

**Fostering Resilience with Students with Learning Disabilities:  
An Ecological Approach**

Lisa Piers

Thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Doctorate in Philosophy degree in Education

Teaching, Learning, and Evaluation Concentration  
Faculty of Education  
University of Ottawa

**Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the educational journeys of five post-secondary students with learning disabilities from the perspectives of the students and their families. Guided by Ungar's (2012) ecological conceptualization of resilience and Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bio-ecological theory of development, this study sought to identify the challenges that these students faced and the capacities and resources within their environments that helped them along their journeys.

Data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the students and their families and analyzed inductively revealed that while each student's educational journey was unique, most of the participants followed a similar path. Common themes that emerged in the participants' journeys included: early academic or socio-emotional challenges, early diagnosis and intervention, common family characteristics and parent support, development of self-awareness and self-advocacy in the students over time, goal setting and determination, the important yet complex role of peers, and the impact, both positive and negative, of teachers. The participants identified a number of interactions at both the microsystem and mesosystem levels that helped the students through their educational journeys. The ongoing interactions that occurred between the students and their parents, teachers, and peers at the microsystem level helped shape and develop the capacities they needed in order to negotiate for the supports and resources that sustained their well-being. These capacities included an awareness and understanding of their learning disabilities and themselves as learners, the self-advocacy skills they needed in order to seek out and negotiate for the supports and accommodations that would help them succeed, the ability to set lofty, yet attainable goals and the perseverance to work towards these goals in spite of setbacks and challenges, and the willingness to use the supports and resources that were available to them. The interactions that occurred among the students'

environments at the mesosystem were important as well, as they helped ensure that the resources they needed would be provided for them. The mesosystem level interactions included open and honest communication between the home and school environments as well as a solid link between the home and community environments so that the parents were able to seek out the appropriate supports in the community.

These findings give voice to students with learning disabilities and their families and inform educators in how they can help other families navigate their way to the resources and supports within their environments that can sustain their wellbeing and support them through their educational journeys.

**Table of Contents**

Abstract	2
Chapter 1: Introduction	10
Background and Context	11
Problem Statement	14
Conceptual Framework	14
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions	15
Research Approach	16
The Researcher	17
Assumptions	18
Rationale and Significance	19
Explanation of Key Terms	20
Chapter Summary	21
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature	23
Learning Differences and Learning Disabilities	25
Learning Differences: Academic Impact	27
Learning Differences: Socio-emotional Impact	28
Learning Differences: Mental Health Impact	31
Learning Differences: Family Impact	34
Resilience	37
Resilience: An Ecological Conceptualization	40
Capacities and Resources Facilitating Development	42
Gaps in the Research	47
Conceptual Framework	48
Chapter Summary	52

Chapter 3: Methodology	55
Rationale for Qualitative Research Design	56
Rationale for Case Study Methodology	60
Recruitment of Participants	62
Overview of Information Needed to Conduct the Study	65
Overview of Research Design	67
Data Collection Methods	69
Data Analysis and Synthesis	71
Ethical Considerations	72
Issues of Trustworthiness	73
Chapter Summary	76
Chapter 4: Findings	77
Case #1 Amy	78
Early Life Experiences	79
Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis	81
Diagnosis	82
School Experiences after the Diagnosis	85
Transition to University	91
Challenges over the Years	95
Capacities and Resources that have Helped	98
Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities	103
Chapter 5: Case #2 Mark	105
Early Life Experiences	106
Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis	109
Diagnosis	112
School Experiences after the Diagnosis	115
Transition to University	121
Challenges over the Years	124
Capacities and Resources that have Helped	127

Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities	131
Chapter 6: Case #3 Kathleen	132
Early Life Experiences	134
Early School Experiences and Diagnosis	138
School Experiences after the Diagnosis	143
Transition to University	148
Challenges over the Years	152
Capacities and Resources that have Helped	155
Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities	158
Chapter 7: Case #4 Paul	160
Early Life Experiences	161
Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis	164
Diagnosis	166
School Experiences after the Diagnosis	167
Transition to University	172
Challenges over the Years	175
Capacities and Resources that have Helped	178
Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities	181
Chapter 8: Case #5 Krista	183
Early Life Experiences	185
Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis	187
Diagnosis	191
School Experiences after the Diagnosis	193
Transition to University	194
Later University Years	199
Challenges over the Years	204
Capacities and Resources that have Helped	207
Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities	210

Chapter 9: Cross Case Analysis	211
Early Life Experiences	212
Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis	215
Diagnosis	219
School Experiences after the Diagnosis	222
Transition to University	224
Challenges over the Years	227
Capacities and Resources that have Helped	231
Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities	236
Chapter Summary	238
 Chapter 10: Discussion and Conclusions	 239
Research Question #1: Educational Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities	241
Research Question #2: Capacities and Resources that Helped Students with Learning Disabilities	253
Research Question #3: Conceptualization of Learning Disabilities	265
Contributions to Theory	268
Contributions to Knowledge	269
Limitations of the Study	271
Implications for Future Research	273
Summary and Recommendations	275
Conclusions and Reflections	279
 References	 281
 Appendices	
Academic Impact of Learning Disabilities (Appendix A)	292
Socio-emotional Impact of Learning Disabilities (Appendix B)	293
Mental Health Impact of Learning Disabilities (Appendix C)	294
Family Impact of Learning Disabilities (Appendix D)	295

Protective Factors (Appendix E)	296
Recruitment Text (Appendix F)	298
Student Interview Protocols (Appendix G)	299
Parent Interview Protocol (Appendix H)	305
Sibling Interview Protocol (Appendix I)	311
Informed Consent: Student Participants (Appendix J)	316
Informed Consent: Parent Participants (Appendix K)	320
Informed Consent: Sibling Participants (Appendix L)	324
Sibling Assent for Underage Sibling Participants (Appendix M)	328
Informed Consent for Parents of Underage Siblings (Appendix N)	331
Informed Consent: Student Participants – French Translation (Appendix O)	335
Informed Consent: Parent Participants – French Translation (Appendix P)	339
Informed Consent: Sibling Participants – French Translation (Appendix Q)	343
Sibling Assent for Underage Sibling – French Translation (Appendix R)	347
Informed Consent for Parents of Underage Siblings – French Translation (Appendix S)	350

### List of Tables

Table 1	Demographic Information of Participants	65
Table 2	Information Needed for Research Questions	67
Table 3	Early Life Experiences	213
Table 4	Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis	216
Table 5	Diagnosis	218
Table 6	School Experiences after the Diagnosis	221
Table 7	Transition to University	225
Table 8	Challenges over the Years	228
Table 9	Capacities and Resources that Helped	232
Table 10	Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities	237
Table 11	Capacities and Resources in the Environment that Helped Students with Learning Disabilities	255

### List of Figures

Figure 1	Ecological Conceptualization of Resilience	53
Figure 2	Ecological Conceptualization of Resilience based on the Findings of the Study	264

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**INTRODUCTION**

This study was designed to examine the phenomenon of learning disabilities and to uncover some of the essential capacities and resources that can help students who have been identified with learning disabilities to successfully graduate from high school and move on to college or university. The purpose of this retrospective, multiple case study was to explore the experiences of five post-secondary students who were identified with learning disabilities and their families as they journeyed through the education system and their perceptions of what helped them along the way in reaching their goals. It was anticipated that the knowledge generated from this study would provide educators with a deeper understanding of these students' learning disabilities and new insights that would help them better support students and their families over the course of their educational journeys. This research used qualitative multiple case study methodology to illustrate the phenomenon under investigation. Participants in this study included a purposefully selected group of post-secondary students who had been identified with learning disabilities and their families.

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background that framed the study. From this context, the problem that drives the study emerged and the purpose of the study and its research questions were developed. Each element is presented and described in this chapter, followed by a description of the research approach, the assumptions that have been made, and the researcher's perspective. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the proposed rationale and significance of the research study and some of the key terminology used.

### **Background and Context**

Every classroom is an amalgamation of a diverse group of children with their own individual personalities, personal histories, family constellations, strengths, and challenges. For some students learning comes easily, but for others it can be a constant struggle. Even though they are

bright, inquisitive children with their own unique strengths and talents, some students experience difficulties learning the fundamental academic skills that seem to come so easily to their classmates. Some students learn differently from their peers, from what educators have come to consider the norm, and these children often find the conventional classroom and the traditional mode of teaching challenging (Winzer, 2007). Unfortunately, for many of these children there is no alternative. Rather than adjusting the curriculum and teaching practices that are in place to meet the needs of all the students, many schools force children who learn differently to fit into the pre-existing model (Baglieri, Valle, Connor & Gallagher, 2011). These are the students who often come to be diagnosed with learning disabilities.

The diagnosis of learning disabilities in most provinces and school boards is usually based on the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (APA, 2000, p. 49), which states that learning disabilities are diagnosed when,

“an individual’s achievement on individually administered, standardized tests in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence. The learning problems significantly interfere with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require reading, mathematical, or writing skills.”

Despite the almost universal acceptance of this definition within school systems in Canada and the United States, some educational researchers and practitioners question its validity (Dudley-Marling, 2004; McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Reid & Valle, 2004). While they acknowledge that some students do encounter academic difficulties within the current educational system and that there are individual differences and variations among their learning styles, researchers like McDermott and Varenne (1995) assert that the conceptualization of learning disabilities as *impairments* or *deviations from the norm* has been socially constructed. Rather than accepting

the dichotomous discourse that this phenomenon has created (the categories of able learners versus disabled learners), they contend that ability and learning can be better conceptualized as running along a continuum of human variation and difference (Reid & Valle, 2004). In the current study, learning disabilities have been conceptualized not as deficits or impairments inherent in the students, but rather as variations from the dominant way of learning that has been socially constructed and sustained by the education system.

Children diagnosed with learning disabilities comprise the largest category of students with special needs in Canadian schools, representing over half of all pupils with special needs or almost five percent of all school-age children (APA, 2000; LDAC, 2007). In addition to the academic challenges that they face, many students with learning disabilities also contend with a variety of social and emotional issues brought on by the demands that their environments place on them. Over the past several decades, researchers have identified a range of mental health issues that affect students with learning disabilities at a higher rate than their peers, such as anxiety, depression, and even suicidality (Bender, Rosenkrans, & Crane, 1999; Huntington & Bender, 2001; Maag & Reid, 2006; Margalit & Zak, 1984; Weiner & Tardiff, 2004; Wilson, Deri Armstrong, Furrrie, & Walcot, 2009; Wright-Strawderman & Watson, 1992). Additionally, students with learning disabilities are more likely to exhibit lower levels of self-esteem and self-competence than comparison groups of their peers (Heath, Roberts, & Toste, 2011; MacMaster, Donovan & MacIntyre, 2002; Stiehr-Smith & Nagel, 1995), and they are more prone to feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and even peer rejection (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004a, 2004b; Margalit, 1998; Margalit, Tur-Kaspa & Most, 1999; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000).

While there is a general acknowledgment that students with learning disabilities are at an increased risk for these kinds of challenges, every child responds differently and some seem to

demonstrate more positive outcomes than others. A fundamental question that drives researchers in this area is why some students are able to cope more effectively with their learning challenges than others. The ability of some individuals to do well in the face of adversity is what researchers have come to refer to as resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Morrison & Cosden, 1997; Rutter, 2003) and is a construct that is being explored increasingly in the learning disabilities literature. Using a resilience framework, the current study seeks to shed light on what has helped some students with learning disabilities successfully complete high school and move on to a post-secondary education.

### **Problem Statement**

Research indicates that students with learning disabilities are at increased risk for academic, social, and emotional challenges throughout their lives. Some students are able to complete high school and move on to successful post-secondary educations, but others struggle throughout their educational journey and are not able to accomplish this same level of success. What is it that makes the difference in these students' lives? What characteristics within them and within their families and broader communities interact to help some students succeed in this way when others cannot? And how can these processes and interactions be fostered with all students and their families?

### **Conceptual Framework**

These questions are explored through the lens of Michael Ungar's (2012; 2011; 2005) ecological model of resilience and Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bio-ecological model of human development. In their conceptualizations of human development and resilience, Bronfenbrenner and Ungar both provide a description of the factors that play a role in individuals' development. While both Bronfenbrenner and Ungar acknowledge that human development is guided by the

individual and his or her personal characteristics and resources, they emphasize that it is the individual's interaction with their environments and the interactions that occur among their environments that shape the course of their development over time. Thus, the current study explored the personal characteristics and capacities within the student participants, the ecological resources and supports that were available to them through their families, schools, and broader communities, and the interactions that occurred among the students and their environments.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this retrospective, multiple case study was to examine the lived experiences of five post-secondary students who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities and those of their families in order to understand what having a learning disability means for them and to identify the capacities and resources that they have found helpful on their educational journeys. It was anticipated that by exploring the capacities and resources that these students and their families identified as having helped them, ways to improve the support that is available to children with learning disabilities and their families would be uncovered. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and constructed reality of students with learning disabilities from the point of view of those who were living through it – the students themselves and those who were closest to them (Schram, 2006). Including their families in the study allowed multiple voices and perspectives to be heard so that a richer, more detailed picture could emerge (Schram, 2006). It was anticipated that once this deeper understanding of the experience of living with a learning disability was established and the capacities and resources that helped the participants in this study were identified, similar supports and programs could be developed within other school communities.

The primary research questions that guided this study are: What are the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities from the perspective of the students and their families? And, what are the capacities and resources that these students and their families identify as having helped them successfully navigate through the elementary and secondary education system? The specific questions that guided the study are as follows:

1. What are the lived educational experiences of students with learning disabilities as recalled by these students and their families when they are at the post-secondary level?
2. What capacities and resources do students with learning disabilities and their families identify as having helped them in school at both an individual and ecological level?
3. How do students with learning disabilities and their families conceptualize and make sense of their learning disabilities?

### **Research Approach**

With the approval of the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, the researcher studied the experiences and perceptions of five post-secondary students who had been identified with learning disabilities and their families. This investigation represented a multiple case study using qualitative research methods. In-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection. A comprehensive review of the relevant literature and the study's conceptual framework shaped and refined the interview protocols and coding categories that were used.

The information obtained through 23 individual interviews with the students and their families formed the basis for the overall findings of this study. Each participant was identified by a pseudonym, and all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure that the interviews were valid representations of the participants' experiences and opinions, the participants were invited to review the transcripts and to clarify or add in any additional

information that they felt was necessary. Individual case studies were compiled for each student participant using the information provided by the student and his or her family, and then a cross-case analysis of the five cases was completed and presented in order to understand whether or not they had any common or shared experiences.

### **The Researcher**

At the time of conducting this study, the researcher was employed as a special education teacher in an elementary school. Some of the primary responsibilities of this position included working with individuals and groups of students who had been identified with learning disabilities and collaborating with their families to try to set up appropriate supports both in and out of school. Thus, the researcher brings to the inquiry process practical experiences as an educator who has worked closely with students with learning disabilities and their families.

Because research is influenced by the values of the researcher, the research process and the final product cannot be isolated from who the researcher is or where the researcher is coming from. Consequently, this researcher's own personal experiences, beliefs, and values have inevitably been intertwined with the stories of the participants. The meaning that the participants made of their experiences during the interviews has to some extent been a function of their interactions with the researcher (Seidman, 2006). As Merriam (1998, p. 6) states, "it is assumed that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own experiences". Thus, while the researcher has tried to allow the voices of the participants to come through as purely and as genuinely as possible, her own experiences as a special education teacher cannot help but be a part of this meaning making process.

While the researcher's experiences and perspectives can provide valuable insight into the investigation, they could also serve as a liability, biasing her interpretation of the findings. To

guard against this, several procedural safeguards were undertaken. The researcher's assumptions have been made explicit at the outset of the study and the researcher has remained committed to ongoing self-reflection and dialogue with professional colleagues and advisors throughout the study.

### **Assumptions**

Based on the researcher's experience and background as an elementary school teacher working with students with learning disabilities and an extensive review of the literature in the area of learning disabilities and resilience, five primary assumptions were made regarding this study.

First, students with learning disabilities will have encountered some academic challenges within the classroom as they were growing up. This assumption is based on the premise that these academic challenges are what typically lead to the identification of the learning disability and that most schools follow a more traditional model of education that does not take learning disabilities into account. Second, the challenges that these students have faced over the years will have led to feelings of frustration and other negative emotions which may have put them at risk for further challenges, such as lower self-esteem or feelings of anxiety or depression. This assumption is guided by the body of research that has accumulated showing the negative impact that learning disabilities can have on children's overall well-being and the researcher's own experiences working with students with learning disabilities. Third, there are some individuals who are able to rise above these challenges and achieve academic success. This assumption is based on the resilience literature that highlights students with learning disabilities who have shown positive development and the researcher's experience with students who have moved on to graduate from high school and attend college or university. This assumption has another

belief embedded within it as well, however, which is that graduating from high school and going on to university or college is a successful outcome and a sign of positive development. While this may be true, it does not take into account other measures of success and positive development, such as family life, entrepreneurship, athletic careers, or various trades. Fourth, the family unit plays an important role in children's lives. This assumption is based on the literature that has accumulated on the impact that learning disabilities can have on the family as well as the researcher's experience working and interacting with the families of her students. Fifth and finally, the experiences that these students and their families have gone through have had a significant impact on their lives and are something that they have reflected upon over the years. Consequently, as young adults these students will have thought about their learning disabilities and will be able to verbalize what they have gone through and discuss how it has affected them. This assumption is based on the researcher's experiences talking with former students who have openly discussed their educational journeys and with colleagues and other peers who have confided about their own histories as individuals with learning disabilities.

### **Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study emanates from the researcher's desire to understand how to help students with learning disabilities and their families navigate through the education system and negotiate for the supports they need. Increased knowledge of the capacities and resources that students with learning disabilities identify as being helpful in their journey through the educational system may help educators better empathize with them and their families and thereby better support them. By learning about the experiences of students who have been identified with learning disabilities from the perspective of not only the students themselves but of their parents and siblings

and by understanding what helped them navigate through the education system, teachers and parents can better plan how they will support other students on similar journeys.

The findings emerging from this study will add to the resilience literature by extending the theory beyond the individual to encompass the family's perspectives and experiences. The ecological perspective underlying the study will provide insight into the effects that students' interactions with their environments and the interactions that occur among their environments can have on their wellbeing. This information will be useful for educators and parents of individuals with learning disabilities.

### **Explanations of Key Terms**

**Learning disabilities.** According to the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (APA, 2000, p. 49), learning disabilities are diagnosed when, “an individual’s achievement on individually administered, standardized tests in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence. The learning problems significantly interfere with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require reading, mathematical, or writing skills”. Most provinces in Canada use this traditional conceptualization to identify students with learning disabilities and it is used in much of the educational and psychological literature to delineate the population that is being addressed (Kozel & Siegel, 2007). In order to align with past research, all of the students participating in the current study had been diagnosed with learning disabilities. The DSM-IV (APA, 2000) delineates four different categories: Reading Disorder, Mathematics Disorder, Disorder of Written Expression, and Learning Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. Since the time that this study was conducted, an updated version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual has been published, the DSM-V (APA, 2013). In this version, the category of learning

disability is broadened to become Specific Learning Disorder. This diagnosis is more general, including a range of deficits that impact on academic achievement. The criteria describe shortcomings in general academic skills and provide detailed specifiers for the areas of reading, math, and written expression (APA, 2014). Because the data collection phase of the study was completed before its publication, the DSM-IV has been used. For the purpose of this study, learning disabilities is used to collectively refer to learning disorder, reading disorder, reading disability, or dyslexia, math disorder, math disability, or dyscalculia, disorder of written expression, writing disability, or dysgraphia.

**Resilience.** In its simplest terms, resilience refers to the ability of individuals to do well in the face of adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 2003). For the purpose of this study, a more in-depth ecologically-based conceptualization of resilience is used. In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and the capacity, individually and collectively, to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2012). This conceptualization of resilience highlights the importance of the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between individuals and their social and physical environments in their development.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an introduction to the current study. After the context and background for the study were presented, the problem and purpose were described and the research approach and the researcher's perspective were outlined. It concluded with a discussion of the rationale and significance of the study and some of the key terminology used.

The remainder of this thesis is organized into nine separate chapters: (1) the Review of Literature chapter (chapter 2) critically examines the research that has been done in the areas of learning disabilities and resilience and presents the conceptual framework that was used for the study; (2) the Methodology chapter (chapter 3) provides a detailed description of the research methodology that was used to conduct the study, including participant selection, data collection, analysis, and trustworthiness; (3) the Findings chapters (chapters 4 through 9) present the educational journeys and experiences of each of the five cases as well as a cross case analysis outlining the similarities and differences among the experiences of the five participants; and (4) the Discussion chapter (chapter 10) in which the answers to the research questions are discussed, contributions of the thesis are described, and recommendations for further research are made.

**CHAPTER TWO**  
**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The purpose of this retrospective, multiple case study was to explore the experiences of post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families as they journeyed through the education system and their perceptions of what helped them reach their goals. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand what kinds of capacities and resources these students and their families found most helpful while they were in school, so that they can be made more accessible to other students who have been identified with learning disabilities. To carry out this study, it was necessary to complete a critical review of current literature. This review was ongoing throughout the data collection, data analysis, and synthesis phases of the study.

This chapter explores the relationship between the experiences of students with learning disabilities and the capacities and resources that have been identified as helping individuals through different challenges. In light of this, two major areas of the literature were critically reviewed: (a) learning disabilities and (b) resilience. The review of the literature on learning disabilities provides an understanding of the context in which students with learning disabilities live. It first examines how learning differences have been conceptualized and how the notion of “learning disabilities” has been constructed within society. It then explores the impact that learning disabilities can have on students and their families. The resilience literature is reviewed to provide a context for (a) exploring the idea that learning disabilities can have different effects on students and their families, and (b) seeking to answer the question of why some students seem to do better than others. The capacities and resources contributing to successful outcomes (i.e., graduating from high school and attending college or university) that have been identified in the resilience literature will be analyzed through an ecological perspective. Finally, gaps in the research that have emerged will be identified in order to help focus the current study and the study’s conceptual framework will be presented.

To conduct this selected literature review, the researcher used multiple information sources, including books, professional journals, periodicals, and Internet resources. These sources were accessed through ERIC, ProQuest, PsycInfo, the University of Ottawa's library database, and Google Scholar. The review is focused on North American and Anglophone literature, as these demographics contextualize the study's participants – students from Ontario universities or colleges and their families. No time frame delimitations were used so that a historical perspective could be taken within both of the areas of focus. Throughout the review, the researcher tried to point out important gaps and omissions in certain areas of the literature when they became apparent. These gaps and omissions were discussed in more detail in the Gaps in the Literature section. Each section of the literature review closes with a synthesis that focuses on research implications. The interpretive summary that concludes the chapter shows how the literature has informed the researcher's understanding of the material and how the material contributes to the ongoing development of the study's conceptual framework.

### **Learning Differences and Learning Disabilities**

As stated in the introduction to this study, some students learn differently from their peers and from what educators have come to consider the norm. In turn, they often find the conventional classroom and the traditional mode of teaching challenging (Winzer, 2007). Rather than ensuring that the education system is organized to address the strengths and learning styles of all students, these students are usually left struggling to try to fit into the pre-existing mode of education (Baglieri et al., 2011). Consequently, these students are made to feel that they are not succeeding within the education system or that they are failing. As McDermott and his colleagues (2006) posit, classrooms tend to be designed in such a way that some children look unsuccessful and then their behavior is blamed on 'disabilities' residing within them. These are

the students who often come to be diagnosed and labeled with learning disabilities. The diagnosis of learning disabilities in most provinces and school boards is based on the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (APA, 2000), which states that learning disabilities are diagnosed when,

an individual's achievement on individually administered, standardized tests in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence. The learning problems significantly interfere with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require reading, mathematical, or writing skills (p. 49).

Despite the almost universal acceptance of this definition within school systems across Canada (Kozey & Siegel, 2008), many educational researchers and practitioners question its validity (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011; Dudley-Marling, 2004; McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Reid & Valle, 2004). The field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE) arose in the 1980s as a reaction to this very notion of "disability". Within this perspective, disability is seen not as an entity or a thing, but rather as an idea, and while it is recognized that people do vary or differ from one another in sometimes very noticeable ways, to refer to those differences as 'disabilities' is considered to be a social judgment (Baglieri et al., 2011).

Consequently, while it is apparent that some students encounter academic difficulties within the current educational system and that there are individual differences and variations among their learning styles and profiles, the conceptualization of learning disabilities as an *impairment* or *deviation from the norm* has been socially constructed (McDermott & Varenne, 2004). Rather than accepting the dichotomous discourse that this phenomenon has created (the categories of able learners versus disabled learners), it is believed that ability and learning can be better

conceptualized as running along a continuum of human variation and difference (Reid & Valle, 2004). Thus in this thesis, learning differences will be conceptualized not as deficits or impairments inherent in the student, but rather as variations from the dominant way of learning that has been socially constructed and sustained by the education system.

Even though the concept of learning disabilities has been socially constructed by the education system and society in general, they can still have some very tangible effects on students. The emphasis that society places on reading and writing can create academic challenges for students who struggle in these areas. Consequently, these students often end up seeing themselves as lacking when they compare themselves to their classmates and peers, and this can lead to social and emotional challenges. The following sections will examine some of the different impacts that learning disabilities can end up having on students and their families.

### **Learning Disabilities: Academic Impact**

There is a substantial body of literature documenting the impact that learning disabilities can have on students' development. By their very definition *learning disabilities* imply negative academic effects, as students diagnosed with learning disabilities are not achieving at a rate commensurate with their abilities or with the standard expectations for their age (APA, 2000). While this academic deficit is assumed to exist for all students with learning disabilities, there are some studies that have specifically targeted the academic effects (See Appendix A for a list of these studies). Al-Yagon & Mikulincer (2004b) compared elementary school-aged students with (N=98) and without (N=107) learning disabilities, and they found that teachers evaluated students with learning disabilities as demonstrating a lower level of academic functioning than students without learning disabilities. Similarly, when Daniel and his colleagues (2006) compared the academic achievement and success of poor readers (N=94) and typical readers

(N=94) at the high school level, they reported that the poor readers had a lower level of academic success and a higher incidence of dropping out before graduation.

Thus, the literature reinforces the idea that students with learning disabilities at the elementary, middle, and high school levels encounter more academic difficulties in school than their non-disabled peers and that these difficulties lead to a higher rate of academic failure, greater school maladjustment, and a higher frequency of dropping out before graduating from high school (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004b; Daniel et al., 2006; Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman, 2004; Wilson et al., 2009).

### **Learning Disabilities: Socio-emotional Impact**

In addition to these academic challenges, researchers have also explored the impact that learning disabilities can have on students' social and emotional development – their experience, expression and management of emotions and their ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others (See Appendix B for a list of these studies). Many of these studies focused on self-esteem and the social difficulties that students can encounter such as peer rejection or loneliness (Chapman, 1988; Grolnick & Ryan, 1990; MacMaster et al., 2002; Margalit & Zak, 1984; Stiehr-Smith & Nagle, 1995; Weiner & Tardif, 2004).

A number of researchers have investigated the link between learning disabilities and students' self-concept (MacMaster et al., 2002; Margalit & Zak, 1984; Stiehr-Smith & Nagle, 1995; Weiner & Tardif, 2004). Early studies focused on more global or generalized conceptualizations of self-concept and the results were not consistent, as some studies demonstrated that children with learning disabilities had lower self-concepts than their peers (Chapman, 1988; Margalit & Zak, 1984) while others did not find that there was a significant difference (Omizo & Amerikaner, 1985; Silverman & Zigmond, 1983). As researchers

developed a better understanding of the multidimensional nature of the construct and began to focus more specifically on academic self-concept, the results began to show more consistently that children with learning disabilities had lower self-ratings than their typically achieving peers (Grolnick & Ryan, 1990; Heath, Roberts, & Toste, 2011; Stierh-Smith & Nagle, 1995). In their comparisons of the academic and cognitive self-concepts of elementary school children with learning disabilities with that of their typically achieving peers, both Grolnick and Ryan (1990), using a sample of 148 children, and Stiehr-Smith and Nagle (1995), using a sample of 116 children, found that children with learning disabilities ( $n=59$ ) perceived themselves as significantly less competent in the cognitive domain than their peers ( $n=57$ ). Similar results have been reported with adolescents. Heath and her colleagues (2011) found that even though their group of 29 adolescents with learning disabilities overestimated their abilities, they still rated themselves below their peers ( $n=29$ ) and below what was considered to be the average range. Comparing adolescents with multiple learning disabilities (30 students with learning disabilities in both reading and math) and adolescents with single learning disabilities (30 students with learning disabilities in reading and 30 students with learning disabilities in math) with those with no learning disabilities ( $n=30$ ), Martinez and Semrud-Clikeman (2004) found that students with multiple learning disabilities reported significantly more inadequacy in school than the other groups of students.

Shifting the focus away from the personal elements of self-concept, researchers began to explore the social skills and social competences of children with learning disabilities, as well as their friendships and attachments (Al-Yagon and Mikulincer, 2004b; Haager & Vaughn, 1995; Margalit, 1998; Margalit et al., 1999; Vaughn, Zaragoza, Hogan, & Walker, 1993; Weiner and Tardif, 2004). These studies have shown mixed results that have varied according to the age of

the participants and the informants used to provide the data. While students with learning disabilities sometimes report feeling lonelier than their peers, the literature does not reflect that they perceived the same kinds of social difficulties that their parents and teachers reported observing. Using data collected through the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth comparing 276 students who were identified with learning disabilities with 4034 students who were not identified as receiving resource help, Whitley, Lupart, and Beran (2007) found that Canadian students with learning disabilities reported similar social experiences as their peers, but that their teachers rated them as having lower social skills. In a longitudinal study comparing the social skills and behaviour problems of primary students with learning disabilities with both low achieving and average to high achieving students, Vaughn and her colleagues (1993) also found that teachers rated students with learning disabilities as having more social difficulties. They found that the children with learning disabilities and lower achievement levels exhibited significantly weaker social skills, as rated by their teachers. Extending the study to include multiple perspectives (i.e., teachers, parents, peers, and the children themselves), Haager and Vaughn (1995) found that the different groups participating in their study responded quite differently. While the students with learning disabilities (n=44) and their parents did not perceive any differences in their social skills, their teachers reported that they had poorer social skills and more behaviour problems than the average and high achieving students (n=53) and peer ratings indicated that the students with learning disabilities and those who were lower achieving (n=44) were less liked than the average or high achieving students.

While the students in these studies did not report that they had any social problems relative to their peers, other studies have found that elementary school children with learning disabilities often report feeling lonelier at school than their typically achieving peers (Margalit, 1998;

Margalit, Tur-Kaspa, & Most, 1999; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000; Weiner & Tardiff, 2004) and rate their attachments and close relationships as less secure (Al-Yagon & Mikilincer, 2004a; 2004b).

### **Learning Disabilities: Mental Health Impact**

More recently, researchers have begun to study mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality in students with learning differences (See Appendix C for a list of studies), and the general contention is that students with learning disabilities exhibit more symptoms of anxiety and depression than are typically seen in the general public (Alexander-Passe, 2007; Carroll & Iles, 2006; Daniel et al., 2006; Feurer & Andrews, 2009; Huntington & Bender, 1993; Maag & Reid, 2006; Wright-Strawderman & Watson, 1992). In their review of the literature on stress, depression, and suicide among students with learning disabilities, Bender and his colleagues (1999) concluded that students with learning disabilities, particularly those with nonverbal learning disabilities and lower academic achievement levels, showed higher rates of anxiety and depression than the general population and that there seemed to be an increased risk of suicide in students with learning disabilities. Using a nationally representative data set of individuals aged 15 to 44 obtained from the *Canadian Community Health Survey: Mental Health and Wellbeing* conducted in 2002, Wilson and his colleagues (2009) compared the rates of mental health problems in persons with learning disabilities (n=670) to persons without disabilities (n=14, 265). They found that persons with learning disabilities were more than twice as likely as those without learning disabilities to report high levels of distress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, as well as poorer overall mental health. Similar results were found by Svetaz, Ireland, and Blum (2000) using data from an American national longitudinal study of adolescent health involving middle school and high school students. Adolescents with

learning disabilities were twice as likely to report emotional distress and twice as likely to report that they had made suicide attempts.

Focusing specifically on anxiety and stress, Alexander-Passe (2007) found that students with dyslexia (n=78), a type of learning disability, experienced significantly higher levels of stress than students without dyslexia (n=77), especially in the junior grades. In this study the students' fears and anxieties centered mainly around their interactions with their teachers and worries over exams and testing, but they also reported feeling stressed by their perceptions of their classmates' feelings towards them. In a similar study, Feurer and Andrews (2009) compared school-related stress in high school students both with (n=38) and without (n=49) learning disabilities using self-report questionnaires. The students with learning disabilities reported significantly higher levels of academic stress than their typically achieving peers, but they did not differ significantly in other areas of anxiety or depression. Margalit and Zak (1984), found that their sample of elementary and middle school students with learning disabilities (n=100) experienced significantly higher levels of anxiety than their peers without learning disabilities (n=118). Looking at an older population of undergraduate university students, Carroll and Iles (2006) compared the anxiety levels of 16 students with dyslexia to those of 16 students with no history of learning disabilities in a variety of areas, and they found that the students with dyslexia reported higher levels of academic and social anxiety than the comparison group.

While the literature generally demonstrates elevated levels of anxiety for students with learning disabilities, the research on depression shows more varied results. Some studies show higher levels of depression for students with learning disabilities, but not all are conclusive. In their examination of the prevalence of depressive symptoms in a sample of 53 elementary school

students with learning disabilities, Wright-Strawderman and Watson (1992) found that over one-third of the students in their sample scored in the depressed range on the Children's Depression Inventory, which is significantly higher than the general prevalence rate of ten percent.

Additionally, six of the 53 students in their sample reported that they had experienced thoughts of killing themselves. When parents were used as the informants, however these same levels of depressive symptoms did not appear. One explanation for this discrepancy may be that the students had kept their feelings to themselves and the parents were not aware of what they were going through. Palladino, Poli, Masi, and Marcheschi (2000) found similar results in their study comparing middle school children with (n=14) and without (n=14) learning disabilities. The students with learning disabilities had a wider range of depressive symptoms and almost half of the students with learning disabilities had a depressive condition. In their study of high school students, Arnold and his colleagues (2005) found that while poor readers (n=94) reported higher levels of depression and anxiety than typical readers (n=94), when parent responses were examined these same differences were not found.

Other researchers, however, have not found these same levels of depressive symptoms in children with learning disabilities. When Maag and Reid (1994) compared middle and high school students with (n=95) and without (226) learning disabilities on self-reported levels of depression and self esteem, they found no significant differences on the students' self-ratings on either the Beck Depression Inventory or the Self-Esteem Inventory. Utilizing both student and teacher ratings of depression in elementary and high school students with learning disabilities, Newcomer, Barenbaum, and Bryant (1995) reported that students with learning disabilities (n=85) did not rate themselves as more depressed than their peers (n=868), but that their teachers did. This pattern of results is similar to what was seen in the studies examining social skills and

difficulties, as teachers reported more depressive characteristics in the students with learning disabilities than the students themselves did. Among 42 high school students with learning disabilities, Dalley, Bolocofsky, Alcorn, and Baker (1992) found that the students with learning disabilities who were the least successful academically had significantly higher levels of depression than their peers. However, those adolescents with learning disabilities who were more successful academically did not show as high levels of depression. Thus, the findings of studies exploring depression in students with learning disabilities are mixed and point to the complex, multifaceted nature of depression. It depends on multiple variables and who is responding. Consequently, while there is some variability in the findings, students with learning disabilities appear to be at an increased risk for not only social difficulties and self-esteem issues, but for mental health challenges as well.

### **Learning Disabilities: Family Impact**

In addition to the challenges that learning disabilities can bring to students, they can also have an impact on other family members and the family unit as a whole (See Appendix D for a list of studies). Grounded in Minuchin's (1974) family systems approach, much of the research in this area is based on the premise that what affects one member of a family will have an effect on all members of a family. Thus, one child's struggles with learning disabilities can have an impact, to varying degrees and in different ways, on all members of the family, and conversely, the family dynamics and the interactions that occur within the family unit can have an impact on how a child manages their learning disabilities and the challenges that come with it (Gilbert & Morawski, 2005).

Learning that one's child has been identified with learning disabilities can have a profound effect on a parent, as many report experiencing a negative emotional response to their child's

diagnosis – at least initially (Heiman, 2002). Interviews with parents of elementary and high school students with learning disabilities reveal that they often find it difficult to accept their child's disability (Dyson, 2010). Coming to terms with the fact that there is something different about their child can evoke feelings of guilt in parents as they struggle to determine the reasons why this happened to their child. These negative emotional responses may lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety in parents and in the family unit in general (Dyson, 1996; Dyson 2010; Margalit & Heiman, 1986; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990). In an early quantitative study using self-report questionnaires, Margalit and Heiman (1986) found that the parents of 20 boys with learning disabilities were significantly more anxious than those who did not have children with learning disabilities (n=20) – especially the mothers. These findings were replicated in a later comparative study conducted by Dyson (1996), as she found that even though family functioning was similar among families with (n=19) and without (n=19) children with learning disabilities, the parents of children with learning disabilities reported significantly more stress in their lives than those of the other children. Using a more qualitative approach involving a combination of parent focus groups and individual interviews with 11 parents of students with learning disabilities, Dyson (2010) later explored some of the sources of this stress and she found that it was attributable to a combination of factors including a strain on the marital relationship due to parenting imbalances, a lack of understanding and support from extended family and friends, negative interactions with the school, and ongoing concern for their children with learning disabilities and their siblings. The cumulative effect of these strains and concerns was an overall heightened level of stress and anxiety in the home which can have a substantial impact on not only the parents, but the entire family unit as well.

Another theme that emerged consistently in the literature was parental concerns about children's academic work and their overall wellbeing at school (Dyson, 2010; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990). Parents reported spending a great deal of time helping their children with their school work and felt that this reduced time spent with other family members (Dyson, 2010). In addition to these academic concerns, parents have also expressed social concerns as children with learning disabilities can encounter difficulties with their peers (Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990). Parents' desire to advocate for their children with learning disabilities can at times put them at odds with teachers and school administration, and thus their interactions with school staff are not always positive which can serve to heighten their anxiety (Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990).

Parents have also expressed concerns about how their children's learning disabilities affect other members of the family, in particular their siblings (Dyson, 2010; Heiman, 2002; Waggoner & Wilgosh, 1990). In their interviews with parents from 8 families with children with learning disabilities, Waggoner and Wilgosh (1990) found that parents were concerned that the other children in the family may come to resent the amount of time that was devoted to helping and supporting the child with the learning disability. Additionally, the parents in Dyson's study (2010) reported that the other children in their families seemed to grow up faster than normal and tended to take on additional responsibilities and a nurturing role towards the child with the disability. On a more positive note, some parents did reveal that they had experienced some benefits from having a child diagnosed with learning disabilities, as they found that their families tended to demonstrate an increased understanding of learning disabilities and a greater awareness and acceptance of difference in general. Additionally, over half of the parents in Heiman's study

(2002) reported that they felt that their children's learning disabilities had actually strengthened their spousal relations and had brought them closer together as a family.

Overall, these studies reveal that learning disabilities can have a significant impact, both positive and negative, not only on the students themselves, but on their entire family system. Thus, it was deemed important that the entire family be considered and included in the current study on students with learning disabilities.

### **Resilience**

As the above sections have demonstrated, many students with learning disabilities and their families must contend with a range of socio-emotional challenges and mental health issues. There are those students, however, who seem to cope much better and even thrive in many cases. For every adverse or challenging experience there is a wide variation in how individuals respond: some seem to succumb to the most minor stresses while others seem to cope successfully with even the most terrible experiences. This ability of some individuals to do well in the face of adversity is what researchers have come to refer to as resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Morrison & Cosden, 1997; Rutter, 2003; Ungar, 2008; Ungar 2005).

The study of resilience started back in the 1970s as researchers began to shift their focus from a deficit-based or problem-focused study of illnesses and issues to a more strengths-based approach. Before this change occurred, researchers were primarily concerned with the challenges and difficulties that children encountered and how these adversities impacted on their lives. It was rooted in a negative approach, as they examined problems and the negative effects that these problems had on children's development (Yates, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2003). The earliest resilience investigations occurred in the field of psychopathology and then were extended to include children living in stress and poverty and those who had endured traumatic experiences

(Masten & Powell, 2003). In a search for antecedents of psychopathology, Norman Garmezy (1974) studied children of parents with mental illnesses and discovered that not all children exposed to the same stresses developed in a similar manner. Some children considered “at-risk” did develop the illness, but others did not. Intrigued by the fact that some children who were at risk for psychopathology were actually developing well, Garmezy and his colleagues began to study competence in children at risk due to parental mental illness, poverty, and stressful life experiences (Masten & Powell, 2003). He and other researchers began to write about the significance of children developing well despite their risk status or exposure to adversity (Anthony & Cohler, 1987; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Werner, 1993), and a general framework for conceptualizing and operationalizing the study of resilience evolved.

While the original research was on the factors that put children at risk for psychopathological conditions like schizophrenia (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990), the field later opened up to include a more diverse range of populations, including children with learning disabilities (Miller, 1996; Morrison & Cosden, 1997; Werner, 1993). In their groundbreaking longitudinal study of childhood resilience, Werner and Smith (1989) followed 698 children who were born on the island of Kauai in Hawaii in 1955. Following these children over several decades, they found substantial individual differences among the high risk children. From the initial cohort, Werner (1993a) isolated 22 children with learning disabilities at 10 years of age and an equal number of matched controls who were all assessed periodically throughout their lifespan. She found that while significantly more of the children with learning disabilities experienced academic and socio-emotional difficulties than the control group during their early childhood and adolescent years, 75 percent of the students with learning disabilities made a

successful adaptation to the demands of work, marriage, and family in adulthood, which was very close to that of the control group at 80 percent.

From this research, a number of capacities and resources were identified that appeared to facilitate positive development. Arranged into clusters of what Werner called “protective factors”, these capacities and resources were separated into intrapersonal factors and interpersonal factors. The intrapersonal factors that were identified included having a positive attitude and personality traits that attracted others, believing in themselves, and setting realistic goals. The interpersonal factors that were identified included having supportive and competent parents who served as positive role models and having other supportive adults to act as mentors in their lives.

A similar study was carried out by another group of researchers in California who studied individuals who had been identified with learning disabilities (Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, & Herman, 2002; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 2002; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1993). In their 20 year longitudinal study, Raskind and his colleagues (2002) explored the characteristics that differentiated successful and unsuccessful individuals with learning disabilities. They found that within their sample of 41 individuals with learning disabilities, 21 were judged to be successful in terms of employment, education, independence, family relationships, community relations, and crime or substance abuse while the remaining 20 were not. Like Werner (1993b; 1993a), these researchers found a core set of capacities and resources that appeared to facilitate positive development and differentiate the two groups. They reported that the successful group demonstrated: a greater level of self-awareness and acceptance of their learning disability; a stronger ability to persevere through challenges; a higher level of pro-activity; a stronger level of emotional stability; a better

ability to set attainable, realistic goals; and a stronger willingness and ability to use the support systems that were available to them.

The goal of this second phase of resilience research was to try to uncover the capacities and resources in children's lives that had the potential to mitigate the impact of learning disabilities or other risks on children's development. Working to strengthen these capacities and resources was hoped to facilitate positive development in all children. Using this kind of resilience framework allowed researchers and educators to shift the focus from negative outcomes and deficits onto more positive outcomes and strengths, and to take a more proactive, strengths-based approach to helping not only students at risk, but all students within the school system.

### **Resilience: An Ecological Conceptualization**

Over the years our understanding of resilience has evolved to become more complex and multifaceted. Originally conceptualized quite simply as the ability to adapt positively despite experiences of adversity or trauma (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Rutter, 1987), resilience has come to encompass much more than that. It has moved beyond being an individual trait or attribute that is found in some children, and is now conceptualized as a developmental process that can manifest differently at different developmental stages and within different contexts and that can change and evolve over time (Cicchetti, 2003). As Yates, Egeland, and Sroufe (2003) assert, resilience "doesn't cause children to do well in the face of adversity. Rather resilience reflects the developmental process by which children acquire the ability to use both internal and external resources to achieve positive adaptation despite prior or concomitant adversity (p. 250)". Just as Bronfenbrenner (1979) realized that human development was not a product of the individual alone, but rather a result of the child's interactions with his or her environments, so too have resilience researchers realized that these developmental processes are not just located within the

individual, but rather include the individual's interactions with his or her environments (Ungar, 2012). Thus, this more ecological understanding of resilience places just as much emphasis on the individual's environment as it does on the individual him or herself (Ungar, 2013).

Our understanding of risk and adversity and positive development has evolved as well. Early studies of resilience tended to isolate one risk, such as being diagnosed with a learning disability or having experienced abuse. Researchers have come to realize, however, that children rarely encounter just one isolated risk, as they usually have to contend with multiple risks in their lives. Consequently, adversity is now conceptualized not as an isolated event or condition, but as a sequence of stressful experiences or chains of events that can accumulate and combine to contribute to the vulnerability of children over time (Masten & Powell, 2003, Ungar, 2008).

While positive development still generally refers to an individual doing better than would be expected given his or her exposure to the risk being studied, what has changed is who defines what "doing okay" means (Luthar & Bidwell Zelazo, 2003). There is an acknowledgement that what "doing okay" means can vary across time or within different contexts or cultures (Masten & Powell, 2003; Ungar, 2008). What is considered okay for a child of 10 can be very different from what is expected of a young adult of 20, as expectations change with age and development. We are now aware that expectations can also change depending on the context and culture in which children live, as the environment in which they live has a significant impact on their perceptions of what is "normal" or "okay". What is considered okay for a teenager living on the street can be very different from what is expected of a teenager living in a middle class suburban neighborhood with his or her mother and father.

In the following sections, the capacities and resources that have been identified in the literature as facilitating positive development in individuals with learning disabilities will be examined.

### **Capacities and Resources Facilitating Development**

A number of individual capacities have been identified as facilitating positive development in students with learning disabilities (See Appendix E for a list of studies), including self-awareness and acceptance of the learning disabilities, a sense of personal control, goal setting and pro-activity, and having a positive attitude and temperament. While Ungar (2013) has come to emphasize the importance of the interplay of the individual with the environment, many of these studies concentrate on the individual and the specific capacities or traits that have been helpful.

Many resilience studies have emphasized the importance of students coming to terms with the fact that they have learning disabilities and understanding what that means for them (Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind & Herman, 2003; Heiman & Kariv, 2004; Higgins et al., 2002; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; Miller, 1997; Raskind et al., 1999; Raskind et al., 2002). They have reported that the more aware students are of their learning disabilities and the strengths and challenges that come with them, the better they have been able to manage and find success. Rather than being completely defined by their diagnosis, successful individuals with learning disabilities have been able to compartmentalize them into one aspect of their lives (Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 1999). In this same vein, while they have been able to acknowledge the challenges they have to deal with, successful students with learning disabilities have also been aware of their strengths and have been able to balance the two. Thus, their understanding of

their learning disabilities and of themselves allows them to maintain a positive level of self-esteem and to realistically set goals and courses of action in their lives.

Other researchers have found similar results in retrospective studies of adults with learning disabilities (Heiman & Kariv, 2004; Miller, 1997; Miller, 2002). Interviewing 30 university students who had been diagnosed with learning disabilities, Heiman and Kariv (2004) found that the students in their study who had successfully reached college or university were aware of their difficulties and accepted their disabilities. Because they had a realistic view of their situation, they were able to set appropriate goals and plan for their success. Similarly, the university students in Miller's studies (2002; 1997) believed that by acknowledging their learning disabilities and the challenges that come with them, they were better able to plan for their studies and arrange for any supports and accommodations that they might need.

A sense of control was another capacity or individual resource that emerged consistently in the literature as helping students successfully manage their learning disabilities (Freeman, Stoch, Chan & Hutchinson, 2004; Gerber, Ginsberg & Reiff, 1992; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; Raskind et al., 2002). Successful students with learning disabilities believed that they had the power to control their own destinies and to affect the outcome of their lives, and they proactively made their own decisions and took the actions necessary to see that their decisions were realized (Raskind et al., 2002). The successful adults interviewed by Gerber and his colleagues (1992) reported that gaining control over their lives and doing what needed to be done to meet their goals was the cornerstone of achieving success. Freeman and his colleagues (2004) referred to this pro-activity as having a sense of purpose or a "goals orientation". Through their retrospective interviews with 16 adults with learning disabilities, they found that the individuals who had remained in school and graduated with their peers were able to construct and sustain

positive goal orientations throughout their high school experiences by setting lofty, yet realistic goals and conscientiously working toward them. Those students who did not graduate until later in life only returned to school once they had reframed their experiences and had come to view completing school as important to their success in life. Hall, Spruill, and Webster (2002) also found that taking the initiative to set high, yet attainable goals and working towards attaining them was a common characteristic of successful college students identified with learning disabilities.

A final individual capacity that emerged consistently in the literature was having a positive attitude and temperament, as this served to elicit positive responses from others and thus gave them the opportunity to take advantage of the ecological supports that could be available (Heiman & Kariv, 2004; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; Werner, 1993a; Werner, 1993b, Werner, 1994). The original resilience studies done by Werner (1993a) demonstrated how this trait had an impact on an individual's life right from infancy, as an active baby without any distressing sleeping or feeding habits tended to elicit more positive responses from his or her parents and caregivers which lead to larger networks of caring adults and higher levels of self esteem and fewer behavior problems in adolescence.

In addition to these individual capacities, there have also been a number of environmental resources that have been shown to facilitate positive development in students with learning disabilities (See Appendix E for a list of studies), including the presence of supportive parents and supportive relationships with other adults and peers.

Parental support and involvement has emerged consistently in the literature as an important resource in the lives of students with learning disabilities (Freeman et al., 2004; Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 1999; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997; Werner, 1993a; Werner, 1993b;

Werner, 1994). In her longitudinal study of children with learning disabilities, Werner (1993) found that successful students tended to have had competent parents who had completed a higher level of education than those individuals who were not successful. This factor was linked to more positive parent-child interactions during early childhood and more emotional support during adolescence which in turn fostered feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence. Freeman and his colleagues (2004) also found that students with learning disabilities who had graduated from high school successfully with their peers had good relationships with their parents. They reported that their parents had encouraged them to stay in school by helping them with their homework, attending school conferences and events, and providing a supportive learning environment at home. While Reis and his colleagues (1997) reported a similar emphasis on parental support from their participants, they found that it was the mothers who most frequently provided it.

In addition to the support provided by their parents, students with learning disabilities have also indicated that assistance from other significant people in their lives, including teachers, tutors, coaches, and friends has helped them cope (Gerber et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 2002; Werner, 1993a; Werner, 1993b). Teachers, who work with children on a daily basis, can play a vital role in supporting and mentoring students with learning disabilities, as they can motivate and inspire struggling students to do their best and provide them with the encouragement and understanding they need when they encounter obstacles and negativity. The university students interviewed by Miller (2002) reported that just knowing that their teachers believed in them and their abilities went a long way, and that the extra attention and support they provided made a difference in their lives. Because of the way that our education system has been organized, many individuals with learning disabilities require academic support, and thus many

often receive some form of remedial help or tutoring. While not all students with learning disabilities can afford private tutoring, most of the successful college students with learning disabilities (n=36) interviewed by Vogel, Hruby, and Adelman (1993) identified it as an important intervention and support in their lives. They reported that the one-to-one relationship that they developed with their tutors had more than just an educational impact, as these tutors came to fill a number of roles, including mentor, friend, and counselor.

A final facilitating resource that has been identified in the literature is friends (Freeman et al., 2004; Miller, 1997; Miller & Fritz, 1998; Weiner, 2004). Special friendships, sometimes even just one special friend, can make a significant difference by providing them with the unconditional support and encouragement that they need (Miller, 2002). As Freeman and his colleagues (2004) noted, these friendships can also help keep struggling students connected with school when there is nothing else keeping them there. These kinds of positive relationships can help foster the individual capacities like self-awareness, pro-activity, and self-esteem that were highlighted in the preceding section.

While the presence of social supports has consistently been shown to be an important resource in the lives of students with learning disabilities, it should be noted that the interaction between the individual child and their environments is predicated on the child's willingness to accept the support when it is offered (Goldberg et al., 2003). Gerber and his colleagues (1992) found that what distinguished highly successful adults from those who had achieved only moderate success was the degree of support they had and their willingness to accept it. The high success group used more support from those around them, sought it out more readily, and accepted it more willingly when it was available. Similarly, Raskind and his colleagues (2002) suggest that the students with learning disabilities who had found success in life actively sought

out support and were able to attract or draw support to them from key people in their environments. Thus, as has been stressed earlier in the section on an ecological conceptualization of resilience, there is a strong reciprocal link between the individual students and their environments.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

This review has sought to bring together the literature in the areas of learning disabilities and resilience. It has shown that while learning disabilities can have a negative impact on some individuals and their families, there are others who demonstrate more positive development. The resilience literature has revealed a number of capacities and resources that can serve to facilitate this development. The majority of the studies exploring these capacities and resources have utilized a more individualized conceptualization of resilience, focusing on the individual capacities of students with learning disabilities. Less research has been done using the ecological conceptualization that was presented earlier in this chapter (Ungar, 2011). More research is needed exploring the reciprocal relationships that exist between students and their environments (i.e., home, school) as well as how these environments work together to support and empower students with learning disabilities. Additionally, more studies are needed to look at the resources that are available to students with learning disabilities and their families, and to see how these students and their families and communities can negotiate meaningful ways for these resources to be shared (Ungar, 2008).

While the number of studies is growing in this area, relatively few have examined these questions from a family perspective – some have involved parents, but very few have included siblings. More attention needs to be given to the interactions that take place among students with learning disabilities and their parents and siblings, so that more can be learned about the

experience of having a learning difference from not only the perspective of the students themselves, but also from those who are raising and living with students with learning disabilities. Including parents and siblings in the research will provide different perspectives and more information about the experience of living with learning disabilities. This kind of research will give voice to those who know best and will allow the experiences of students with learning disabilities and the people who are living most closely with them to emerge through their personal stories and recollections.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The review and critique of the literature combined with the researcher's own experience and insights, contributed to the development of a conceptual framework for the current study. The conceptual framework helped to focus and shape the research process, as it informed the methodological design and guided the creation of the interview questions. The conceptual framework was also used to organize and make sense of the data that was collected, providing the basis for the initial coding scheme. Consequently, the conceptual framework provides an organizing structure for reporting the study's findings and for the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of these findings.

The categories within the conceptual framework that was developed for this study are derived from two separate models: Michael Ungar's (2008; 2011; 2012) ecological model of resilience and Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2007) bio-ecological model of human development. At the core of both of these models is the belief that positive human development is not something residing solely within the individual. Rather, these theories assert that positive development is influenced by the different environments or systems with which individuals interact and the complex interactions that occur among these different environments. Each

model will be described below and then synthesized to show the conceptual framework that has been created and that serves as the basis for this study.

Michael Ungar (2012) conceptualizes resilience as, “the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity, individually and collectively, to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (p. 17)” in the context of exposure to significant adversity. Thus, resilience resides in neither the child nor the environment alone, but rather in the processes through which environments provide resources for individuals to use and through which individuals develop the capacities they need to take advantage of these resources. Likewise, children’s own individual resources are only as good as the capacity of their social and physical environments to facilitate their expression (Ungar, 2011). In this ecological conceptualization of resilience, the environment and the interactions between the environment and the individual are the most critical elements in child development and resilience, as children’s positive outcomes are seen as being mostly the result of facilitative environments that provide them with the potential to do well.

This ecological conceptualization of resilience has been used throughout the current study as the lens through which the lives and experiences of individuals with learning disabilities have been explored. Within the context of our current education system, which typically does not accommodate different learning profiles, learning disabilities can be seen as a potential risk or adversity in the lives of students. However, as previous research has demonstrated, this potential risk can have different effects on students’ development, as some students seem to fare better than others. The purpose of this study was to explore what types of factors facilitate positive

development in some students. Or, in other words, what capacities and resources within these students and their environments contributed to their resilience.

The transactional relationship between the individual and his or her environment that is so integral to this ecological conceptualization of resilience is also highlighted by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2007) in his bio-ecological model of human development, which will be used as a second and complementary theoretical framework for this research. Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological model, development is conceptualized as a "lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his [or her] environment (p. 3)". The environment itself is conceived as a complex set of ever-broadening systems extending out from the developing individual who resides at its core. Each layer represents individuals or groups of individuals who, either directly or indirectly, have an effect on the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, human development is seen as a process of reciprocal interactions occurring between the individual and his or her ever-broadening set of environments.

The first layer of the environment, referred to as the microsystem, incorporates those people or groups of people with whom the individual is directly involved. In the current study, it would include the student and his or her immediate family (i.e., parents, siblings), the student and his or her school environment (i.e., teachers, friends, classmates), or the student and his or her neighborhood (i.e., friends, parents' friends, neighbors). The next layer of the individual's environment is referred to as the mesosystem. This layer encompasses the connections among the microsystems or the interrelationships among the different people or groups of people in the student's life. In the current study, this layer includes the relationship between the student's parents and the school and between the student's parents and the community. The next layer, the exosystem, refers to those more distal social interactions and conditions that can affect the

individual's development indirectly. In the current study, it includes the school board and the policies and decisions they make and the community mental health services that are available within the area. Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts that these exosystems, though only indirectly related to the individual, have a significant effect on the quality of interactions at the mesosystem or microsystem levels. The outermost layer of the student's environment, the macrosystem, envelopes and influences all of the other layers, as it forms the cultural backdrop to the individual's development. It consists of society's norms and cultures and laws, all of which can have an impact on the child and his or her development. In the current study, it includes the special education laws that have been enacted to formally identify students in the education system with learning disabilities or the way that learning differences are conceptualized as learning 'disabilities' within the Canadian culture.

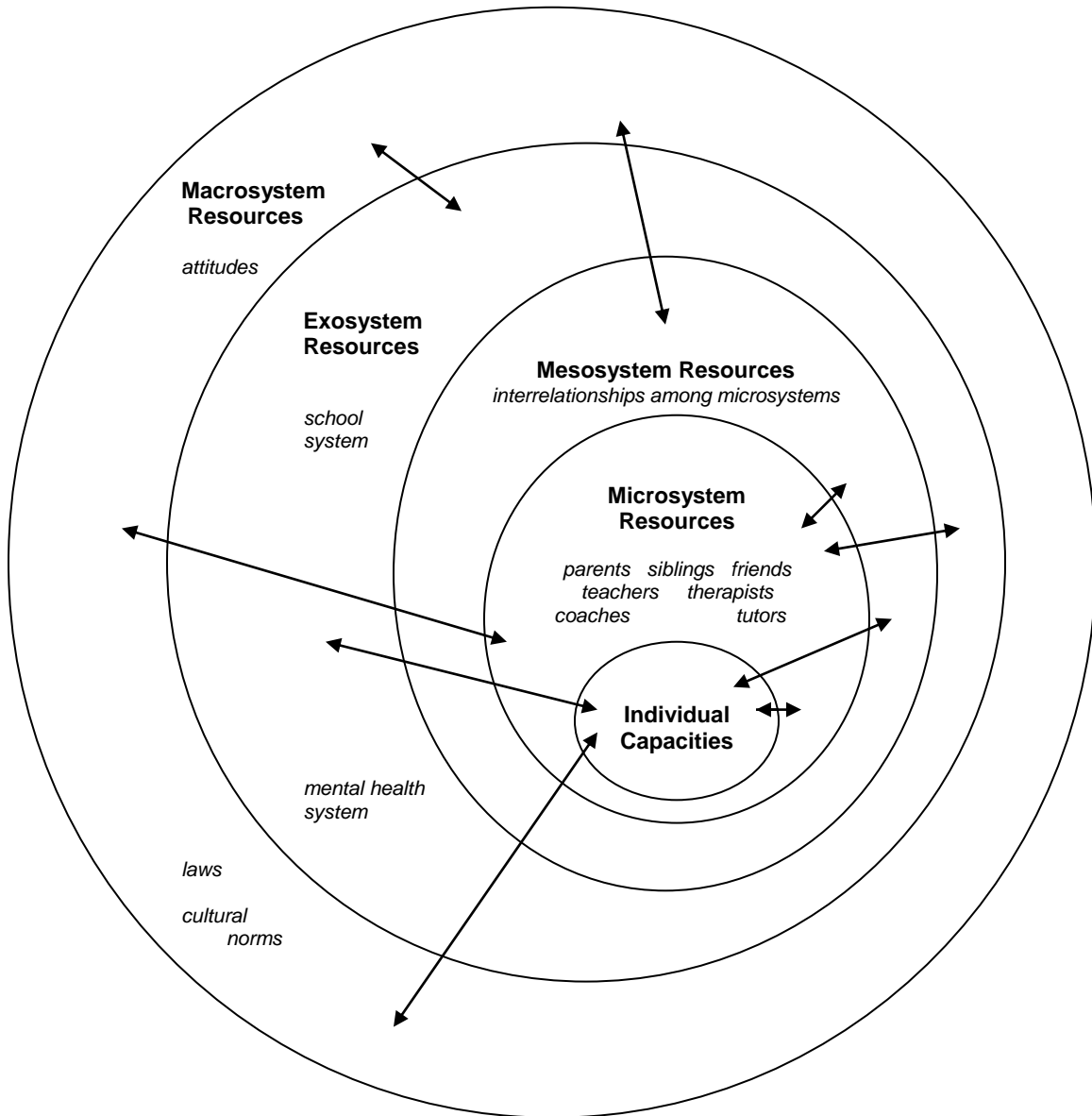
While the interactions among individuals and their environments are important, Bronfenbrenner (1979) looks beyond the direct relationships and interconnections to incorporate the interactions that occur within and among the various systems and how these interactions can impact on the developing individual. Bronfenbrenner (2007) later extended his original model to incorporate a more bio-ecological conceptualization of development. This newer, more complex theory evolved to place a greater emphasis on the developing individual and the influence that his or her personal characteristics have on their interaction with the environment over time. These personal characteristics include: (1) dispositions that set the interactions with the environment in motion and sustain them over time, (2) bioecological resources of ability, experience, knowledge, and skills that are required for these interactions and processes to occur, and (3) demand characteristics that serve to either invite or discourage reactions from the environment. Adding to the complexity of this theory, these personal characteristics apply not

only to the individuals themselves, but also to the members of the individuals' microsystems with whom they interact (e.g., parents, teachers, friends). Thus, in Bronfenbrenner's (2007) newer, more complex bio-ecological theory of development, development is influenced by the processes and interactions that occur among a person and his or her environment which can vary over time according to characteristics of the person and characteristics of the environment. Applied to this study's exploration of the experiences of students with learning disabilities, Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bio-ecological model of development integrates seamlessly with Ungar's (2012) ecological conceptualization of resilience. Both Ungar (2012) and Bronfenbrenner (2007) place the individual and their personal capacities at the core. The bio-ecological model of resilience that has been conceived for this study does as well. Then, as in Ungar's (2012) model of resilience, through their interactions with their environments individuals develop the capacity to navigate towards and negotiate for the resources and supports they need to sustain positive development in the face of adversity. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of development is used to help organize the environment into the different layers of interactions that branch out from the individual. The resulting conceptual framework has allowed the researcher to explore the pathways to resilience that the five students who participated in this study have shared. That is, to explore the individual capacities and the ecological resources and supports that have had an effect on the students' development and resilience. For a visual representation of this conceptual framework, see Figure 1 on page 53.

### **Chapter Summary**

This review of the literature explored the key areas within the current study. It explored the experiences of students with learning disabilities by examining the impact that they can have on the individual – academic, social, emotional, and mental health – as well as the impact that they

**Figure 1.** Ecological Conceptualization of Resilience



can have on the family. It then explored the capacities and resources that have been identified as contributing to successful outcomes in the resilience literature. From these reviews, it was apparent that most of the research was more focused on the individual and the personal capacities that have helped students cope with their learning disabilities. More research is

needed at the ecological level, exploring the relationship between the individual and their environments and among their environments. By bringing together Ungar's (2012; 2013) ecological model of resilience and Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2007) bio-ecological model of human development, the goal of this study is to explore this relationship through the educational experiences of five post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the experiences of five post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families as they journeyed through the education system and their perceptions of what helped them reach their goals. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand what kinds of capacities and resources these students and their families found most helpful during their educational journey so that they could be made more accessible to other students who have been identified with learning disabilities. In seeking to understand this phenomenon, the study addressed three research questions: (a) What were the lived educational experiences of students with learning disabilities as recalled by these students and their families when they were at the post-secondary level? (b) What capacities and resources did students with learning disabilities and their families identify as having helped them in school at both an individual and ecological level?, and (c) How did students with learning disabilities and their families conceptualize and make sense of their learning disabilities?

This chapter describes the study's research methodology and includes discussions around the following areas: (a) the rationale for the research approach that was used, (b) a description of the research sample, (c) a summary of the information needed to answer the research questions, (d) an overview of the research design, (e) the method of data collection, (f) the analysis and synthesis of the data, (g) ethical considerations, and (h) issues of trustworthiness. The chapter closes with a brief concluding summary.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

Research is a means of producing knowledge about the world, a way of learning more about a phenomenon, an issue, or a problem (Merriam, 1998). Through a process of systematic inquiry, researchers collect, analyze, interpret, and use data to deepen their understanding of the world and to empower individuals (Mertens, 2010). As Hancock and Algozzine (2006)

articulate, in its most informal and general sense, research is a way of answering questions as we try to understand the world around us.

Originally, researchers were concerned with finding definitive answers to their questions about the world around them. Within this positivist perspective, which is still being used by some researchers today, it is believed that the social world can be studied in the same way that the natural world is studied – in a value-free, objective manner that in the end will uncover general laws to describe constant relationships between variables (Mertens, 2010). Quantitative research designs, those rooted in establishing definitive relationships among the variables being studied, are typically used to find the “truth” or the correct way of knowing and understanding the world (Mertens, 2010).

Rather than seeking to find the definitive “truth” about learning disabilities of students, the current study sought to explore and understand students’ perceptions of their learning disabilities and their lived experiences as students with learning disabilities. Thus, a more interpretivist perspective was adopted. This perspective, which developed as a reaction to the positivist worldview (Mertens, 2010) recognizes multiple realities and assumes that knowledge is socially constructed. Consequently, living with learning disabilities is seen as lived experiences and knowledge is gained through efforts to understand the meaning that these experiences have for the people involved (Merriam, 1998). Because they seek to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it, interpretivist researchers enter into close relationships with what is being studied by having direct personal contact with their participants and by using methods that will bring them closer into their worlds.

While research within a positivist perspective seeks definitive answers and explanations for their questions about what causes certain things to happen, research within an interpretivist

perspective focuses more on how knowledge is constructed within society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The different questions that researchers are striving to answer and the different kinds of knowledge that they are seeking requires that they go about finding their answers in different ways. Consequently, while positivist research takes a more quantitative approach, the interpretivist perspective that guided the current study takes more of a qualitative approach.

Researchers such as Miles and Huberman (1994), Mertens and McLaughlin (2004), Schram (2006), and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have identified a number of essential or core features that define qualitative research. First and foremost, it is a naturalistic and contextual study of a phenomenon or process that involves intense and prolonged contact within the field. The goal is to understand a phenomenon or a process in all of its complexity from the perspective of the participants. Qualitative research is polyvocal, embracing the different perspectives, voices, and points of view of the people involved, and because of this it gives voice to people who have not always had the chance to be heard, people who have historically been silenced or marginalized (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Qualitative researchers are not looking to isolate or discover one true reality, but want to hear the subjective realities – the multiple realities – that their participants have created and constructed. For qualitative researchers it is not the actual experience that is key, but rather the participants' perceptions of that experience. Thus, while both inductive and deductive processes can be used, qualitative research is typically a more open-ended process as opposed to one driven by predetermined theories and hypotheses.

Multiple methods are used in qualitative research and the researchers themselves are typically considered to be the primary instruments of data collection and analysis, as they collect the data through their personal observations of the participants in the field, their interviews and

discussions with the participants, and their examination of documents related to the study.

Analysis usually results in the identification of recurring patterns that cut through the data or in the delineation of a process by the researcher. The voices of the researchers are heard in the final narrative alongside those of their participants in a thick, contextualized description of the phenomenon that allows the reader to experience it as much as possible as the participants did.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) provide a comprehensive definition of qualitative research, describing it as,

multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives (p. 2).

It was the researcher's belief that the knowledge being sought in the current study was best served through qualitative methods. The goal of this study was to enter into the world of the participants and to learn about their lived experiences as students with learning disabilities. As such, the research was open-ended and was not trying to validate any specific pre-existing hypotheses. The study took place within the context of the Ontario education system, exploring the experiences of students as they moved through this education system from elementary school to university through the perceptions of the students themselves, as well as their family members.

### **Rationale for Case Study Methodology**

Within the framework of a qualitative approach, this study was most suited to a case study design – specifically a multiple case study design. Case studies, one of the most commonly used designs in qualitative research, are used to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation or phenomenon in question and the meaning it holds for those involved (Mertens, 2010). True to qualitative research, case studies are generally inductive explorations of phenomena in their natural contexts that usually result in richly descriptive narratives that give readers an empathetic understanding of the phenomenon in all its complexity (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). While these in-depth studies do have the potential to bring about new insights and meanings that can be transferred beyond the case itself, it is important to note that in case study research the researcher's first responsibility is to understand the individual case or cases, not to generalize to the broader population (Stake, 2005).

While some researchers (Yin, 2003) define case studies as a method or a specific research process, others focus not so much on the process of the study but more on the unit of study – the case. Stake (1995; 2005) and Merriam (1998) believe that using a case study approach is not so much a methodological choice but an indication of what is to be studied and that by whatever method or methods, researchers choose to study a particular case within its specific context. The case that is chosen for study is one example among others, as it is a specific entity around which there are boundaries. As Merriam (1998, p.27) articulates, these boundaries are important as they allow the researcher to “fence in” or specify exactly what is being studied. Miles and Huberman (1994) represent the case study as a circle with a heart in the centre. The heart is the focus of the study (the case) while the circle defines the edge of the case – the boundary that shows what is not being studied. When the focus of the definition is

on the unit of study, a case study can be defined as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1998; p. 34). It is this second definition of case studies that guided the current study, as the focus was on the cases that were being studied within their specific contexts. Multiple cases were examined to gain an in-depth understanding of learning disabilities and the meaning this diagnosis holds for a sample of post-secondary students and their families living and attending school within the province of Ontario.

Case studies are considered to be the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being asked and when researchers are looking for a deeper understanding of a complex social phenomenon from the perspective of those who are living through it (Yin, 2003). They typically result in rich and holistic accounts of the phenomena, offering insights and further areas of research for the research community and deepening personal meanings and understandings for their readers. While the case itself is a single entity, each one is made up of a number of different people and contexts. Hence, a number of conditions and interactions are exposed which would not be able to be studied in a more controlled, experimental setting (Stake, 2005). The in-depth understanding that comes out of a case study may play an important role in advancing a field’s knowledge base and provide new insights that had not yet been considered (Merriam, 1998). This is the result of their inductive focus, as new ideas, concepts, and ways of doing things are able to emerge within their natural setting. Case studies usually do not result in a conclusion or an ending, but instead serve to provoke more questions and inspire further research.

Qualitative case studies focus on naturally occurring events within natural settings and there are no contrived situations or contexts. Because of this, they provide a picture of what

real life looks like and give researchers a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. By studying phenomena in their natural contexts, researchers are exposed to everything and thus are not limited to specific and finite variables (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because of this, variables may emerge naturally and can take researchers into new directions. Case studies concentrate on particular situations, events, programs, or phenomena. This specificity of focus make them a suitable design for studying practical problems, as they focus attention on the kinds of problems that people have to contend with and reveal how they go about solving them (Stake, 2005). Hence, the knowledge gleaned from qualitative case studies can be extremely useful in the development of practice-based theories or interventions.

The current qualitative research study fits well into a case study design because it sought to understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities and their families to learn more about what kinds of things helped them on their educational journey. By studying these particular cases, insight into learning disabilities could be gleaned and used to identify what kinds of support and capacities could potentially help other students and their families.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select this study's group of post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families. Purposeful sampling is a method that is typical in qualitative research, as it allows researchers to assemble a group of participants that best represent the range of possibilities that they are seeking to explore (Glesne, 2011). Selecting information-rich cases allows researchers to learn a great deal about the issues that are of central importance to the research (Glesne, 2011). In the current study, the student participants were purposefully selected based on several criteria. The principal selection criterion was that they were enrolled as a student at a post-secondary institution in Ontario and

that they had been formally diagnosed with learning disabilities. The sample was restricted to Ontario students in order to ensure that the students had attended and were attending similar publicly-funded educational institutions within the same geographic region. This would ensure that they had been identified using similar criteria and that the same policies and regulations shaped their educational experiences. One of the participants (Mark) started his education in Quebec, but he and his family moved to Ontario at the end of grade one and he has remained in Ontario ever since. It was also essential that at least one of the students' parents and one of their siblings (if they had any) were available to participate in the study as well so that the student, the parent, and the sibling perspectives could all be explored. The decision to focus on the whole family rather than just the individual student was based on the lack of studies giving voice to parents and siblings of students with learning disabilities in the literature. It was also believed that multiple perspectives would provide a richer, more detailed picture of the students' lives as their parents and siblings would provide additional information and perspectives on their experiences. Additionally, it was important that the participants were reflective individuals who were comfortable sharing and discussing their personal experiences with the researcher. As Creswell (2007) asserts, a willingness to speak and share ideas is essential ingredients for successful interviews and qualitative studies.

After receiving approval from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, recruitment took place through three separate venues: the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) and the centres for students with disabilities at two eastern Ontario universities. It was hoped that recruitment would also be able to take place through the centre for students with disabilities at an eastern Ontario college, but because of delays encountered with their Research

Ethics Board the five families required for the study were found before any recruitment could occur there. Consequently, no recruitment occurred through an Ontario college.

First, the researcher met with the director of the local chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario to discuss the research study and the possibility of advertising through their website. The director agreed to advertise the study on the LDAO website (see Appendix F for a copy of the study summary and recruitment text) and also invited the researcher to attend a parent information night to share the details of the study with parents directly. Two students were recruited through the LDAO. Then, the researcher spoke with the director of the centre for students with disabilities at an eastern Ontario university to talk about the research study and the possibility of advertising at the centre. The director agreed and sent a summary of the study and the recruitment information to all of the students registered with the centre. Two students were recruited through this university's centre. Finally, the researcher contacted the director of another eastern Ontario university's centre for students with disabilities to discuss the study and the possibility of advertising at this centre. Once ethics approval was received from that university's ethics board, the director sent a summary of the study and the recruitment information to all of the students with learning disabilities who were registered with the centre. One student was recruited through this centre.

The research sample included 13 individuals: five students, five parents, and three siblings. The student participants came from four different universities within Ontario. Demographic information for the participants is included in table format below.

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Diagnosis</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Program</b>
Amy	22	Amy Mother (deceased) Father 2 brothers	Amy Father Brother (Rick)	Language - based LDs Grade 3	Eastern Ontario university	BA Political Science / Human Rights
Mark	23	Mark Mother Father 3 brothers	Mark Mother Brother (Lucas)	Language - based LDs Grade 1	Eastern Ontario university	BA Psychology
Kathleen	20	Kathleen Mother Father	Kathleen Mother	Language - based LDs Kindergarten	Eastern Ontario university	BA Psychology/ Criminology
Paul	20	Paul Mother Father	Paul Mother	Nonverbal LDs Grade 1	Central Ontario university	BA Film Production
Krista	32	Krista Mother Father 1 sister	Krista Mother Sister (Kate)	Nonverbal LDs Grade 12	Central Ontario university	BA History Masters of Social Work

**Overview of Information Needed to Conduct the Study**

This multiple case study focused on five post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families living within the province of Ontario. In exploring the experiences of these students and their families and the capacities and resources they felt helped them along their educational journey, three research questions were explored. The information needed to answer these questions was determined by the conceptual framework and fell into four categories:

(a) contextual, (b) demographic, (c), perceptual, and (d) theoretical. Each one will be discussed in turn below and then the specific information that was needed to answer each research question is presented immediately afterwards within a table format.

*Contextual information* was necessary in order to establish the context, or the culture and overall environment, in which the participants were living. Document reviews revealed how learning disabilities were defined within the province of Ontario and the criteria with which students were identified with learning disabilities within Ontario schools. The number of students identified with learning disabilities within Ontario schools and universities, and the supports and services that have been made available to them and their families were also important elements that set the stage for the study.

*Demographic information* was needed to establish who the participants were in terms of their age, background, education, and family dynamics. This information may help explain what is underlying an individual's perceptions, as well as any similarities or differences in perceptions among the participants. This information was collected during the interviews with the participants and is displayed in Table 1.

*Perceptual information*, the most critical information gathered in the study, was focused on the students' and their families' perceptions of learning disabilities and their descriptions of the capacities and resources they feel helped them during their educational journeys. For this study it was not necessarily the facts themselves that were the most important, but rather how the participants perceived the events and their experiences. This information was collected during the interviews with the participants.

*Theoretical information* was necessary in order to provide the conceptual framework guiding the study and to provide support for the interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the data that

were collected. This information was collected through an ongoing review of the literature focused on Ungar’s ecological model of resilience and Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model of development.

Table 2

*Information Needed for Research Questions*

<b>Information Needed to Answer Research Questions</b>		
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Information Required</b>	<b>Method</b>
<p><i>Research Question 1</i>                      What are the lived educational experiences of students with learning disabilities as recalled by these students and their families when they are at the post-secondary level?</p>	Participants’ recollections and perceptions of their experiences or of their family members’ experiences throughout their years in school.	Interviews
<p><i>Research Question 2</i>                      What capacities and resources do students with learning disabilities and their families identify as having helped them in school?</p>	Participants’ recollections and perceptions of the capacities and resources that they found helpful while they were in school.	Interviews
<p><i>Research Question 3</i>                      How do students with learning disabilities and their families conceptualize and make sense of their learning disabilities?</p>	Participants’ perceptions of learning disabilities and how their feelings and understanding of this concept has changed over the years.	Interviews

**Overview of Research Design**

This section provides an overview of the research design that was followed for the current study. Each of the five steps that were taken in the research process is described.

**Step 1 – Literature Review and Development of Conceptual Framework:** The first step within the research process was to conduct an initial review of the literature. This review was

focused within two main areas: learning disabilities and resilience. The purpose of the review was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges of students with learning disabilities and to explore why some students with learning disabilities seem to fare better than others or why some students show more resilience than others. The information gleaned through this literature review was used to inform the conceptual framework of the study, the research questions that were explored, and the interview protocols that were used with the student participants, their parents, and their siblings.

**Step 2 – Research Proposal:** Following the literature review, a research proposal was prepared outlining the background and context for the study, the research questions that would be explored, the literature review and conceptual framework that would be used, and the methodological approach that would be followed.

**Step 3 – Recruitment Phase:** Once the proposal was successfully defended and ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa, the recruitment phase began. Working with the local chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) and the centres for students with disabilities at two local universities, participants were recruited for the study. The director of the LDAO advertised the study on the provincial website and the researcher spoke with parents directly at a parent information night sponsored by the local chapter. The directors of the centres for students with disabilities both sent out emails to students registered with their centres advertising the study and asking for volunteers. Two families were recruited through the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, two families were recruited through one of the local universities, and one family was recruited through the other local university.

**Step 4 – Data Collection Phase:** Once the participants had all been recruited, the data collection phase of the study began. Each of the five student participants and their families were invited to participate in individual in-depth interviews. Following Seidman’s (2006) interview process, three semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with each student participant and one semi-structured, in-depth interview was completed with each student’s parent and sibling (when they were available). The interviews were conducted with the participants either at their homes, at the University of Ottawa, or in the researcher’s office. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants were asked if they would like to member-check the transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected their feelings and opinions.

**Step 5 – Data Analysis and Synthesis of Findings:** The interview transcripts were read and re-read by the examiner in order to analyze and interpret the findings. An initial coding scheme based on the literature review and the study’s conceptual framework was developed and recurrent themes were identified. Once this data analysis was completed, the study’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations were generated.

### **Data Collection Methods**

For this retrospective multiple case study, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with post-secondary students who had been identified with learning disabilities and with their parents and siblings. These data provided an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and the meaning they made of those experiences both in and out of school from multiple perspectives (Seidman, 2006). Using Seidman’s (2006) three part interview model, each student was interviewed individually by the researcher. One parent and one sibling of each student were interviewed using a similar format, but within a single

interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed immediately following each interview, so that ongoing analysis could occur and the participants could have the opportunity to reflect upon their responses to ensure that they accurately represented their experiences and opinions.

The three-part interview process that was used in this study was adapted from Seidman's (2006) three interview series. The first interview was used to establish a context for the participants' experiences as individuals with learning disabilities. It explored their early life experiences, such as their family life, their early school experiences, the experience of being diagnosed, and the impact that the diagnosis had on their school lives. The second interview focused more on the present and on the challenges that they have faced over the years with a special emphasis on the capacities and resources that they feel helped them through these challenges. And finally, the third interview was used to provide the participants with an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their experiences, as they were encouraged to examine how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their current situation (See Appendices G, H and I for copies of the Interview Protocols).

The interview questions created for this study were based on a synthesis of the review of the literature on learning differences as understood through Ungar's (2008) resilience framework and through Bronfenbrenner's (2007) model of human development. The questions were designed to elicit the lived experiences of students with learning disabilities as they progressed through the education system, as well as the capacities and resources that they believe facilitated their positive development and successful transition to post-secondary studies. Even though all of the student participants had successfully completed high school and transitioned on to university, their journeys had not always been easy. All of the participants had encountered

some challenges in their lives, and sharing and reliving these experiences during the interviews was emotional and painful for them at times. The participants who showed the most emotion during the interview process were the parents, as it was difficult for them to recall and recount the challenges they saw their children endure. Even though it was painful for the participants to relive some of these experiences, they expressed a desire to share them with the examiner as a means of helping other children who may be going through similar situations.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The data were analyzed inductively so that the findings could emerge naturally from the experiences of the participants (Seidman, 2006). Specific categories based on the study's conceptual framework were created to help guide the analysis. Using the constant comparative method of data analysis, each set of interviews was completed and analyzed before moving on to the next participant (Creswell, 2007). The first step in the analysis process was to read through the data, highlighting significant text, taking notes, and writing comments in the margins. The data were then coded in order to extract and organize the key ideas into the pre-determined categories as well as create new categories that emerged. These categories were studied for common themes and for connections that existed within each category and among different categories (Seidman, 2006). These themes and connections were then used to tell the story of students with learning disabilities from the perspective of the students and their families.

From this initial analysis, individual cases were created documenting each student participant's educational journey and the capacities and resources that were identified as having helped them along the way. Within each case, the perspectives of all the participating family members were considered and then combined in order to create one overall narrative. While the voices of the parents tended to be the strongest during the early years, the students' recollections

grew stronger as they grew older. The siblings did not have a lot of information to share, as they did not have a lot of first-hand knowledge of the day to day challenges and struggles that the student participants endured. Overall, the narratives generated by the different family members were quite similar. When there were discrepancies, the researcher tried to let both voices and perspectives be heard, thus allowing the reader to experience the complexities of the participants' experiences. The voices of the participants were used as much as possible throughout the narratives to convey their feelings and perspectives (Seidman, 2006).

After the interviews had been analyzed and the cases had been generated, a profile or summary of each case was created by the researcher. These profiles were based on the researcher's interpretation of the data and were used to introduce each case to the reader. The final step in the analysis process was to perform a cross case analysis of the cases to find similarities and differences in their experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the research process, it is essential that the rights and well-being of the participants are protected. From the time that the participants are recruited, through the data collection and analysis phases, to when the findings are being disseminated, researchers need to be aware of the ethical issues that can arise and have the appropriate safeguards in place (Mertens, 2010; Schram, 2006).

At the very core of these safeguards is informed consent. It is essential that every participant knows the purpose of the study and exactly what it entails. Consequently, it is the responsibility of the researcher to inform the participants about the details of the study, including both the benefits and the risks, so that they can make a fully informed decision as to whether or not they want to participate. In the current study, the researcher reviewed the informed consent form with

each participant before starting the initial interview (See Appendices J, K, L, M, and N for copies of the consent and assent forms in English and Appendices O, P, Q, R, and S for copies of the forms in French). French translations of the forms were created because the University of Ottawa is a bilingual university and it was important that participants have the opportunity to review them in their preferred language. Going hand in hand with this step, is the fact that participation in any research study is purely voluntary. Consequently, participants need to be aware that they have the right to withdraw at any time.

In this research, the participants opened up and shared personal details about their lives during in-depth interviews – a process that could result in emotional discomfort. Consequently, several safety measures were put into place. The participants were told that they did not have to answer all of the questions during their interviews and that if certain questions made them uncomfortable they could choose not to answer them. Additionally, the participants were provided with the name and address of a counseling service they could access if they felt they needed some additional support after the interview. Most importantly, participants were reassured that the information they provided would remain completely confidential. Pseudonyms were used throughout the writing of this dissertation, and revealing details and characteristics of the participants were altered so as to keep their identities confidential.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure that any research is meaningful and useful to other educators and researchers, the knowledge it produces has to be trustworthy. The following criteria were used to ensure that the study was as trustworthy as possible: credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Merriam, 1998).

**Credibility.** Credibility is defined as the correspondence between the way the participants perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints (Mertens, 2010). A number of research strategies can be used to enhance credibility. In the current study, the following strategies were used: member checks, triangulation, and progressive subjectivity.

Member checks, the most important way of establishing credibility, were employed as the researcher sought verification with the participants about the interpretations that were being developed as a result of the data that were collected and analyzed (Mertens, 2010). On an informal level, the researcher offered the participants a summary of the key points that were discussed and checked to see whether they were accurate or whether there was anything else they would like to add. On a more formal level, the researcher offered to provide each participant with the transcripts of their interviews and the initial draft of the report so that they could review them and thus ensure that the interpretations being made by the researcher accurately represented their thoughts and experiences (Merriam, 1998).

Another strategy that was used to establish credibility was triangulation, or what Mertens (2010) refers to as crystallization. This involves using multiple sources of information in order to find a diversity or multiplicity of perspectives, so that a more complete picture of the phenomenon can be revealed (Mertens, 2010). In the current study multiple sources were interviewed – students, parents, and siblings when possible – in order to provide as complete a description as possible. The participants were asked to describe their experiences with learning disabilities and what helped them through their journey, and the different perspectives helped paint as complete a picture as possible. It was assumed that the participants were sharing their perceptions of their experiences with the researcher as they remembered them, and the multiple informant format of the study enhanced the detail that could be shared.

The final strategy that was used to establish credibility was progressive subjectivity.

Progressive subjectivity refers to the researcher monitoring her own perceptions and beliefs as the study progresses (Mertens, 2010). The researcher stated her own experiences and beliefs at the outset of the study and reflected on her reactions and feelings as the study progressed to ensure that she kept an open mind and was not just finding what she wanted to find.

**Transferability.** Transferability is defined as the degree to which the results can be generalized to other situations (Mertens, 2010). The reader has to determine the degree of similarity between the study and their context while the researcher has to provide sufficient detail to enable the reader to make such a judgment. Extensive and careful description of the time, place, context, and culture is known as thick description. In the current study, measures were also taken to ensure that the results were transferable, as multiple cases were used and the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences so that the readers would be able to determine how closely their situations matched the research situation, and hence whether the findings could be transferred (Merriam, 1998). The researcher took care to be transparent in reporting all of the procedures that were used in the study. Using rich, thick description, this study should be able to be reproduced by anyone following the same steps.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is defined as objectivity, or the minimization of the influence of the researcher's judgment (Mertens, 2010). In other words, it means that the data and the interpretations that the researcher has made from them are not influenced by the researcher. The logic used to interpret the data needs to be made explicit so that readers can follow how the researcher arrived at the conclusions he or she did. In the current study, the researcher described the process for analyzing the data in detail and outlined the conceptual framework that was used to guide the interpretations as well.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed description of this study's research methodology. Qualitative case study methodology was used to explore the experience of having learning disabilities and the capacities and resources that post-secondary students and their families have found helpful during their educational journeys. The participants were comprised of five post-secondary students, four mothers and one father, and three siblings (2 brothers and 1 sister). The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted individually with each of the participants. The interviews were developed based on the study's conceptual framework and an extensive review of the literature in the areas of learning disabilities and resilience. The conceptual framework and review of the literature also helped guide the analysis by identifying some of the key themes. Through a comparison with the literature, interpretations and conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made for educational practice and further research. The goal was that this study would contribute to the understanding of learning disabilities by letting the voices of those who have successfully lived through them speak out and explain what capacities and supports have helped them navigate the educational system and could potentially help others.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**FINDINGS**

In the succeeding chapters, the profiles of the participants are presented. During the interviews the students and their families shared their personal stories focusing on their experiences at the different levels of the education system. They shared the capacities and resources that they felt had helped them along their journey as well as the things that they felt had challenged them along the way. While each story and perspective is unique, there are many similarities as well. After all of the profiles have been presented, a cross case analysis is presented so that the common themes may be highlighted.

### **Case #1: Amy's Profile**

Amy is a fourth year undergraduate student at an Ottawa area university who is working towards a double major in human rights and political science. An extremely determined and self-motivated individual, Amy has always been driven to do her best and achieve her goals. Diagnosed at a young age, Amy looks back at the experience positively. She feels that it helped her understand herself as a learner and develop an awareness of her strengths and needs and what she needed to be successful, early on in life. This understanding and knowledge has empowered her, and she sees herself as having more of a learning difference than a learning disability. Her family has been with her every step of the way, advocating for her needs when she was younger and encouraging her to advocate for herself as she grew older. Consequently, Amy has become a strong advocate not only for herself, but for others as well. She has been disappointed at times in how society, especially those people within the education system, has treated her and others with learning disabilities. She believes that there needs to be a better understanding and compassion for individuals with learning disabilities and she takes it upon herself to help make that happen. Her story gives us the chance to experience her educational journey. It allows us to witness her successes and see what supports worked effectively for her over the years, as well as the

challenges and frustrations that she faced along the way. The following narrative describes Amy's educational journey, as recounted by Amy, her father Patrick, and her older brother Rick.

### **Early Life Experiences**

Growing up in a suburban neighborhood in Eastern Ontario, Amy lived with her parents, Eleanor and Patrick, and her two older brothers, Brad and Rick. The children generally got along well, as they often played together, watched television, or went on family trips to the cottage in the summer. Her oldest brother Brad was very strong in math and science, what Amy describes as "disgustingly smart". Rick, however, recalls having a more difficult time in school himself. He reports that he struggled with reading and math and that his parents enrolled him in tutoring programs and even summer school one summer. Several years after Amy had been diagnosed, Rick also went for some testing and, subsequently, he was diagnosed with learning disabilities when he was in grade 12. Amy reflects that it would have been helpful if he had been diagnosed earlier so that he could have accessed some of the same supports that she did. There was a large extended family nearby, and Amy was able to spend a lot of time with her grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins when she was growing up.

Amy's mother did most of the day-to-day child rearing, but her father was very involved as well. He worked long hours, but made sure to be involved in the children's extra curricular activities. He went on school field trips, took Amy to hockey practices, and was a group leader at Beavers and Cubs. Patrick describes Amy as a bit of a tomboy, as she liked to play hockey and chose to participate in Beavers and Cubs rather than Sparks because she liked the more adventurous, hands-on activities of the predominantly boy groups. Hockey was a big part of her life growing up. She played right through until university and will be starting up again this year. She finds it to be a good outlet for energy and stress, and she has always enjoyed the team

atmosphere. Both Amy and her father identify hockey as having a significant impact on her life because she developed long lasting friendships and received a lot of support through her teammates over the years. They feel that it taught her to work hard and to play to win. Amy also believes that spending so much time in hockey taught her how to manage her time because as she played more and practised longer hours, she had to make sure she had time to do her homework.

Amy's mother was diagnosed with cancer when Amy was in grade three, right around the time that they were first exploring the possibility of learning disabilities. Her mother was going through treatment that year and while she went into remission for a few years, she later passed away when Amy was in grade seven. While it was extremely hard for her to lose her mother at such a young age, both her father and her brother report that Amy took it better than might be expected and they attribute that to her inner strength and determination. Amy does not seem to dwell on it herself and attributes her close family connections to helping her through it.

I'm pretty close with my brothers... we hang around each other a fair amount. We fought like any siblings did, but nothing major. And I think my mom having cancer brought us closer than most siblings. They'd do anything for me (Amy).

Friends have been very important in her life as well. She describes herself as being shy when she was younger and while she did not have a lot of friends growing up, the ones she did have were very special to her and some, like her next door neighbour, are still an important part of her life today. Over the years, Amy relied quite heavily on her friends for support and credits them as being one of her "biggest assets". Her father also stresses the importance of friends in her life and observes that she expects a lot from her friends, but in turn she gives a lot to them. She is loyal and honest and will defend and advocate for them if she feels it is necessary.

### **Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis**

Amy began her schooling at the local public elementary school. She liked learning and always enjoyed going to school. She had high expectations of herself, even when she was young, but often ended up feeling frustrated and disappointed when she could not understand a concept or when it seemed to take her so much longer to learn than her peers.

I remember being frustrated a lot. I remember liking it [school] when I was little. I liked learning. I remember getting into grade three and not being able to pick up on things as fast as other students, and that kind of frustrated me. You know you don't want to be the dumbest kid in the class – you never want to be the dumbest kid in the class (Amy).

She would compare herself not only to her classmates, but also to her brothers, who seemed to find school a lot easier than she did.

Even though her reading was fairly strong, spelling was very difficult for her. Her family used to joke that she had created her own language as she would write long strings of letters without any vowels or breaks. What was interesting was that she could always seem to make sense out of what she had written to read it back. These problems with spelling began to interfere with her learning more as the writing demands increased, and homework always seemed to take longer for Amy than for her classmates and siblings. Her parents would work with her in the evenings, but she often drove herself to the point of frustration, so they would encourage her to take a break to calm down.

I spent hours doing my homework when it just took other kids fifteen minutes, and then eventually I'd get so frustrated that my parents would just kick me outside and be like, "You're not doing this anymore". I always wanted to finish, but they'd just be like, "No, you're done" (Amy).

Her parents tried to treat each child individually, setting goals for them based on their capabilities and their current levels of achievement. The focus was not on the marks, but rather on the effort the children put into it – the goal was for them to do the best they could and to always work to their potential. As Rick recollects, “not getting the most of our education was not an option”.

It was Amy’s grade three teacher who noticed the challenges that she was encountering and the frustration that she was feeling at school. Her own daughter had been diagnosed with learning disabilities and she saw a lot of the same characteristics in Amy. She followed up on her observations by talking with Amy’s parents and recommending that they have some testing done.

We didn’t know. We knew something was wrong and we saw some of the reversals and the spelling things, but we didn’t know. I mean the other two [Amy’s brothers] were okay and we didn’t see it as a big deal (Patrick).

### **Diagnosis**

Once they were aware that there was a problem, her parents explored their options for having Amy assessed. It could be done through the school, but there was a long waiting list. Her father realized that it would have been several years before she could have been seen by the school board’s psychologist, and he did not want to wait that long. Fortunately, they had enough insurance coverage to have the testing done privately and relatively quickly. Patrick recognizes how important this early intervention was and is grateful that they had the means to pursue it. However, it does not sit well with him that only those families who can afford it or have the insurance to cover it, can have the testing done privately.

Amy was a little nervous about the assessment and what it entailed. She was uncomfortable about working with someone she didn't really know, but in hindsight she feels that the experience was definitely worth it.

I remember feeling awkward about doing school work while someone was watching me.

Kind of a weird experience for a seven year old... and I was pretty shy when I was younger too. I can understand why a lot of kids don't want to do it... It was just kind of an awkward experience, but I think knowing there was something different about how I learned, maybe took a little bit of the pressure off (Amy).

They were satisfied with the assessment results and the information that was provided by the psychologist. It showed that while Amy had a lot of strengths (verbal comprehension and reasoning skills, vocabulary), she struggled with fine motor skills, visual spatial skills, and memory processing. Amy was there to hear the results with her parents and they talked about it very openly with her. She seemed to accept it well and her parents saw it not as something negative but as a confirmation and better understanding of Amy's difficulties and a direction for future plans.

It was a long process, probably extending over a full year from when they first started looking into having some testing done, to actually going through the assessment itself, to then hearing the results and implementing the recommendations at the school. For Amy this wait time was a good thing.

It was so long from when I was told it was happening to the testing, then I got diagnosed, and then I went into spec ed. It was pretty much a year long process probably, realistically. So it wasn't a real shock I would say. I do know people who felt they got rammed into spec. ed., but I think it wasn't a big deal for me. It was also presented as "This is a way to make

yourself better” versus “Something is wrong with you and you need to go fix it”. It was, “So you learn differently, this is how you learn. It’s no big deal”. I don’t really remember it being a big deal (Amy).

Once she was diagnosed, her father recalls that she wore it almost as a badge of honour as opposed to an “I’m stupid” kind of thing. He laughs that she has argued that everyone should be tested so that they can be fully aware of their capabilities and their learning style and can ensure that they are being taught properly.

I think the diagnosis is the most important thing – to be able to understand your strengths and weaknesses... You’re really strong at some things and weaker at others, you just need to learn how to balance it... Just having it laid out so you know that there’s not something wrong with you, you’re not stupid (Amy).

Her parents talked about it openly within the family, explaining the diagnosis and what it meant to Amy and her brothers. They knew that they would have to spend extra time working with Amy to help her get through her school work and build her skills. Thus, they wanted her brothers to understand so that there would not be any resentment. While Rick does not remember talking about the diagnosis with Amy at the time, he remembers them discussing it when he was diagnosed with learning disabilities several years later and they continue to talk about it now. Amy’s father recalls that they were careful not to use the diagnosis as an excuse or defense and that they did not “cut her any slack”, so there were not any bad feelings or resentment towards her. They tried to maintain the same high expectations for all three children. As he recalls, “It wasn’t a free ride for her. If anything there was more work for her.” They found that the challenge was to keep the others occupied while they worked with Amy. In the end, her brothers did not feel any resentment towards Amy – they each did their own thing and

were generally very protective towards her. As Rick recalls, “I remember being told not to be hard on her because she was having trouble in school... We were sure to let my parents give her the help she needed with homework and my mother often read with her which was great for her and helped her a lot”.

Their psychologist also worked part time with the board of education. Consequently, she was able to help them navigate the system. Upon her recommendation, Amy’s father accessed the local chapter of the learning disabilities association and the special education department at the school board, but he did not feel that he received a lot of support or useful advice from either resource. They basically advised him to advocate for his child, but they did not go much beyond that. He felt he was already doing that and that part of their job was to advocate for children with learning disabilities to make sure they were getting all that she should be getting. It should not be solely the parents’ responsibility to seek out the support that their children need, because as he says, “Not all parents know the system, so not all are able to access everything and that’s not fair.”

### **School Experiences after the Diagnosis**

**Elementary school.** Once they received the diagnosis and the testing results, Amy and her family shared this information with the school. They met with the special education resource teacher and the principal to discuss what accommodations could be put into place for Amy. It was decided that she would be formally identified as an exceptional student with a learning disability and that an individual education plan (IEP) would be created for her. At first, it felt as though the school was trying to push Amy down a very specific path, one that her parents did not really want for her. They were talking about placing her in a specialized program full time without any plans for reintegration. Her parents wanted Amy to receive the support that she

needed, but they did not want her withdrawn full time. They were hoping that, with the right support, she would eventually be back in the regular program. They wanted her to stay within her community school and within her grade appropriate class for at least part of the day so that she could maintain her friendships and receive the benefit of the academic curriculum. Their goal was to help her develop her skills so that she would be back in the classroom full time. They felt as though they had to fight the school in order to get what they believed she needed. As Amy's mother worked for the school board, her father assumed the role of the "heavy", or the "bad cop", challenging the system and the teachers when he felt their policies or decisions were not in Amy's best interest. You can hear the frustration in her father's voice, as he says, "We're trying to help out Amy and all we're getting is road blocks. They're not listening."

With persistence, her family received what they wanted and Amy remained in the regular class for the majority of her day. Additionally, she also received some specialized support in the special education learning centre each day in language and math during the final two years of elementary school. Amy looks back positively on this support and the gradual way it developed for her. Because she transitioned into the special education system slowly over the course of that year of testing and feedback, she was more comfortable with the changes and the new environment. In the special education environment, she did not have to compare herself to all the other students in her class. In the regular class she had been constantly confronted with the fact that she did not seem to understand everything as easily as her peers and that she did not finish her work as quickly as them either. In the special education class she was able to work at her own level and her own speed, and she could receive the support that she needed to improve her skills. Amy reflects that the assistance she received in elementary school was a good balance

of allowing her to work at her own level and her own pace and challenging and pushing her forward to improve and progress. She commented,

It was a bit of a switch because it's a different learning environment. You go from a classroom of 30 plus kids to a classroom with eight kids approximately. And then everyone was kind of doing their own thing because everyone was at different levels, so you couldn't really compare yourself to other people, which was nice... I was able to work at my own pace, but I still felt challenged (Amy).

**Middle school.** This individualized curriculum in language and math was not always the case, however, and things changed for Amy as she moved on to middle school and high school. She continued to receive special education support the first year of middle school, but it was not the same positive experience that she had back in elementary school. Amy found that it was a more generalized program which was not tailored to her specific needs. Consequently, it was not at the right level for her or many of the other students in the program. The work was too easy for her, and she felt she was not challenged sufficiently. Upon reflection, Amy actually feels that she lost ground at this point of her educational career and that she missed out on learning some important concepts and skills that she would need in high school. She attributes this change in support to the fact that middle school is a much bigger environment with several schools merging into one, which creates a much wider variety of capabilities. Rather than being treated as individuals, the students ended up being taught as a group by the special education teacher. Some students really struggled with the work while others worked through it too quickly and did not end up learning much. Amy was one of the latter students, and she ended up moving back to the regular program part way through the year. This put her at a disadvantage, though, because

there was a lot of material that she had missed and this made it difficult to move forward with the class.

Her father shares these sentiments, as he felt things broke down at the middle school level as well. He remembers Amy coming home crying at the beginning of each year during this time because her teachers did not seem to understand her challenges and the supports that would help her. Consequently, he remembers having to go in to the middle school each year to explain her situation to the teachers and ask them to read the reports and IEPs that were in her file, so that they could give her the accommodations and support she needed.

Middle school was the most challenging I would say because the support that was supposed to be there just wasn't there... Middle school was the one I remember the most having to go in every year and fight every year (Patrick).

**High school.** At the high school level things seemed to improve a little bit, but there were still the same struggles to make sure she got the support and accommodations she needed – extra time for tests and exams, opportunities for write exams in quiet settings, and use of the computer. Amy's father still advocated for her with the school staff, but Amy began taking on more of this role herself. She felt that she knew her own capabilities and needs better than anyone, and she worked hard to be heard by her family and the school. Amy recounted an experience she had in high school with her grade nine French class. She had missed a lot of French classes over the years, as her testing sessions and extra support periods often seemed to fall during French, and consequently she did not feel that her French language skills were as strong as they should be. Despite her request, in grade nine she found herself in academic level French and she knew that it was going to be very challenging for her to pass the course. She took it upon herself to talk with her teacher and her father about the situation and to explain that she was not prepared for

the academic level class and that she should be in the applied level. Even though she was advocating for herself and her needs, no one seemed to listen to her, as both her father and her teacher felt she could handle it. After two months of struggling through the academic class, she was finally allowed to switch into the applied level. That whole experience was very frustrating for Amy, but it seemed to solidify her conviction that she had to advocate for herself and what she needed in the education system. Her brother Rick has witnessed the development of these self-advocacy skills as well, as he reflects, “Amy has learned to stand up for herself and she knew what was right and wrong and spoke out when she needed help”.

**Teachers.** Over the years, Amy has had a range of experiences with her teachers. Some went above and beyond expectations for her and her classmates, providing extra support and guidance while others just made things worse. In elementary school, her special education teacher worked with Amy over the summer holidays and she was able to make a lot of academic progress with this one-to-one support and attention.

My spec. ed. teacher tutored me outside of school which helped a lot actually. And she also had a better basis of where I was at and how to challenge me and how I learned. So, it was kind of nice to have someone with that connection already versus someone having to sit and figure you out for four hours or something (Amy).

Her parents recognized that this teacher was going above and beyond what her role required and they appreciated that this extra effort made a positive difference in Amy’s education.

I know there was more time spent by her teacher, her special education teacher, more hours than what she was doing so I know she was using personal time. It’s not a surprise but that’s a dedication and a passion. (Amy’s father)

At the high school level, there were also some teachers who also had a positive impact. They took the time to work with her individually and would explain assignments and concepts in different ways so that she could understand. These were the teachers who were always available to meet with their students and who would make time to explain the concepts and processes that they were teaching in different ways so that all of their students could understand them. Amy recalls that her math teacher from grade eleven helped her understand concepts that she hadn't been able to grasp in earlier years. Similarly, she had always had difficulty writing paragraphs and essays, but her grade ten English teacher gave her an explicit formula for writing essays that she still uses today. That direct instruction really helped her as she reflects that, "it made such a difference getting the right teacher".

While these kinds of teachers helped her through her educational journey, there were also a number of teachers who just made things harder and more challenging for her. The one that stands out the most for Amy was from her elementary years, and you can still hear the emotion that these memories evoke in Amy as she talks.

She wasn't getting the fact that I learned differently and she basically told me that everything was my fault. I came out of the parent teacher interview crying as a nine year old. So there was a lot of problems there... it was the opposite of support, it was an offense (Amy).

In high school, Amy had another negative experience with a guidance counselor who insisted on directing her towards college rather than university. Any time she tried talking with her about it, the counselor was dismissive and she recalls even being asked to leave her office on one occasion. What seems to bother Amy the most is that this was someone who should have known better, someone who was supposed to have been educated and informed about students with learning disabilities. What resonates for Amy and her father is that there does not seem to

be anything that can be done about it when these issues arise. They tried to report these incidents to the school's administration or to the school board, but no one seems to be accountable and nothing ever seems to come of it. This situation has been very frustrating for them.

### **Transition to University**

Despite the judgmental advice of her guidance counselor, Amy pursued her goal of going to university. She did not know exactly what she wanted to study, but she knew she wanted to go to university. Her father recalls how she took it upon herself to make it happen. The school created a transition plan on paper, but they did not provide a lot of actual support and direction for the students. Amy and her father both felt that the onus was on them to make sure that they were properly informed of all the program options and requirements at the different universities. Amy wanted to stay close to home, and she focused on the local universities that had good reputations for supporting students with learning disabilities. She reasoned that staying at home would be the easiest thing and would give her the best chance for success.

I don't really feel like I missed out on anything by staying at home and I think it took a lot of the pressure off as well because I had that support system and I wasn't dealing with going to university and going into a different city and living on my own for the first time (Amy).

Once she decided that she would stay at home, she then looked at the supports and programs that were available at the local universities. She chose a specialized undergraduate program that seemed to be well suited to her strengths and general learning style. The program guaranteed smaller class sizes with a maximum of 100 students per class during the first year. Amy found this a lot less intimidating and she knew that she would do best in a smaller, more intimate class where there were more discussions and interactions among the students.

I think you can make more connections in a smaller environment. I honestly think if I had to go to a university with 400 people in a class I would have dropped out. I like having my peers around to help me and I think I would have been overwhelmed. I don't think I would have liked it... I think that program made the transition [to university] so much easier (Amy).

Amy continued to be identified as a student with learning disabilities at the university level. She had expected that her high school records had transferred over automatically, but she discovered that she had to go to the university and set up her individual education plan again. While she feels that it would have been easier if there had been an automatic transfer, Amy reports that the process was surprisingly easy.

It was really easy to get identified, actually. I went to the resource centre my first week. I had my documents and I didn't even have to retake them [the psychological assessments], which I thought I would because they were so old (Amy).

Amy does not have any extra funding, but she does have an IEP that provides her with the same kinds of accommodations that she had in high school – extra time and an alternate setting for exams and the use of a computer in class. She feels that being able to write her tests and exams in a smaller room is important for her, because it is something she became used to doing in high school and without that in place, university would have been too much of a “culture shock”.

She has been surprised at how easy the whole process has been at the university level.

I really was surprised how easy it was to get it. You don't even have to go up to your teachers and be like, “I'm learning disabled”. I've only had to do that once. The test rooms need to be booked in advance, so I just go on the computer and book what times I need and I get to write in a special room (Amy).

Amy has generally enjoyed her time at university working on a double major in political science and human rights. She understands herself as a learner and in turn selects courses that are of interest to her and that are taught in a style that she enjoys and that complement her strengths. She appreciates those classes that are discussion based, as she likes getting involved and dialoging with the other students and the professor.

The smaller class sizes in her program have allowed her to connect with other students and form some solid friendships. When she moved into university, she knew she wanted to take advantage of the new setting to branch out and meet new people. A number of the students with whom she graduated from high school were at her university and she was surprised when many of them just maintained their established networks of friends. Amy was the complete opposite – she wanted to meet new people and experience new things. She participated in frosh week and met a lot of new people. She is still connected to those friends she was close to growing up, but she has added to her circle of friends over her years at university.

I had a high school support system, but I kind of left that. I didn't want to stay with all my high school friends. I still talk to a couple, but I liked having a program that I wasn't sitting next to someone from my high school every day. And I'm probably closer with my university friends than I ever was with my high school friends (Amy).

This circle of friends is an important source of support for Amy, what she considers one of her “biggest assets”. They are peers to whom she turns to when she needs support, when she needs a little break from all the stresses when school demands start to become overwhelming, and on whom she relies when she needs to talk things through.

My friends are definitely who I turn to the most, and they're also the people who understand it the most. They're there right now, going through the same thing. So, we all know (Amy).

Her family is another constant source of support for Amy. She has been living at home during her university years and this has been an integral component in her success. While the support has remained constant, the family's daily interactions and dynamics have changed over the years. Amy, her father, and her brothers all see themselves more as roommates now rather than a traditional family unit. They are living under the same roof, but they are adults living their own lives. Amy feels though, that her father and her brothers are, and always will be, there if she needs them.

Overall, Amy's post-secondary experience has generally been a positive and successful one and as her father says, she has "flourished" within the university setting. At this point, she is exploring the possibility of continuing with her studies and pursuing a graduate degree. Despite the overall level of success, there have been some significant challenges along the way. The ones that stand out the most in her mind involve professors who did not have an understanding of learning disabilities and who said things that offended her.

I've had two incidents at university that I couldn't really advocate for myself, two incidents with two professors where they've said something that is not right to say and it's offended me personally (Amy).

The first incident occurred after a class when she was talking with a professor and one of her friends. The professor made a comment about the disability resource centre that Amy used, suggesting that a lot of people do not go there for legitimate reasons and take advantage of the system. She felt that this comment was entirely inappropriate as he knew that she accessed the centre and its services. It upset her that he would make an insensitive and inaccurate comment like that. The second incident occurred during a class when another professor commented that if people did not understand the law then they may as well be mentally handicapped. She knows

the impact that language can have and she feels that remarks like this are as hurtful and damaging as racial slurs in instilling prejudices and misunderstanding. Both comments wounded her deeply, and she made her feelings known, taking her complaints to the university administration. Both times however, nothing was done about it. Amy takes pride in being a strong advocate for herself and others, and these were both occasions where she was not able to do that effectively. She was able to speak up, but she did not feel as though she was heard and she was not able to see any results. The lack of response and action to her concerns by the professors themselves, whom she feels should be educated enough to know better, and the university in general seems to have affected her more than the comments themselves. Patrick feels the same way, as he voices his frustration,

The system is designed not to work. There's nobody you can complain to... The system is designed not to be accountable – it's a design flaw (Patrick).

Thus, while she is proud of herself and her accomplishments at the university level, Amy still feels that there is a long way to go in making this educational journey positive and accessible for everyone.

### **Challenges over the Years**

**Teachers' lack of understanding of learning disabilities.** Reflecting on her educational experiences, Amy highlighted several challenges that confronted her along the way. The most significant one came from the teachers and the individuals in authority who did not adequately understand learning disabilities and who treated her unfairly or disrespectfully. She endured some negative encounters with teachers throughout her educational journey – from elementary school, through middle school and high school, and on to university as well. These teachers, whom she feels should have known better, either did not have an adequate awareness of what

learning disabilities were and how students with them need to work or showed an insensitivity and lack of understanding for individuals with learning disabilities. When she was younger Amy's father would advocate on her behalf to try to help teachers understand what her needs were and what kinds of supports and accommodations would help her in the classroom.

However, as she became older Amy took more of this responsibility on herself and started confronting her teachers and advocating for herself and her classmates. Unfortunately, Amy and her father both found this task frustrating and disheartening. Whenever they tried to take action to make people aware of problems or issues, they felt as though they were hitting a brick wall or being given the "run around". In the end, the big issues never seemed to be resolved.

I think that's the hardest thing with teachers. Because teachers have such a good union, you can't just fire them or talk to them. One of my elementary school teachers deserved to be fired and I will adamantly say this, but nothing happened. (Amy)

**Society's lack of understanding of learning disabilities.** Amy would go further and extend this general lack of understanding beyond teachers to include the broader education system and society in general. She believes that society does not have a good understanding of learning disabilities because it is something that they do not actively think about. As people learn more about it, she hopes that the understanding will come, but she realizes that it is a long process. Amy is less forgiving of people in the education system, because she feels as though they are the ones who should understand what learning disabilities are all about.

When people who work in educational institutions don't understand it [learning disabilities], I get confused as to why they still have a job. It's really frustrating. I know people are being forced to become more educated about it now, but I think people who become teachers and professors don't understand it because they didn't go through it themselves or know

someone who had it. They're just people who were always the model student and never had to try, and it doesn't make sense for these people to become teachers often. They don't get it or they don't have the sympathy or empathy for it. They don't have the comprehension for it and that is a frustration (Amy).

Amy's father believes that some of these issues could be remedied in teacher's college by including more courses in special education, some of which would be taught from the perspective not of a teacher but of someone who has gone through the special education system themselves and who can share their personal experiences. He feels that it needs to become more personal for teachers and people in the education system so that they can deal with students with these special needs more sensitively and respectfully.

**Lack of academic support in middle school and high school.** In general, Amy received the support she needed in the early years through the special education classes that she attended. Both she and her father attest that this early intervention played a pivotal role in her later success. They also report, however, that this individualized support tapered off drastically as she grew older. By middle school and high school there was no longer much support at all, mainly a few accommodations to help her during tests and exams and the opportunity to use the computer for writing assignments. While the early intervention was paramount to Amy's success, there were still some scheduling problems where it was concerned. Sometimes receiving the extra support meant missing certain classes and as the case with her French, she perceived it as creating issues for her later.

Thus, there have been a number of challenges that Amy faced along her journey through the education system, including a lack of understanding of learning disabilities at the individual,

school, and **societal** levels, a lack of support at the higher grade levels, and inappropriate or ineffective supports.

### **Capacities and Resources that have Helped**

Despite these ongoing challenges, Amy graduated from high school and has moved on to a successful educational career at the university level. Both Amy and her father identified a number of capacities and resources, at both an individual level and an ecological level, that helped Amy over the years.

**Determination and effort.** On an individual level, there are many personal capacities and characteristics that Amy and her father identify as having supported her through her educational journey. First and foremost, she is an intelligent, reflective individual who is motivated to do her best and to put in the effort necessary to achieve her goals. Her determination to succeed and her willingness to work hard served Amy well in her academic career. She willingly participated in extra tutoring over her summers and voluntarily went to teachers for extra help when she did not understand a concept or skill. Her father acknowledges that while her determination can sometimes get her into trouble, it is generally an asset that has helped her press on despite any challenges or road blocks that have appeared in her path.

Amy is a very determined young lady and when she puts her mind to something there's no stopping her. She's got some bad habits from me on her determination – she can be pretty blunt, but I can't discourage it (Patrick).

**Goal orientation.** When she was growing up, Amy and her family took a sports-like approach to her school work and any challenges that she faced. Their philosophy was that the more you practised, the more you could progress. Amy's father would often talk with the children about setting goals to move forward and improve themselves and their performance in a

certain area. If one of the children was a C student, then he or she would be encouraged to work towards the goal of getting a C+ or a B. The goal was to always strive to improve themselves and reach their personal bests, whatever that may be. Using this same philosophy, Amy has high expectations of herself and over the years she has regularly set goals and worked hard towards achieving them. First it was to be demitted from special education and back into the regular stream full time and later it was to attend university even when people were pushing her towards college.

I think the goal was always to get out of spec. ed., and I finally did that, and to go to university and to do better. I think the goal was always to do better... We kind of looked at what my skills were and what my weaknesses were and assessed that we could do it and then just worked towards that. But I never really felt pressured, either. It was always that I was doing it for myself and everyone was working to help me (Amy).

**Openness about learning disabilities and self-awareness.** Amy's parents always talked with her openly about her learning disabilities and in turn, Amy always had a strong understanding of her strengths and challenges. This self-awareness resulted in a level of personal confidence that allowed her to accept herself and her learning disabilities and be comfortable sharing them with others. Her openness and willingness to discuss her learning disabilities with her family, her peers, and her teachers served her well over the years and allowed her to feel comfortable advocating for what she needs and is entitled to by law. Thus, self-awareness and an acceptance of her learning disabilities led Amy to understand and advocate for the accommodations she needs to be successful.

**Willingness to use supports.** A willingness to accept and use the supports that were there for her in her environment is another important capacity that has helped Amy move ahead. She

was always willing to accept help from her family at home or from her teachers at school or over the summer. Even when she is out of her familiar environments, she is confident that she will be able to find or create the support that she needs, as Amy declared,

Support systems [are important], but I think I'm also capable of creating that support. I'll still always have my close friends, but I'm not linked to my support system. I can go away and still have people. (Amy)

That confidence in herself and her ability to access the support she needs to be successful is a recurring theme in Amy's narrative and presents as an important component in her success.

Throughout her educational journey Amy accessed and used many of the resources and supports that were available in her learning environments. She and her family identified a number of ecological resources that they feel contributed to her success.

**Peer support.** The importance of friendship and peer support is a recurring theme in their narratives, and Amy often refers to this kind of support as her "biggest asset". Over the years, Amy created some lasting friendships with some of the students in her special education classes. She remembers them working together and helping each other, both academically and emotionally. They talked to each other, helped each other with school work, and just generally pushed each other to do better.

Meeting other students with learning disabilities makes it a lot easier to deal with as well.

With other people you have a support system... I think having that support system was nice, being able to develop that. I'm still close with a couple of people, friends from my spec. ed. class and then if I'm frustrated I can talk with somebody who understands it (Amy).

She feels this same connection and support from her friends at university now, as they are the people she turns to when she is feeling frustrated and needs emotional support.

**Family support.** Amy also received unwavering support from her family over the years. While it evolved over time as her needs and level of independence have changed, it has remained a constant in her life. Amy remembers that her parents were very involved in her schooling when she was first diagnosed. They helped her at home with her homework and with extra work to help her catch up over the summer. They also arranged trips to the library and sessions with tutors to build her skills. While they have always supported her academic development, they were careful not to overdo it, trying to balance academics with opportunities for her to participate in other activities, such as hockey, Cubs and Scouts, swimming, and skating. They even stopped her from working if they saw that she was pushing herself too hard or starting to become frustrated.

It was nice being able to do other programs, like they weren't just making me focus on school. I still had extracurricular activities, I could still go out with friends, I could still do whatever. It wasn't always about school which was nice because I wouldn't have wanted that (Amy).

**Extra-curricular activities.** This involvement in activities outside of school is another resource that has helped Amy over the years in a number of ways. It has acted as a stress reliever, providing a break from school work and the stresses and frustrations that can come with it. Extra curricular activities also provided additional opportunities for her to develop friendships and connections with her peers. As well, they helped her develop additional skills, such as time management and perseverance. Now that she is in university, she also has a part-time job.

I think work is a big asset for me to have in university so I have some guilt-free time not to be doing school work. One year when I had a stressful period it was nice to be able to go to

work. I was like, “I have work now, I don’t really have time for that”. And I do a lot better if I’m busy, I always have (Amy).

**Advocacy and encouragement for self-advocacy.** Amy’s parents encouraged her to work through things on her own and to take ownership of herself and her strengths and needs. Leading by example and showing her how to do it on her own, they helped her become comfortable advocating for herself with her teachers. As Amy recalls,

They really helped me advocate for myself and they were really good advocates for everything with all my teachers when there were problems. They wouldn’t necessarily do it for me, but they were a great tool for me to have (Amy).

This self-advocacy is an important capacity that has developed in Amy over the years, empowering her to be in control of her education and her life. It has come to extend beyond herself, as Amy has found herself advocating for others as well.

Overall, Amy’s success seems to come from to a combination of these ecological supports and the personal capacities that have enabled her to take advantage of them. Both Amy and her father are acutely aware that she has succeeded where many others have not and they search for reasons why things worked out so well for her while others have not fared as well. Amy reflects on this discrepancy, saying,

I think one of the biggest differences for me versus the people who were in the [special education] program at the same time as me was I think I was more determined than they were and I had a better support system (Amy).

Her father acknowledges the importance of the ecological supports she had at home from her family and in elementary school from her resource teacher, but he gives the most credit to her own personal capacities.

I suspect that a lot of it has to do with the fact that Amy embraces it [her learning disabilities]. Amy didn't care if she was ostracized for it so she had a stronger backbone than other people. Some people may have felt more singled out and not been as pig-headed as Amy is, and so they didn't get that same [outcome]. They had the support at home, but their friends were more important than their education and I can't criticize them for that, it's who they are. Amy, right off the bat, has always chosen to go the forward looking route. (Patrick).

### **Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities**

Over the years, Amy developed a deep understanding of herself as a learner. She believes that being diagnosed with learning disabilities when she was young helped her, because it brought with it an awareness of how she learned and what her strengths and challenges were as a learner. She perceives this knowledge as an asset that empowered her to know how to work to achieve her goals and how to advocate for herself when she needed to. For Amy it is more a "learning difference" than learning 'disabilities', and understanding this difference is the key to her success. She believes that she will always learn differently, but that as she has grown older and her self-awareness and understanding has developed, it affects her less. Amy reports that her knowledge of learning disabilities, or learning differences, has grown over time. On an intellectual level, she consciously chose to study learning disabilities when she was in high school in order to learn more about them and their effects on students. On a more personal level, her own experiences and the experiences of her friends and acquaintances who had learning disabilities deepened her understanding.

While Amy feels that she has a solid understanding of learning disabilities, she does not feel as confidently about society's understanding. She is disheartened by the public's general attitude

towards learning disabilities and feels this is an area where some change is necessary. Amy, her father, and her brother all discussed how a lot of people seem to view learning disabilities as intellectual deficits and perceive those who have learning disabilities as less able and less capable. Rather than seeing some individuals as having learning “disabilities”, they would like society to acknowledge and recognize that all people learn differently.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**CASE #2: MARK**

## **Mark's Profile**

Mark is completing his Bachelor of Arts in psychology at an Ottawa area university, and is transitioning into the world of work. Even though he was diagnosed with learning disabilities at a young age, Mark still went through some challenging times within the education system. His early teachers did not understand his learning disabilities or his attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and consequently he was labeled as a behavior problem by his teachers. Supported by a loving family, Mark made it through these challenges and ended up developing a love of learning and a strong work ethic that has served him well over the years. Knowing the struggles that he went through as a child, Mark is motivated to help others in similar situations. His story gives us the chance to witness the educational journey of a student diagnosed with learning disabilities and ADHD. We can see the challenges that he had to overcome as well as the supports and resources that helped him over the years. The following narrative describes Mark's educational journey, as recounted by Mark, his mother Monica, and his older brother Lucas.

## **Early Life Experiences**

Born in eastern Quebec, Mark grew up in a family of four boys surrounded by loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. His mother and father created a close family unit and always made the family their number one priority. His mother, Monica, describes him as a bright, well-spoken child with a great sense of humour. Consequently, she found that their friends and family were drawn to him when he was young and enjoyed being around him. His older brother Lucas remembers him as being very outgoing and talkative. As he recalls, "being the smallest, he had to use his voice to be heard. If he wasn't loud, then he would go unnoticed". When he was seven, Mark and his family moved to Ontario, just a couple of hours from their

hometown. While this move took them away from their extended family, they were close enough that they still saw them at least once a month and on special occasions. Consequently, those close, supportive connections remained intact.

While Mark describes his family as being very close, he recalls that he was not always as close to his brothers as he is now. Their ages and their interests tended to divide them at times, as Mark's brothers range from four to eight years older than him. When they were younger the age difference did not seem to matter as much, but as the older boys moved into their teen years, it seemed to have more of an impact on their relationships. His brothers were very involved in sports like hockey and soccer, but this was not much of an interest for Mark and it served to divide them even further.

We would play together and we would hang out together and those sorts of things, but the three of them were definitely more of a cohesive unit... I would play on my own and do my own thing a lot more and I think it was partially because I wasn't as into sports and I wasn't as into a lot of the rough and tumble things that they were into (Mark).

His brother, Lucas, also remembers this family dynamic, as he recalls spending most of his time playing soccer or hockey with his other two brothers, Eric and Jason. Lucas was the closest in age to Mark, though, and he remembers times when the two of them were quite close,

Sometimes we would isolate ourselves and play games together. I was nicer to him then.

When it was just the two of us, we got along well and I was nice to him, but when we were with the others I would pick on him like they did (Lucas).

His mother remembers this divide extending a bit into Mark's relationship with his father, Pat as well, because sports played a large role in his relationships with the children. Pat loved sports and was very active in the boys' hockey and other extra curricular activities. As Mark became

older, however, he and his father began to discover some common interests and now spend a lot of time together talking about and tending to their aquariums of fish. Consequently, Monica reflects that she was probably the one who spent the most time with Mark when he was growing up. When Mark was very young, before he started school, she ran a daycare out of their home. This allowed them to spend a lot of time together when Pat was at work and the other boys were at school. Monica had worked as an elementary school teacher before the children were born and has a passion for teaching and learning. Because of this, she was the one who worked with him on his academics over the years, trying to help him learn what seemed to have come so much more easily to the other children. As Monica recalls, all of these things combined to create a very special relationship between her and Mark.

I think I tried to help him as much as I could... I love all my kids very, very much but I have a very special connection to him, maybe because of all the things he's been through (Monica).

In addition to this strong family foundation, Mark also emphasizes the important role that friends have had in his life. When he was younger, developing close friendships was harder for him. His mother observed that during the elementary school years he was not able to maintain friendships for very long. He had difficulty interacting with his peers, as he did not seem to know how to get along with them. Mark attributes some of these early difficulties with friends to the academic and behavioral difficulties he had back in his first years of school.

I was always in the hallway for bad behavior so I didn't really connect in a lot of ways with the rest of the class because I was sort of emotionally separated in my own mind because it was such a difficult time for me. But I was also physically separated from the classroom, and I think any kid who has been identified as the problem child, you know, the class I think

picks up on that and it becomes sort of – I don't think I was ostracized per se but in some ways I was the outlier (Mark).

As he matured, however, he started to make some solid connections and slowly built up a strong network of friends. Many of his current friendships were established back in high school. His closest friend, Tessa, has an even stronger history as they first met back in middle school when they were twelve years old. He and Tessa have lived very different lives, but Mark sees this as a positive thing as they balance each other out.

We've always been very different. She's a lot more adventurous and a lot more free spirited than I am, but we balance each other out and support each other. She's brought me a bit out of my shell and I've sort of reeled her back a little bit (Mark).

Monica observes that most of Mark's closest friends over the years have been girls and she surmises that this is because they provided the more supportive, interactive relationship that he was looking for. Because he was not as interested in the sports that typically bind boys together, he gravitated towards girls and has made some very strong friendships that have endured throughout the years.

### **Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis**

Even before Mark started nursery school, his mother knew that something was different in how he learned. While all of the boys were bright, talkative individuals, some of the things that had come so effortlessly to his brothers, did not come as easily to Mark. Compared with his three older brothers, he had much more difficulty remembering his numbers and letters and no matter how hard he tried, he could not seem to learn how to write his name. Monica also observed that he was a lot more active and impulsive than the other boys.

He'd always been very hyper from the time he was little. He couldn't even sit at the table and have dinner with us. He'd be running around the room and he could never sit still. He was extremely hyper and I knew that even though the boys were all active, he was the most active with everything (Monica).

She voiced her concerns to the nursery school teacher, but she just dismissed it as immaturity and reassured her that he would catch up and be just fine. Despite her reassurances, Monica was very worried and devoted a lot of time at home to working with him and trying to help him learn the basics she felt he needed for school. No matter how hard they worked though, he seemed to have limited recall of previously taught material. You can hear the frustration in her voice as she recalls how much they practiced and the lack of success that they had.

I could see that he was very bright so I couldn't understand why nothing was sticking with him. I would concentrate on just one letter a week. We'd do all kinds of things with that letter – we'd do it with sand, paper, Play-Doh and everything and then I'd put a huge letter on the board and every time he came into the kitchen or walked by, if he could tell me the letter I'd put a sticker on it... And then I would take it down and the next day he wouldn't know that letter at all. It was like he'd never seen it before (Monica).

She was a teacher and had worked with children on these skills countless times before, but she could not make it work with her own child. She was confused and could not understand what the problem was.

In kindergarten they were forced to put him into a French immersion program, because that was all that was available in their area of Quebec. He was strong orally though, and he ended up making some progress that first year. The following year when he had to start writing, things started to deteriorate very quickly. Additionally, his grade one teacher was not a good fit and

both Mark and his mother recall that he had difficulty in her class right from the start. She did not understand his learning challenges and was very inflexible in her approach – she did things one way and would not make any exceptions for Mark or any other student. His mother remembers the weekly spelling dictées that had such a horrible effect on Mark. He would study hard for them all week long, and then on Friday’s test he would get every word wrong. Monica tried talking with the teacher to explain to her how hard Mark was working and to ask for the demands to be reduced, but the teacher refused to make any exceptions. Over time, Monica saw the toll it was taking on Mark. As each week progressed and the dictée got closer, Mark’s level of anxiety and agitation would grow and his misbehavior would escalate in the home. By Thursday evening, he would be having full-blown temper tantrums and meltdowns.

He couldn’t tell us why he was so upset so he expressed it in very poor behavior like tantrums. He would throw his toys. I remember one time when he was standing at the top of the stairs just throwing all his toys and screaming that he hated everybody and everything (Monica).

The behavior issues mounted at school as well, as his parents received calls from the teacher or principal almost daily. Mark seemed to be spending most of his days out in the hall.

Monica and Pat tried talking with the teacher and the principal at the school, but they did not receive much understanding or support, as the principal once told her that Mark was just spoiled and needed a good spanking. They tried to get him transferred to another class or even another school, but neither of these options worked out due to the school board’s procedures. They even thought about home schooling him for a while, but as difficult as that class was for Mark he did not want to leave his friends. His parents were extremely concerned, but they could not seem to

find any kind of solution. Finally, they were forced into action when he started to talk about hurting himself.

So it came to a head finally when he told me he wanted to kill himself. He was six years old and he just said, “I want to die. I want to kill myself.” That was bad to hear your child say that (Monica).

### **Diagnosis**

Receiving no support from the school during his kindergarten years, Mark’s parents sought help through their pediatrician. They were referred to a child psychologist who ended up doing a full psycho-educational assessment with Mark. Not having the necessary insurance coverage to cover the cost, it was a significant investment, but one that they considered worthwhile and essential for Mark’s wellbeing. It took a few months, but by March of his grade one year the testing was complete and they had the results – Mark was diagnosed with learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The psychologist had a lot of recommendations for the school and for Mark’s family, one of which was that he start taking medication to help manage his ADHD.

For Monica, these diagnoses helped tremendously. Rather than feeling upset or devastated, she was relieved. Finally, there was a reason, an explanation for everything that was happening. She had been baffled for so long as to why her bright, intelligent, hard working son was struggling so much with school, and these diagnoses gave her the reasons she was searching for. She felt as though she now had a place to start and that this information would help her learn how to best help Mark. As Monica recalls, “I was not upset about the diagnosis. I was pretty much, “Phew! Okay, this is what it is and now we’re going to do something about it”. Because of her background in teaching, Monica took the lead in this area as well. As she explains it, this

was “her domain” and not something that Pat was as interested in or passionate about. Armed with the knowledge of what was going on with her child, Monica took it upon herself to seek out the resources and information that she needed to help him. The psychologist did not give her any direction for seeking help, but she did her own research at the library and accessed the local learning disabilities association as well. Reading as many books and articles as she could and consulting with specialists in these areas, Monica became an expert on learning disabilities, ADHD, and her son.

The idea of putting Mark on a daily dose of medication for his ADHD was difficult for Monica, but even more so for Pat. He was very much against the idea and this caused some issues between them as they struggled to make the right decision for their child. They eventually did give it a try, and it was difficult at first as Mark had some adverse reactions to the drug – he had stomach aches, he was moody and irritable, and he lost his appetite for much of the day. While Monica was tempted to take him off the medication, she had consulted with the doctor extensively beforehand and he was monitoring the process closely. They waited it out, and with time things settled into a more comfortable rhythm for Mark. In the end they were glad that they had stuck with it, as it allowed him to focus on his work and be more successful academically and it helped him on a social level as well.

Monica talked very openly about the diagnoses with Mark, always being cognizant of his age and his level of understanding. She felt that the more he knew and understood about his situation and the more knowledge he had about learning disabilities in general, the better off he would be. She tried to share the names and stories of other people, famous people, who had learning disabilities so that Mark could see that others had gone through it and that it was possible to be successful. Monica wanted to take away the negative stigma that seemed to accompany learning

disabilities, so that Mark would not become so discouraged that he did not have hope for his future. As Mark recalls,

My mom was pretty open with me about it and told me all the details as we went along and it was very out in the open. I don't think I really understood it when I was really young, but as I got older I understood it. I think it helped me to be aware of why I felt this way and why I had the challenges I had (Mark).

Monica talked about it with the family as well, explaining that Mark was very smart but that he had some difficulties in certain areas. Although she talked with his brothers about it a lot, she does not feel that they really fully understood what she was saying. They still seemed to have the impression that if you could not read, then you were "dumb". She worried that like typical siblings, there would be times when they would be insensitive and tease or make fun of him.

I remember having many, many talks with them trying to explain to them what it is and that he is very smart and it had nothing to do with his intelligence. For me it was difficult because I was worried about the outside world hurting his feelings, but then his own brothers too (Monica).

His older brother, Lucas, remembers his mother talking about Mark's learning disabilities, and while he knew friends and classmates who had learning disabilities at the time, he recalls that the brothers were not easy on Mark and did tend to tease him at times. The extended family had mixed reactions. Mark's grandfather did not understand how his smart grandson could have these learning problems and he would not accept it. Monica's sister, on the other hand, had a son with some learning and behavior issues of his own, and while it was not exactly the same she did understand and ended up being a very strong support for Monica over the years.

### **School Experiences after the Diagnosis**

**Elementary school.** Equipped with the assessment results and the psychologist's recommendations, Monica went into the school to confront the teacher and principal. While the grade one teacher did not change her teaching style or methods, she did ease up on Mark in class. As Monica says, she "basically ignored him for the rest of the year", which was fine with her and made life a lot easier for Mark as the pressure was reduced. At the end of the school year, Monica and Pat discovered that they would be moving the family to Ontario. While this would be a big change for all of them, Monica saw this as a great opportunity for Mark, as he would be able to start fresh in a new school with new friends.

After they had settled in to their new home, Monica and Pat went to the new school to make sure that the staff was aware of Mark's needs and that he would be in a better, more positive environment than he had been for the past year. They were pleasantly surprised at what they found. They had been prepared for Mark to repeat the first grade since he had not made any progress the year before, and they were pushing for that outcome so that he could catch up with his peers. The principal asked to meet with them, though, and actually recommended that he move ahead into grade two with his same aged peers, promising that he would receive the support and nurturing that he needed to be successful. Reluctantly, Pat and Monica agreed, and they look back on this as one of the best decisions they ever made for Mark. He was formally identified as a student with learning disabilities and an individual education plan (IEP) was developed to ensure that he got the support and specialized programming that he needed to be successful in school. More importantly however, he was placed in a class with a teacher that changed his life. This teacher had a grown son who had been diagnosed with learning disabilities when he was a child, and she saw a lot of him in Mark. Because of this, they had a

very special connection and she took a lot of time and care with him building up his damaged self-confidence and helping him feel better about himself again. Mark remembers her fondly, disclosing that he will never forget the positive impact that she had on his life,

It was basically night and day in terms of teachers. Mrs. G was her name and I'll always have her name engrained in my mind. She was very supportive and really sort of an advocate for the kids (Mark).

The rest of his elementary schooling continued along this path, as he had supportive teachers and positive experiences all the way through. He remembers his mother being very involved in his education, as she would help him at home with his homework and volunteer her time in the school for field trips and special activities. Being a teacher, Monica understood the system and maintained positive relationships with his teachers throughout the years.

I think I had a really good relationship with all his teachers because I really like them and I knew they were helping him so I was out and about quite a bit in the school and he liked it (Monica).

While not actively involved in his schooling during the day, Pat always took an interest in Mark's education and inquired how things were going.

My dad was also involved in that he was interested and asked me about my grades and asked me about how school was. He just was not physically there because he was working during the days (Mark).

Monica worried that all of the time and attention they devoted to Mark and his schooling might be resented by the other boys, but they did not have the same challenges as Mark and as Lucas recollects, they recognized that the attention he was getting from his parents was not something

that they needed or wanted. They had their own special bond with their father in the sports that they played.

Mark received academic support in the special education learning centre (SELC) each year for about half of his day in language arts and math, and this extra support helped with his attentional difficulties and did a lot to bring up his skills and build up his confidence.

He had a really good experience in elementary school right through until the last year. All the teachers took a lot of time, the special education teacher was great with everybody and I could see him changing. The behaviors got much better as well (Monica).

Looking back on this extra support in elementary school, Mark has mixed emotions. On one hand, he found it difficult to be pulled out his homeroom classes because it singled him out and made him feel different from his peers. He remembers feeling insecure about it and wishing that he did not have to go and wishing that the other students did not know and think of him as ‘the special kid’. On the other hand, he realizes that it was beneficial for him and without it he may not have progressed as well as he did in school. He believes that it ended up having a big impact on his confidence.

I think it almost built up some of my confidence because I was always kind of like at the top of this [special education] class and that was so different for me because I’d never obviously been at the top of my class. I’d always been one of the lower ones, but in this smaller class environment I was always having lots of right answers and was getting recognition for the first time as having been doing well academically (Mark).

**Middle school.** The same level of assistance continued in middle school, and in fact there was an opportunity for it to increase. The school was implementing a full day support class, where students would be able to receive specialized support in all subjects rather than just math

and language. While Monica was grateful for this additional support, Mark's attitude began to change. Suddenly, he started fighting against the extra support, as he did not want to be separated from his peers and put in what he considered the "dummy class". It was difficult for Monica to go against Mark's wishes, but she stood by her convictions and enrolled him in the program where she knew he would have the academic assistance he needed.

We had another royal battle about that and I almost caved because it's so hard to make your child do something they're so against. But again, I think it was a very good move because there were like ten kids in the class and he got a lot of help, because there was a SELC teacher and there was an educational assistant, and you know for ten kids that was a lot (Monica).

As the end of middle school approached, the students and their families had to make plans for high school. Many of the students who had been in Mark's program were directed towards the vocational high school where they could study trades and prepare for the world of work. The other option was to go to the local high school where he could take applied, college level courses, or academic level courses that would prepare him for university. Neither Monica nor Mark wanted him to go the vocational high school, and fortunately that option was not recommended by the school either. Unfortunately though, the school decided that the students coming out of Mark's program would be taking the college route. Just hearing his teacher remark that this was the option they should be taking made Mark feel even more strongly about going to university. At that point Mark was determined to go to university to pursue a career in social work or the social sciences.

**High school.** When Mark first entered high school, he was taking the college level courses, but this was not what he wanted and he knew this would get in the way of him reaching his

goals. Consequently, over that first summer Mark took it upon himself to register for the summer program so that he could take an equivalency course and be admitted into the university stream of classes. He was successful and from that time on, he took the university level courses that he needed in order to pursue his goals of a career in social work or the social sciences. His parents hired a tutor to help with his math, but this was something that they had done for all of the boys.

Throughout high school Mark's individual education plan was maintained, but at this point rather than working on specialized programs, he was working towards the same goals as the rest of the class. There were some accommodations in place that he and Monica feel were essential in order for him to be successful. In his first year of high school he had a slightly reduced workload, as one of his courses was a learning strategies class where he worked on organizations skills and received some extra support for his other classes. Additionally, he received extra time for tests and exams, he had access to a special setting and a scribe for some exams, and he was not penalized for spelling in his writing assignments. This last accommodation was an important one, and one that both Mark and his parents had to fight for at the high school level and later at the university level as well.

Generally, Mark's high school experiences were quite positive, although there were a few bumps along the road in the form of insensitive or uninformed teachers. Most of the teachers did not seem to read his IEP, and it was up to Mark or his mother to talk with them about his needs and the accommodations to which he was entitled. This lack of awareness on the part of the teachers is something that Mark and his mother just seem to take for granted and accept, as the onus fell on them to make teachers aware and advocate for Mark's rights as a student with learning disabilities. One incident with the guidance counselor, however, stands out for both of

them. She called Mark into her office to talk about his accommodations, but spoke to him like he was a child who could not understand big words. She tried to talk with him about his learning disabilities and explain to him how differently his brain worked. She ended up humiliating him and upsetting him, without having any awareness of what she had just done. After hearing about the incident from Mark, Monica contacted the guidance counselor and tried to make her understand the effect that her words and her actions had on Mark. The fact that a counselor would have such a lack of awareness and understanding about learning disabilities still puzzles and infuriates Mark and Monica to this day.

She was his guidance counselor. That's how it goes, they stay as the guidance counselor but they don't understand... As far as I'm concerned that was one of the worst experiences he had in high school (Monica).

While he may have had some difficulties with unsupportive and insensitive teachers in high school, it was during this time that Mark really started to connect with his peers and establish some deep friendships. When he was younger, social interactions had been challenging for him at times, but in high school he seemed to find his way and make some strong connections. He had never had a big interest in sports and the typical extra curricular activities that students participated in, but in high school he discovered a love of drama and the theatre. He joined an improvisation group and that was a good outlet for his creative talents and provided an opportunity to make friends. He is still close to these friends that he made in high school, and he feels very lucky to have them in his life.

I've lived a very privileged life to be honest. I've had a very good, close knit group of friends that I made when I was in high school (Mark).

## **Transition to University**

As his high school journey was starting to come to an end, Mark began thinking about his options for university. There was not any support from the school during the application process, as both Mark and Monica remember working through it together at home. Mark's three older brothers had all gone through the process of applying to university or college themselves and they were there to help somewhat, but there was no formal transition plan on paper or support from the high school itself. While he considered the idea of moving away for university, Mark ended up staying at home and going to one of the local universities to do a Bachelor of Arts in psychology and criminology. He did not register himself as a student with learning disabilities, and thus did not receive any special accommodations during that first year. In that first semester he tried to adjust to the new routines and expectations of university life. He enjoyed his classes, but was not entirely ready for the new level of responsibility that came with university level classes. It was quite an adjustment for Mark, as he realized that "everything is at your own pace and nobody really asks you if you did the readings so really you only have yourself accountable". He ended up failing a course the first semester. This came as a big shock to him and it had a big impact on him, as he experienced some feelings of self-doubt as to whether he would be able to be successful at the university level. He did not let it get him down, though, as he worked hard to overcome it and put himself on a more positive and successful path. His determination and perseverance in working towards his goals came into play once again.

I knew that I really wanted to do it and I really wanted to finish it, and I knew that it would have a big impact on my future, like if I finish university or not and I personally really hate quitting things so it was just a big internal motivation I guess (Mark).

After that first semester, Mark started feeling as though he had “chickened out” by playing it safe and staying at home. Consequently, he ended up going to the out-of town university that he had applied to originally on an exchange after Christmas. The exchange went well and he passed all of his courses, but he ended up moving back home after the semester. He missed his family and his partner at the time, who lived in the city, ended up returning as well. He settled back into his life at the local university committed to doing his best and graduating with his degree. As he moved into his second year, Mark’s parents noticed a change in him. They found that he was taking on more responsibility for himself in his education and was not coming to them for help as he once had.

He pretty much really did most things on his own. Just the odd time coming to me and asking me to edit his work. But he was also asking friends to edit his work too... Really once he hit university, he was pretty much doing everything on his own. I really had very little to do with anything (Monica).

There had been no communication or link between Mark’s high school and the university, and consequently his identification as an exceptional student with learning disabilities and the accommodations and extra supports to which that entitled him were not in place for him at the university level. It was up to Mark or his parents to take the initiative and get that in place for him. Initially, Mark did not initiate any of that. Monica tried to encourage him to bring the paperwork into the resource centre, but he was reluctant to do it. As Monica reflects on it, she believes his reluctance to access the support services may have stemmed from the bad experience he had with the guidance counselor back when he was in high school.

He didn't do it right away. He waited and I was telling him, you need to tell them because most places do have accommodations for kids with learning disabilities, and he didn't really want to I think because of his experiences with that guidance counselor (Monica).

It was not until he started getting penalized for his spelling that Mark actually took any action to get some accommodations in place. As he remembers,

One time I got a really bad mark on an exam and it was like for workplace psychology and the professor had marked all my spelling in the exam. I remember just thinking that this is completely unfair. The content was all there... I remember getting a much lower mark than I otherwise should have and I talked with her about it and I said, "You know this doesn't really seem fair to me. I have the right answers but they're spelled wrong. It doesn't seem fair (Mark).

It was the professor who actually advised him to go to the student resource centre to put the accommodations he needed in place. Mark brought all the documentation they had accumulated over the years to the centre and they were able to identify him as a student with exceptionalities. Both Mark and Monica were surprised that they were able to use the psycho-educational assessment that had been done back when he six years old, but were grateful to have the documentation in place.

While attending university, Mark has always had a part-time job as well. The jobs varied over the years, but he has always found a way to work while he has been attending university. He worked as a cashier in a grocery store, a clerk in a pet store, an associate in a book store, and a server in a restaurant. The best work opportunity came most recently, however, when he signed up for a federal work experience program. He did not have any experience with the government or in the field, but he was invited for an interview and offered a job in the

Immigration Department. That job changed Mark's life significantly, as he found he had a passion for the work and reconsidered his career goal of social work. Additionally, it served as extra motivation for him to complete his degree and graduate from university because he wanted to pursue a permanent job in that area. At the time of the interviews, Mark had just been offered a permanent position in the Immigration Department.

Thus, while it has not always been an easy journey and while there have been a number of challenges along the way, Mark worked hard to complete his university degree and is now employed with the federal government.

### **Challenges over the Years**

**Untreated ADHD.** Reflecting on his educational journey, Mark highlighted several challenges that confronted him along the way. The first challenge stemmed from his undiagnosed and untreated ADHD. Both he and Monica feel that those first years of school, before he started taking the medication, were very difficult for him in a number of ways: socially, behaviourally, and academically. He had some significant academic challenges, but his inability to sit still and focus his attention long enough to work on those skills set him back even further. His impulsivity got him into trouble with the classroom teacher, and the isolation and feelings of frustration that the consequences created for him caused some strong emotional and behavioral reactions. Mark often ended up acting out and expressing his negative emotions in temper tantrums and meltdowns both at school and at home. He and his mother believe that these difficulties ended up distancing him from his peers and affecting his social interactions. Mark reflects back on this time and the difference that he saw once he started taking his medication,

I was probably the definition of hyperactive. I was so scattered and so wild. So I think both educationally and socially it made a big difference because I would settle down and I could focus and I could build relationships easier because I wasn't bouncing off the walls (Mark). Thus, once his ADHD was identified and he started taking medication for it, he saw an improvement in his behavior, his social interactions, and his academic achievement. As he got older, Mark continued taking his medication but he tended to use it more judiciously. He would take it when he felt it would help him concentrate on an exam or when he knew he needed to focus to study or complete an assignment.

**Teachers' lack of understanding of learning disabilities.** Another significant challenge for Mark came from the teachers and school staff who did not have an understanding of learning disabilities and who treated him unfairly or insensitively. One of his very first school experiences was extremely negative, as his first grade teacher did not understand his needs and would not work with him or his family to help him have some success. She actually did just the opposite, singling him out and making him feel even worse about himself than he already did. Her words and actions evoked negative feelings in him, to such an extent that he eventually talked about hurting himself or killing himself.

I had a particularly terrible teacher when I was younger who just didn't know how to deal with me and was not used to dealing with learning disabilities and things like that (Mark). Later he encountered other teachers who reacted inappropriately to his learning disability as well. The one that stands out the most for both Mark and Monica, after that first grade teacher, is his high school guidance counselor. Her complete lack of understanding of what learning disabilities were and what students with learning disabilities needed came through loud and clear in the way that she talked to him. As Monica remembers,

She brought him in to meet with him and she obviously didn't understand learning disabilities, because she started to talk to him like he was a baby, like he couldn't understand what she was saying. She said to him, "Don't worry, I just found out about your learning disability and I won't use any big words when I talk to you" (Monica).

Her attitude and tone wounded and offended Mark deeply. He was humiliated by the way she talked down to him and assumed that his understanding was less than his peers. When Monica confronted her about the damage that she had done, the counselor was genuinely sorry, but being in that position, they feel that she should have known better.

**Alienation from peers due to withdrawal.** The early intervention and support that Mark received as he entered the second grade in the Ontario school played an important role in strengthening his academic skills and confidence. At the same time however, he also feels that it served to alienate him from his peers at times as he was removed from his class for approximately half of each day and this was difficult for him.

At the time I wasn't very happy about it because you're sort of singled out in a lot of ways because you leave for the subjects... I can remember feeling insecure about it and wishing that I didn't have to go and wishing that the other kids didn't know about it because you don't want to be the special kid or painted with that sort of paintbrush (Mark).

Thus, there have been a number of challenges that Mark faced along his journey through the education system, including the period of time where his ADHD went undetected and untreated that resulted in not only academic, but social and behavioral difficulties. There was also the lack of awareness and understanding of learning disabilities and ADHD within some of the educational community, and the social challenges that came with being withdrawn from his homeroom class for support.

### **Capacities and Resources that have Helped**

Despite these challenges, Mark successfully graduated from high school and transitioned to university, and he is now working in Immigration, a field about which he is passionate. Mark and his family noted some specific capacities and resources, at both the individual and ecological levels, that helped him.

**Determination and effort.** On an individual level, there are a number of personal capacities and characteristics that Mark and his family identify as having helped him through his educational journey. Most importantly, he is an intelligent and determined individual who is willing to work hard to meet his goals. This is something that resonated strongly throughout Monica's narrative, as she often talked about reassuring Mark that in spite of the challenges he faced with reading and spelling, he was indeed as smart and as capable as his peers.

I can't even count how many times when he was younger that I would tell him that he was smart, and tell him how intelligent he was. Many times I would go over the results that he had on that test [psycho-educational assessment] and I would tell him you scored in the 97<sup>th</sup> percentile (Monica).

His brother Lucas echoes these sentiments, as he attributes much of Mark's success to his personal strengths, stating, "a lot of his success came from him. He's a hard working person. If you have a disability, you'll have to work harder and use the resources that will help you".

**Goal orientation.** Mark used his intelligence and his determination to persevere through challenges and succeed in his academic pursuits. He would set goals for himself and not let anything or anyone deter him from working toward them and eventually achieving them. The best example of this is his decision to go to university. He knew from an early age that he wanted to go to university to study social work or something in the social sciences. As far back

as middle school, however, his teachers tried to dissuade him for working towards this goal and directed him towards college level courses. Mark knew that this was not what he wanted, and instead of acquiescing, he worked hard in his classes and took the initiative to make sure that he had the pre-requisite courses for university entrance. This drive and determination to accomplish his goals, even when others did not necessarily believe in him, came from within.

He's determined and he has goals. He sets goals for himself and he makes sure that he reaches them. That's not really from anyone else doing it, that's from within (Monica).

**Openness and awareness of learning disabilities.** From the time he was first diagnosed, Mark's parents have always talked with him openly about his learning disability and his strengths and challenges. Thus, Mark always had a strong awareness and understanding of his own strengths and needs as a learner. This awareness resulted in a level of personal confidence that allowed him to accept himself and his learning disability. While he initially questioned why he had to learn differently from his peers and wished that he could be "normal", he came to accept these differences and not see them in such a negative light. Now he refers to it not as a disability, but as a "difference".

If parents and children and everybody would just understand that it's not such a big deal... It's a difference. It's not a disability as far as I'm concerned because I don't feel disabled (Mark).

Mark developed this positive outlook from his mother. Right from the beginning, Monica saw the diagnosis as a positive piece of information that would help her work with her son. She had struggled to understand what was going on with Mark, and the diagnosis gave her a reason for his difficulties and with that reason she knew she could find a solution.

When you know about something, it's much easier to deal with it. Ignorance is not good. I started off with ignorance about it and it was stressful, it was more stressful. But once I understood about it more and learned more and more, that's been a big help (Monica).

**Willingness to use resources and supports.** Throughout his schooling Mark was willing to access and use the resources and supports that were available in his environment. He and his family identified a number of ecological resources they feel contributed to his success.

**Family support.** First and foremost, Mark always felt the support of his family over the years, particularly from his mother. She helped him with his homework and his learning, she advocated for him at school with his teachers, and she was always there to talk with him and encourage him when he needed someone in his corner. For Monica, these are probably the most important things that parents can do for their children.

If your child doesn't feel that his own parents support him, you know, who else is going to support him? You know, you have to be there 150 percent for that child to help him become the best that he can be (Monica).

Mark acknowledges the importance of the support that he received from his mother and father, and how lucky he is to have had it throughout his life.

I've been very fortunate in the way that I have a really great relationship with both my parents. They've always been extremely supportive and just always provided everything that I needed financially, emotionally. They were just very supportive in every definition of the term (Mark).

His brother Lucas saw the support that Mark received from their mother on a daily basis, and reflects on just how important it was in his life,

Mom was really involved with his homework. They worked together a lot. I remember them working at the table for a couple of hours every night – just working and going through things. My mom really helped him. She was good at encouraging him. He couldn't have done it without her. He needed someone who was patient with him and to help him through things (Lucas).

**Teacher support.** In addition to this family support, Mark also received assistance from his schools and teachers once he and his family settled in Ontario. He recalls many teachers who took the time to know him and understand his learning strengths and needs.

Different teachers who were supportive at different periods in time definitely helped with a lot of the challenges because if you can have an open sort of dialogue with your teacher about why it's not going well or what you don't understand it is always helpful (Mark).

His grade two teacher, Mrs. G, is the one who stands out the most in his mind. She saw something special in Mark and went out of her way to nurture and care for him while he was in her class. Her care and compassion went a long way to undoing the damage that had been done the year before. For Mark's part, he was always open to receiving the support that his teachers offered and made the most of it.

Overall, Mark's success seems to come from a combination of these ecological supports and the personal capacities that have enabled him to take advantage of them. While Monica acknowledges that the support that she and the schools provided helped Mark graduate from high school and university, she believes that what is most important are the personal qualities and capacities that he possesses and that allow him to take advantage of those supports.

He had support, but honestly, if he wasn't who he is, all the support in the world would have brought him to this point where he is right now. I think he's a very strong person in many

ways... He knows himself, he's strong, and he can not fall into peer pressure and things like that (Monica).

### **Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities**

Because Mark was diagnosed with learning disabilities at such a young age, it has always been a part of who he is. His learning disabilities have never defined him, but as he says, "it is one part of who you are" and he has always acknowledged it. His parents have been open and honest with him from the beginning, discussing his learning strengths as well as those areas that were challenging for him. In turn, Mark feels he has always been interested in learning disabilities, and he feels that part of the reason that he pursued psychology was to learn more about how and why people learn the way they do. As he reports, he was always very interested in learning and had a real "thirst for knowledge" from his earliest years. Mark has never felt "disabled" in any way. For him, it is a learning difference not a "disability". He conceptualizes learning as operating on a spectrum: some people are stronger in one area, while others are stronger in other areas. It is this variation that leads to learning differences among individuals.

While Mark feels that he has a positive outlook on learning differences, he acknowledges that not everyone understands it the way he does. Some people have a more negative perception of these differences and view them as "disabilities" or deficits in the individual. This has created a negative stigma around students who learn differently and is something that Mark believes needs to change. His mother echoes his concerns, as she has witnessed the lack of understanding in not only the general public, but also in educators who should know better.

**CHAPTER SIX**

**CASE #3: KATHLEEN**

### **Kathleen's Profile**

Kathleen is an undergraduate student at an Ottawa area university, completing a major in psychology with a minor in criminology. Her journey to reach this point in her life has been rife with challenges and tells a personal story of resilience. Kathleen was diagnosed with epilepsy at the age of three and endured seizures and the effects of her medications for the next nine years. These early years were also filled with the social and academic challenges that came with her learning disabilities, and consequently were very difficult for her. Compounding this, Kathleen's mother was diagnosed with cancer when she was a baby and then had it return when she was just entering high school. While her mother is now healthy once again, her father has just recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Consequently, Kathleen has had to deal with not only her learning disabilities but also with many other challenges in her life. Her family, particularly her mother, has been an important ongoing source of support. She pushed Kathleen forward every step of the way, ensuring that she was able to access the support she needed at school, helping with her homework and arranging extra tutoring as well. She also exposed her daughter to new experiences to build her confidence and provided her with the social opportunities she needed to develop in that area as well. Kathleen has internalized much of her mother's determination and drive, as she pushes herself to achieve the goals she set for her own. As she grew older and developed more social connections, friendships became another important source of support in her life. Her story gives us the chance to experience the element of resilience in an individual's life and to witness the difference that early intervention and support can make. The following narrative describes Kathleen's educational journey, as recounted by Kathleen and her mother, Lise.

## **Early Life Experiences**

Growing up in a small community outside of Ottawa, Kathleen was the only child of Lise and Derek. While they were a close supportive family, challenging events in the first few years of Kathleen's life brought them even closer. Born a month premature due to pregnancy complications, Kathleen spent the first weeks of her life in hospital. Shortly after this early trauma with Kathleen, Lise was diagnosed with cancer and hospitalized herself. Derek was left to care for and nurture Kathleen while Lise focused on surviving and getting better so that she could return home to the family. This early time with her father created a very close relationship between the two. In fact, Derek is the one Kathleen tends to go to for comfort and emotional support, as she states, "My dad is the one you go to when you just want to be hugged". Too young to remember the events surrounding Lise's first bout of cancer, Kathleen did experience it later on in her life, in grade nine, when Lise's cancer returned. Lise believes that going through these difficult times together brought them closer than most mothers and daughters and showed Kathleen how strong her mother could be. Consequently, while Kathleen typically goes to her father for emotional support and comfort, she tends to go to her mother when she needs help or wants to take action to get something done.

As a baby Kathleen seemed to develop normally, meeting age appropriate milestones for walking and talking and enjoying life with her family. When she was three years old, however, things suddenly changed. While the family was on vacation in the United States, Kathleen had a seizure that lasted for almost an hour. This seizure unleashed almost constant miniature seizures that took a significant toll on her daily life. She went from a child who could walk, talk, and look after herself to one who could not function on her own at all. Lise revealed,

She walked through the house and you'd talk to her and she couldn't hear you. She was having a mini seizure every ten seconds they told us, so she couldn't function at all. She stopped talking, she stopped asking me zillions of questions, and she couldn't get dressed, she couldn't eat (Lise).

The doctors diagnosed her with epilepsy, but they did not have a lot of answers for Lise and Derek, as they did not know how long it would last, whether she would grow out of it, or whether it could become even worse. They started Kathleen on medication to control the seizures, but it made her extremely hyperactive and impulsive – so impulsive that she would run out into the street or jump into a pool. The potentially dangerous side effects that this medication created led to her parents' decision to take her off it after about six months. Without the medication however, Kathleen was having almost constant seizures and she was functioning like a robot, oblivious to the world around her. They tried another treatment to help control the seizures that did not have the adverse effects of the earlier one, and from that point on while Kathleen did not regain the ground she had lost, things started to get better. She started talking again and was able to relearn some of the skills that she had lost.

While Kathleen derived a lot of support from her mother and father, she was close to some of her extended family as well, especially her maternal grandparents. Her grandmother has been a constant optimistic presence in her life, supporting her both academically and emotionally. Her constant encouragement and positive perspective helped Kathleen not only when she was younger, but through her university years as she lived with her for some of the time before her parents moved into the city. Kathleen's relationship with her grandfather, while just as significant, was quite different. When Kathleen was growing up, her grandfather was going through a difficult time in his life, suffering from poor health and the after-effects of a

depression. He did not have a lot of contact with the rest of the family, but Kathleen had a special place in his heart. When she came to visit, she made a point of going to him and he would leave his room and spend some one-on-one time with her. The fact that he took the time to talk and connect with her made Kathleen feel special and loved. As Lise reflects, “the relationship was helpful in the sense of making her feel good that he would spend time with her”.

While family played an important role in her life, not all the relationships were so positive. Kathleen’s mother recalls a more competitive dynamic in the relationship with her sister’s daughter, Bridgette. They were quite close when they were young, but as they grew older the girls’ relationship seemed to change and become more competitive in nature. Bridgette always did extremely well in school and social relationships seemed to come very easily for her. Bridgette’s mother always seems to be comparing the two girls and emphasizing how well her daughter was doing compared to Kathleen. Lise senses that this underlying competitiveness came from a resentment of all the attention and encouragement that Kathleen received from her grandparents over the years.

It’s very competitive between the two of them because my sister makes it competitive.

That’s partly because my mom puts so much emphasis on encouraging Kathleen and she stayed with her so she’s very close to her and so my sister is jealous of that relationship so she always compared the two (Lise).

Aside from this one relationship, family has played a very important and positive role in Kathleen’s life.

Friends have become another important source of support in Kathleen’s life, as she has come to rely quite heavily on her friends for emotional support and companionship. Early in her life this was not the case, however, as her seizures and the medication she took interfered with the

development of her social skills and any opportunity for interactions with other children.

Kathleen describes those early years as a bit of a blur, as she seemed to be living in a world of her own rather than interacting with the people around her. Because she had missed out on these early experiences with peers, Kathleen never really developed the social skills she needed to interact successfully with classmates at school. Consequently, she had difficulty making and maintaining friendships and did not have a lot of friends during her elementary and middle school years. Lise tried to help in this area by getting her involved in other activities, such as gymnastics, photography, horse back riding, fencing, and a variety of day camps over the summer holidays where she could meet new people and interact with them in a fun, stress-free manner. Lise found that these day camps were beneficial for Kathleen, as they helped her make some connections with other children and they gave her a chance to feel good about herself as she learned new skills. Additionally, the camps were short term which meant that if there was one in which her skills were not well-developed, it did not matter because she could excel at the next one. She also felt that it was easier for Kathleen to meet and interact with other children for a short period of time without having to try to sustain it over the whole year.

For the social aspect because she had a lot of problems at school, well you've got a bunch of friends for a week, you have fun with them and she was not shy so she would interact with them and she never got to the point where the problems became big. So, one or two weeks was ideal for her (Lise).

In high school and university, Kathleen developed and maintained some friendships on her own and she has come to see these relationships as the cornerstones of her support system. Some of the friendships she developed in high school are still important in her life today. Talking with friends about her struggles helps because she finds that they understand and that

many are going through the same things that she is. Thus, friends are now who she usually goes to when she needs emotional support during a difficult time. As she says, “When I struggle with school or whatever and I need immediate attention, I just talk to my friends... I know these people will help me through it”.

### **Early School Experiences and Diagnosis**

Despite the early challenges she faced with her seizures and medication, Lise and Derek felt that Kathleen was ready to start junior kindergarten with her peers and they hoped she would be able to handle the structure and demands of the school program. Kathleen entered into the regular kindergarten program at the local Catholic school. Initially, the teacher was quite concerned about how Kathleen was doing in the kindergarten program, as she was sure that her inattention and impulsivity were interfering with any learning taking place. As she got to know Kathleen, however, she realized that she actually was learning some things along with the other students. Lise remembers one conversation she had with her about how Kathleen had learned all of her classmates’ names when no other child in the class had done that. The teacher thought that Kathleen was off in her own world and not engaged with the classroom activities at all, but after hearing her list all of the students’ names, her opinion suddenly changed. As Lise recalls, “from that point on, it made a huge difference because the teacher realized that there was potential”. Even though she acknowledged that Kathleen could learn, this kindergarten teacher told Lise and Derek that she would never be able to function well in a regular class and recommended that they move her to a special education class for students with severe learning issues.

Lise wanted to do what was best for her daughter, but was not comfortable with the idea of placing Kathleen in a special class away from her peers. To gather more information to help her

with this important decision, Lise took Kathleen to the children's hospital to undergo a complete neuro-psychological assessment. A cognitive assessment had been done just before she started school, but the results had been inconclusive because many of the subtests could not be completed due to her difficulties with attention and focus. Now that she was a little older, they hoped that they would be able to learn more about her abilities and what would be best for her. The neurologist essentially told them the same thing that they had heard from the teacher, saying that Kathleen would not be able to function in a regular class and that they should consider enrolling her in a special school. It was explained to Lise and Derek that Kathleen's cognitive abilities were within the borderline range and that these abilities generally do not change over time. For Lise and Derek, it felt as though they were condemning Kathleen to a limited life, a life without the potential for her to grow and achieve. While initially this news was devastating for Lise, she also remembers having a very strong and protective reaction as well.

I remember being in the parking lot and holding Kathleen's hand and looking at the hospital and saying, "I will prove you wrong!"... I always thought some parents would have said, "Well, there's nothing we can do and we'll just put her into a special school", but where would she be now if we did that? (Lise)

Going against the advice of the school and the doctors, Lise and Derek decided not to put Kathleen in a special school. Instead, they switched her to the public school in their neighborhood and kept her in the regular classroom with her same age peers. Looking back on that decision now, Lise believes that they did the right thing, as subsequent testing showed that Kathleen's abilities have improved over time. Those initial assessments indicated that her overall abilities were within the borderline range and that there was a risk of learning difficulties. The challenges that they predicted materialized in the classroom, as she struggled and continues

to struggle in certain areas. However, Kathleen ended up doing much better than the experts had predicted. She completed high school and is now attending university. Additionally, later testing done in middle school and high school revealed that many of Kathleen's cognitive abilities had moved up into the "average" range.

Kathleen does not remember much about the initial assessments or diagnoses, but she recalls the challenges she faced as a young learner. She reports that she had difficulty with writing and math in particular, and she can remember trying so hard in these areas but not encountering much success. The experts cautioned that she would struggle with reading as well, but reading came much more easily for her. Overall, Kathleen remembers feeling frustrated at school, because she never seemed to be able to complete the work the way her classmates did, no matter how hard she tried. She remembers feeling as though she was disappointing her teachers and coming up short no matter how hard she tried.

Some stuff got really frustrating. My writing was bad, but I remember when I had to work with the teachers and this one kept telling me that I needed to write prettier and I got so upset because I was like "I can't do this, leave me alone" (Kathleen).

There were social challenges during these early years as well, as Kathleen had difficulty fitting in and interacting with her classmates. All in all, school was an environment that produced academic frustrations and social challenges for her.

Lise did not share a lot of details about the learning disabilities with Kathleen when she was younger, but they were always very open about the fact that learning and school were more difficult for her than for most of the other children in her classes. Lise believes that the fact that she was already dealing with an ongoing medical condition made accepting and coming to terms with learning disabilities a little easier for all of them.

It's like she always knew. I would explain that you have problems learning, but you're still smart. I would say that no matter what the results were, but I would tell her that you're going to have to work harder. So it wasn't hidden. She had to know she had to work harder (Lise). As Kathleen matured, they discussed it more often and in more detail. Lise recalls that Kathleen was there to hear the results herself at the last assessment that was done when she was 16 years old and she felt that it had a really positive impact on her. In looking back over the previous assessments, the neurologist was amazed at the progress that Kathleen had made and shared how impressed she was with Kathleen and her family.

[The neurologist] said that at this point Kathleen could do whatever she wanted. She said, "If you want to go to college, you can go. If you want to go to university, you can go... So that neuro-psychologist gave her confidence and made her believe. It's one thing to hear it from you mom but it's a different thing hearing it from your neuro-psychologist. That's someone you respect. It did have an impact on her (Lise).

Kathleen has similar recollections of hearing the results. She believes that it really helped her know the nature of her disabilities and how they affected her. It provided a reason for why things were so difficult for her at school and it was not because she was "stupid".

It actually helped me deal with myself. You're like, "Okay, there's sort of a reason now. It's not just like you're lazy or whatever. It just let me know that I have to work harder in a way than someone else (Kathleen).

Kathleen also commented that being given the learning disabilities diagnosis or label made it easier to explain to others and access services. Lise expressed similar beliefs, but cautions that while the learning disabilities label is helpful in terms of accessing services, it also brings with it

the stigma that these individuals are not as intelligent as their peers and that they cannot learn as much as their peers.

If the kids are labeled as having a learning disability then she can get the services which was useful to get the service, but it also brings a whole stigma around it and the attitude that they can't learn or they can't learn as much as some other kids (Lise).

Kathleen's parents talked about her learning disabilities openly within the family, just as they had done with her epilepsy and the other issues that had come their way. They were not too close to her father's side of the family, but they did receive a great deal of support through Kathleen's maternal grandmother and Lise's side of the family. They were there to offer emotional support to Lise and Derek and actively support Kathleen over the years. Lise also gathered support by educating herself about learning disabilities and how she could best help Kathleen. She read books about children with learning disabilities and how their parents had helped them adjust so that she could learn from their experiences. She joined the learning disability association in her area, as she found it helpful to connect with other parents who were going through the same experiences that she was. She learned from them and she believed that this knowledge empowered her. Later she ended up being the one in the position to help other families in this way.

It is very useful to have it modeled with other people that have done it so it's not impossible... Meeting other parents whose kids are in high school and finding out in college some of them are still struggling with their kids having quit college but they managed to get through high school. And the same kind of parents, a lot of getting involved, reading to their kids, and not allowing the system to take over (Lise).

Lise used this knowledge to help her navigate the education system and make sure that she obtained the best possible support for Kathleen.

### **School Experiences after the Diagnosis**

**Elementary school.** Going against the recommendations of the doctors and the previous school, Lise and Derek enrolled Kathleen in the regular grade one program at their community public school. They shared the testing results with the school and as a result, Kathleen was formally identified as a student with learning disabilities and an individual education plan (IEP) was developed to guide her program. She was placed in a regular grade one class where an educational assistant was already assigned to work with another student. In addition to this in-class support, Kathleen was also withdrawn to work with a special education teacher each day. While Kathleen remembers liking the small group and one-to-one support that she received over the years, her mother also remembers that it was hard for her to be singled out and to leave the room each day. She also had some bad experiences with one special education teacher in particular. As Lise recollects, “she hated the fact that they moved her out of the class and to move her with a teacher that she really couldn’t relate to whatsoever made it really bad”. After this initial year, the special education teacher worked more closely with Kathleen’s classroom teachers, and consequently Kathleen received more of her academic support within the classroom, which seemed to be a good arrangement for her.

In addition to this academic assistance, Kathleen’s parents worked with the school to make sure that she received the additional supports that were so important for her development in other areas. In those early years, Kathleen worked with an occupational therapist to develop her fine motor skills, a speech therapist for her articulation skills, a social worker to strengthen her social skills, and a special education teacher. By the time she completed grade six, she was no longer

needing all of these supports, but if she had not had them when she was younger, her mother does not think that she would be where she is today. She states, “I believe to this day that if she had not had all those services, she wouldn’t have been able to function”.

Lise was very involved in Kathleen’s education during these elementary years, communicating regularly with the school to ensure that the necessary supports were in place for her daughter. She also wanted to make sure that the teachers understood Kathleen and what she was going through. She was still suffering from seizures and the medication she took to control them essentially left her in a world of her own. This, combined with her short attention span and high level of impulsivity, made it very difficult for Kathleen to interact with her peers and participate meaningfully in class activities. As Lise explains,

I was a huge advocate. I was at the school and everybody knew me, but I also took very much an approach of working with them versus getting mad at them... I made sure I went to see all the teachers and everybody that was providing her service to make sure that they didn’t give up on her because it would have been easy (Lise).

Kathleen remembers her mother’s involvement in her schooling, as she was always there for meetings with her teachers and she would fight to make sure that she received the supports and services she needed. She comments, “she used to go all the time to school and talk to teachers and she really fostered my rights”. She also remembers the support that her mother and father provided for her at home, taking turns working with her on her homework. Because of her impulsivity and short attention span, Kathleen needed constant support and feedback while she was working. She could not just be left on her own to do the work; she needed one of her parents to be there with her the entire time. Additionally, everything took longer for her. Her mother never wanted to cut back though, because she knew that Kathleen needed more repetition

and practice than her peers and that without it, she would not be able to learn and retain the material. Spending so much time working on homework each night was challenging for everyone, including Kathleen. She was a very active child who found it very difficult to sit still. Consequently, her parents talked with her about it and allowed her to move around while she was working at home. While this could be disruptive at school, it was possible at home and it made the world of difference.

Her homework would take almost all evening. And sometimes they [the teachers] would say, “Well, just make her do less”, but I found that she wouldn’t grasp it if it was less. She needed the practice... A lot of times I wanted to just cut it back and I thought, “No, if I cut it back then she doesn’t learn. She needs to practice to learn.” (Lise)

Kathleen also went to Kumon to improve her math skills from grade three until she was in high school, as this seemed to be one of the most challenging areas for her. It was a big investment for them, both financially and time-wise, because they had to travel from their home in the country in to the city for her weekly sessions.

**Middle school.** When she began middle school, many of the academic supports that had been in place for her at the elementary level were discontinued. She no longer received any extra resource support, but she still had an individual education plan with accommodations, such as extra time for tests and exams, opportunities to write exams in a quiet setting, and use of the computer. The biggest issues at this stage seemed to be social in nature. Kathleen had been harassed and bullied by another student for a number of years. Lise took an active role to have the school deal with it, but nothing ever seemed to be resolved and it continued happening for years. Finally, Lise started documenting what happened every day so that they had a running log of the incidents. Every night when Kathleen arrived home from school, Lise recorded what the

other child had said and done to her that day, things like saying that she was stupid and that nobody liked her and that everyone hated her, and threatening that they would kill her, until she felt she had enough evidence to go to the principal. The school was shocked at the daily abuses and finally took some action to move the girls into separate classes and to watch over Kathleen more carefully until she moved to another school at the end of grade eight.

**High school.** While things had improved for Kathleen over that last year in middle school, the transition into high school was extremely difficult. Over that summer Lise's cancer returned and she was in the midst of her treatments when September and Kathleen's first day of high school arrived. Consequently, Lise was not available to support Kathleen when she entered into this new and challenging phase of her development. Looking back on this time, her mother refers to it as a "very dark period".

It's like when you start high school you're all excited, but she's going through so much difficulty and taking care of her mom. So that was really tough and she went through a really, really tough time (Lise).

Kathleen echoes these sentiments, as she explains that she went into a kind of depression that first year of high school. Her mother was in treatment for cancer and her father was trying to attend to the situation himself. Kathleen was left to deal with this and all of the other changes in her life as she was settling in to a new school and trying to establish some friendships. Kathleen remembers what a difficult time this was for her, saying "I didn't really have anyone to help with this. I remember I was so mad because everyone kept asking how my mom was but no one asked me how I felt". Once her parents realized what a difficult time Kathleen was having, they sought help for her and things started to improve. They arranged for her to see a psychologist to help her work through some of the emotions she was dealing with. Having someone to talk with

seemed to help Kathleen understand and manage her feelings about what she and her mother were going through, and this helped. Once she started feeling better, Kathleen was able to focus more on her school work. Consequently, her grades improved and she made some friends that she still stays in touch with today.

I had a group of friends that I kept until now. Like actually, I'm still really close to one or two of them... When I struggle with school or whatever I know I can [go to them] and if I need immediate attention I just talk to my friends (Kathleen).

Academically, Kathleen was able to pass her courses with the support and accommodations provided by her individual education plan. Although she was permitted to use a computer to take notes, she did not take advantage of it. As Kathleen explains, "I didn't want to use a computer... because I didn't want to be different. Everyone else is writing manually and I didn't want to be the only one with a laptop". It was only when one of her grade twelve teachers insisted that she use it in her class that she finally started using it. Kathleen recalls that using the computer to take notes and write assignments really seemed to help her and she continues to use it at the university level. Lise remembers that Kathleen acted as though she was upset about it, but in reality she felt that Kathleen was actually happy that the teacher had insisted because it gave her an excuse to use it and get the help it provided her. Kathleen herself admits that it has always been difficult for her to ask for help from her teachers and from people outside her family. For her, this difficulty comes from the bullying that she received when she was younger and from not wanting to show any weakness or vulnerability that people could take advantage of. Over the years, she has had to learn how to allow herself to open up to other people and ask for help when she needs it.

I didn't want to ask for help because it shows you need it, you're desperate. I'm not saying you literally believe it, but it's pride, that's what it is. (Kathleen)

Her mother sees this trait in Kathleen as well, and while she saw the improvements that came as she matured, she knew that she needed to accept the help that was offered in order for her to be successful.

When she went to high school it was better than before: she was no longer on medication, she was able to make some friends, and she didn't want any help whatsoever at school which is not necessarily a good thing (Lise).

Throughout high school, Lise and Derek continued to provide academic and emotional support. They worked with Kathleen each night to help her make sense of the material that had been covered in school that day. Lise remembers making tables to organize the information that Kathleen needed to study because she knew that her learning disabilities made this very challenging for her. With these kinds of supports, Kathleen was able to graduate from high school with her class. For Lise, this was a very important moment in Kathleen's life, one that she had never been sure would even arrive.

When she graduated from grade 12, I cried for two weeks before. I was okay on the day but the two weeks before I couldn't believe that she would graduate grade 12... I'd always thought that when she graduates from grade twelve I should go back to CHEO and say I did prove you wrong (Lise).

### **Transition to University**

From the time she was in elementary school and attended summer camps at a local university, Kathleen had always known that she wanted to attend university. At first she had wanted to study paleontology, but her interest later shifted more towards psychology. She

worked towards these goals, but as she was nearing the end of high school, she and her family felt that it would be best for her to attend college first before making the big step to university. Consequently, she applied to the local college and was accepted into their Education Services program. Kathleen and her family thought that going to college first would be a more manageable option that would prepare her for the rigours of university. They believed that there would be more supports in place at the college level to help her succeed. However, this was not the case. Kathleen's experiences at college were not positive at all right from the outset. They discovered about a year into the program that the paperwork they had submitted to have her identified as a student with learning disabilities had not gone through as it should have. As a result she was not receiving the academic support or accommodations to which she was entitled. They also discovered that there were actually very few supports available for her or any student with learning disabilities within this college system at that time. Laptops, which were an essential component of Kathleen's program, were not permitted in the classroom. This meant that Kathleen was not learning as much as she could from the lectures and consequently, she struggled in most of her courses. When Kathleen and her mother tried to obtain the accommodations that she needed, the college responded that they would only provide these kinds of extra supports when students were failing.

The situation continued to deteriorate until Kathleen actually failed one of her practicum placements. As a result, they decided to move Kathleen out of the college and apply to one of the universities in the area. Kathleen was accepted to do her Bachelor of Arts in psychology and was credited with one year from the college program. The difference in services at the college and university levels was astounding to Kathleen and her family.

At the college level, they don't have the proper support. They make it look like they do when you start, but the kids get discouraged and they stop, so many of them quit. Whereas in university laptops are normal, no books in the classroom, you can download your presentation, you can take notes on your computer, everything she needs with a learning disability is the way of working in university. It's just automatic, so she doesn't have to ask... It's a bit strange because you always think that a learning disability would be better in college, but it's much better in university (Lise).

Lise went with Kathleen when she registered with student services to ensure that all of the paperwork was in order and that she received all of the supports and accommodations to which she was entitled. Both she and Kathleen were surprised at how easy this process was at the university level and how quickly things were put into place.

At university, Kathleen is registered with student services as a student with learning disabilities and she is provided with the same accommodations she received in high school – extra time and a quiet setting for exams and the use of a computer in class and during exams. The student service centre contacts her professors to inform them that she has learning disabilities and that these accommodations are in place. Now Kathleen self-advocates with her professors when the need arises. She finds that most professors are supportive and accommodating in their classes, with only one or two having a problem with students using computers.

I've had a couple of profs who when you start school are like, "I don't allow computers in my class. You've got to take notes." Well, I just bring it [the computer] anyway. If they ask I'll do something, but so far they've tolerated me (Kathleen).

While the accommodations that are in place for her help, Kathleen still struggles with certain things in her studies. The computer helps with taking notes in class and writing exams, but Kathleen still finds preparing assignments extremely challenging. Organizing her ideas and getting them out on paper has always been one of the biggest problems for her.

The written papers – I never do that great on those because it's my weakness. It doesn't come out properly. I can explain it, but I can't write it. I can't do a five page paper on it even though I know it (Kathleen).

While this is frustrating for Kathleen, she never gives up and always tries her best even though she knows she will not be rewarded with an 'A'. She realizes that she has to work just as hard or even harder than her classmates, but will likely only ever be able to get a 'C'. This can be frustrating for her, but it is something she has had to accept ever since she was a young child. Her mother has seen this happening over the years and marvels at Kathleen's determination and perseverance and the hard work she is willing to put forth in her educational pursuits.

It's frustrating because some of her good friends or some of her best friends don't study as hard as she does and they'll have 90%. One of her friends if she doesn't work will get 80% and Kathleen works like crazy and she doesn't get anything close to that. It's really difficult on her and she gets really frustrated (Lise).

When things like this start to take their toll on her, Kathleen often turns to her friends. She has made new connections at university and has amassed a strong, positive group of friends. This circle of friends is an important source of support for Kathleen, as they have become the people she turns to when she needs comfort or encouragement.

At the university level I have found some friends that I can actually talk to... With them I actually feel understood when I talk, which is a lot because usually when you talk to people they don't really understand. And I know when I talk to them, they get it (Kathleen).

While her friends have come to play a significant role in her life, this was not always the case as friendships and relationships outside her family did not really develop until she reached high school and university. Her family however, has been a constant source of support for Kathleen over the years, as she says she has been "very well surrounded at home". Kathleen has been living at home during her university years, either with her parents or with her grandmother, and this has been integral to her success. Kathleen still turns to her mother for academic support, as she asks her to edit her papers. While she remains extremely close to her mother, she has grown even closer to her father since he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. After having endured seeing her mother go through a life threatening condition, Kathleen is now having to watch her father go through difficult times as his conditions worsens.

Even though Kathleen's university experience challenged and pushed her, it has generally been a positive one and she is considering the possibility of pursuing a graduate degree.

### **Challenges over the Years**

**Health challenges to Kathleen and her family.** Reflecting on her educational journey, Kathleen and her mother highlighted several challenges that confronted her along the way. The most significant challenge came from the health conditions that have plagued not only Kathleen but her mother and father as well. Being diagnosed with epilepsy early on in her life created innumerable challenges for Kathleen and the seizures and the treatments took a huge toll on her life. Due to the side effects of her medication, she was isolated her from her peers and even her family at times. Once the seizures ended when she was 13 years old and she no longer had to

take any medication, Kathleen started to connect with her social world and was able to build some friendships. These relationships have become very important to her. Her mother's cancer and her father's more recent diagnosis of Parkinson's disease have also had quite an effect on her life.

**Social challenges.** Secondary to these health problems, were the social challenges that they brought about for Kathleen. The medications that she had to take to control her epilepsy left her in "a world of her own" and essentially isolated her from her peers for most of her elementary and middle school years. Because of this lost time, Kathleen's social skills were delayed. Thus, once she was taken off the medication and was ready and interested in connecting with her peers, she did not have the skills she needed to successfully interact with them. Additionally, she became the target of bullies during her middle school years. It was not until high school that Kathleen really started to develop any kind of friendships with other children her own age.

**Writing challenges.** On a more academic level, Kathleen struggled in many areas over the years. She received adequate support in the early years through the special education classes that she attended and the specialists that came into the school to work with her. Her mother attests that this early intervention played a pivotal role in her later success. Despite these supports, Kathleen continues to find writing assignments challenging. The accommodations help, but Kathleen still struggles to organize and express her thoughts and ideas in writing. She pushes herself to do her best job on her assignments even though she knows that she will not be able to attain a high mark. This is something that she has accepted, but she admits that this is one of the biggest challenges she has to face, "Getting back grades is one of the hardest things... You always keep telling yourself to push harder but in a way it's kind of like you'll never be able to get that grade." Her mother expresses these same sentiments as well, as she observes Kathleen

working harder than her friends without ever receiving the same rewards in terms of good grades.

**Lack of understanding of learning disabilities.** Kathleen also identifies a lack of understanding of learning disabilities as another challenge that she has had to face. She does not feel as though people truly understand what learning disabilities are, as they tend to believe that a person with learning disabilities just has to try harder. This is a theme that resonates through Kathleen's story as she always feels as though people just want her to work harder, when she is working as hard as she possibly can. She asserts,

People don't get it because they can't see it, and it's really not understood properly. I feel there's a lack of understanding towards it. I find that there's a lot of judgments surrounding it too, because it's really that people perceive you as not trying hard enough (Kathleen).

Kathleen's mother has witnessed these same misunderstandings about learning disabilities and she saw the impact that they had on her daughter. She always acknowledged that she knew Kathleen was already working very hard, but because the work was harder for her she needed to put in that extra work to succeed.

You don't have to try harder because you're lazy. I know it's really hard, I know it's hard, I know it's difficult, I know you get discouraged, you just have to try harder and you'll succeed (Lise).

**Lack of support at the college level.** A more recent challenge faced by Kathleen was the lack of support available for her at the college level. Kathleen went the college route because she and her parents felt that she would be better supported and more successful in this environment compared to university. They were disappointed to learn, however, that the college she attended did not accommodate students with special needs effectively. She had worked so

hard to make it to that stage of her life and then found herself struggling and failing without the support she needed to be successful. Fortunately, there has been better support at the university level.

Thus, Kathleen has faced many challenges throughout her life, including her family's health challenges, the social difficulties she faced as a youngster, the academic difficulties she continues to face, and the lack of support that was available at the college level.

### **Capacities and Resources that have Helped**

Despite these ongoing challenges, Kathleen graduated from high school and moved on to pursue further studies at the university level. Both Kathleen and her mother identified a number of capacities and resources, at both an individual level and an ecological level, that have helped Kathleen over the years.

**Determination and effort.** On an individual level, there are a number of personal capacities and characteristics that Kathleen and her mother identify as having helped her through her educational journey. First and foremost, she is a hard working and determined individual who is motivated to do her best and to put in the effort necessary to achieve her goals. Her determination to succeed and her willingness to work hard have served Kathleen well in her academic career. Things did not come easily for her, but she still put out the effort time and again to do her best working with her parents and tutors outside of the school environment. Even in extra curricular activities, she was willing to participate when she did not have the skill that most of the other children did. Her parents always tried to be positive and encouraging and their goal was to make Kathleen believe that she was capable of, and had the potential to do, anything she put her mind to. It might be hard and she might have to work harder than others, but it was

never impossible. Her mother believes that you need that belief and that it is at the heart of everything.

She never knew that she wouldn't be able to do something or that anybody really thought that she couldn't do it. She always thought that she would have to work hard, but that she would succeed (Lise).

**Openness about learning disabilities and self awareness.** Kathleen's parents always talked with her openly about her epilepsy and learning disabilities. Thus, Kathleen has a strong understanding of her own strengths and challenges. This self-awareness resulted in a level of personal confidence that allowed her to accept herself and her learning disabilities and over time to become more comfortable sharing this information with others over time. She is also comfortable advocating for what she needs and is entitled to. Kathleen even talks about wanting to be the one "who fights for someone else" at some point in her life. Thus, self-awareness and acceptance of herself and her learning disabilities are important capacities that have allowed Kathleen to understand her needs and advocate for accommodations.

**Willingness to use resources and supports.** A willingness to accept and use the supports that were there for her in her environment is another important capacity that Kathleen has developed over the years. While she was always willing to accept help from her family at home and her teachers at school, it took a little longer for her to open up to her friends in this manner, but now she has come to see her friends as her biggest source of support. Throughout her educational journey Kathleen has been able to access and use many of the resources and supports that were available in her environment. She and her mother identified a number of ecological resources that they feel have contributed to her success.

**Family support.** As mentioned above, Kathleen felt the support of her family over the years. While it has evolved over time as her needs and level of independence changed, it has remained a constant in her life. Her parents were very involved in her schooling when she was first diagnosed with her learning disabilities and have continued to support her over the years. For Lise, this unconditional support and constant encouragement is essential for children with learning disabilities. Without the support of their parents and without their parents believing that they can progress and succeed, Lise does not believe that these children have much of a chance. She thinks back to when the neurologist at the children's hospital told her to put Kathleen in a specialized class and forget about any plans for her completing regular high school or going to university, and she wonders where Kathleen would be today if she had listened to him. She wonders that if their parents do not believe in them, then how can they ever come to believe in themselves?

Making the parents believe that it's possible is important... If the parents don't believe the kids can succeed, then the kids will not succeed. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lise). Kathleen also received emotional and academic support from her grandmother, with whom she lived for several years while she was attending university. While in elementary and secondary school, Kathleen's parents supported her at home with her homework and took her for extra tutoring in math even though the nearest tutoring centre was far away.

**Extracurricular activities.** While they have always supported her academic development, they were careful not to overdo it and to balance that support with opportunities for her to participate in other activities, such as summer camps and different sports activities and to just have fun. The family traveled a lot and this opened Kathleen up to new experiences and people. It also helped to develop her confidence and she has taken to traveling for babysitting jobs over

her summer breaks at university. This involvement in activities outside of school is another resource that helped Kathleen over the years in a number of ways. It helped her develop the social skills that she was lacking and gave her confidence in trying new things and experiences. When she was younger, it was in activities gymnastics, fencing, horseback riding, and summer camps. While in university, she sought out summer jobs in different parts of the country. Kathleen is confident and ambitious enough to seek out new working opportunities across Canada and she is careful about the jobs she chooses, making sure they pay well and have good working conditions. She enjoys babysitting roles, and has worked in Quebec City, Vancouver, and the Yukon starting back in high school. Kathleen is able to move to a new city, seek out a place to live, and get along on her own for the duration of the summer.

**Peer Support.** While she has shown that she can do well in a situation where she has to function independently, the importance of friendship and peer support is a recurring theme in her narratives. Kathleen has been able to create some lasting friendships and this has become very important to her. She feels this connection and support from her friends at university, as they are the people she turns to when she is feeling frustrated and needs emotional support.

Overall, Kathleen's success seems to come from to a combination of these ecological supports and the personal capacities that have enabled her to take advantage of them.

### **Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities**

Kathleen was diagnosed with learning disabilities at a young age, and they have always been a part of her life. Her parents were open with her about her learning challenges right from the beginning, and they worked with her to strengthen those areas that were more challenging for her. In Kathleen's understanding, she does not have a disability, but rather learns differently from many of her peers. This means that she has to work harder to reach her academic goals, but

it does not mean that she cannot reach them. She has seen her perception of learning disabilities in general and her own learning disabilities in particular, change and evolve over time. Living through her life experiences, Kathleen has become more understanding of herself as a learner, and more lenient as well. As she has developed a better understanding of herself and her learning strengths and challenges, she is better able to work through challenges and is not as hard on herself when she encounters challenges.

While she has seen her own understanding of learning disabilities evolve over time, she is disheartened to see that society's understanding is not developing at the same rate. From Kathleen's perspective, a lot of people do not have an accurate understanding of what learning disabilities are. As she says, "it's kind of like a mental disease. People don't get it because they can't see it." She finds that people tend to make judgments, assuming that individuals with learning disabilities just are not trying hard enough. It is these judgments that Kathleen finds most difficult to deal with and most necessary to change.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**CASE #4: PAUL**

## **Paul's Profile**

Paul is a bright, creative undergraduate student currently attending a central Ontario university where he is completing his final year in a film production program. He is passionate about film and the life he is creating for himself in this area. An intelligent and articulate individual, Paul has strong opinions and convictions, and he speaks his mind openly. Diagnosed with nonverbal learning disabilities when he was still in elementary school, Paul perceives them not as a deficit or disability, but more as a different way of learning and processing information. His early diagnosis led to early intervention, all of which was spearheaded by his mother, Rebecca. She played an integral role in his life, providing constant support and encouragement, advocating for him within the education system, and ensuring that he had every opportunity available to him beyond school as well. While he has started to take on more of this responsibility as he has grown older, Rebecca still pushes him forward in meeting his goals and they attribute much of his success to her drive and determination. Paul's story gives us the chance to understand the educational experiences of a student diagnosed with nonverbal learning disabilities who has embarked on a career path in the arts. It allows us to witness his successes and see what worked effectively for him over the years, as well as the challenges and frustrations that he faced along the way. The following narrative describes Paul's educational journey, as recounted by Paul and his mother, Rebecca.

## **Early Life Experiences**

Paul grew up in a warm, loving home in an eclectic university neighborhood in eastern Ontario. As an only child, Paul's life was replete with interesting and enriching experiences created mainly by his mother, Rebecca. She worked hard to provide him with all of the outlets and opportunities she could and to nurture any interests or passions that he identified. His

parents separated when he was 13 years old and while he maintained some contact with his father afterwards, it is his mother who figures most prominently in his recollections. As he explains, it was she who took the most active role in his life. Paul recalls that his father nurtured his interest in filmmaking, taking him to movies and watching television with him, but it was his mother who actively pushed him and helped him to pursue those interests over the course of his life. His parents' separation took an emotional toll on Paul, and Rebecca remembers taking him to a psychiatrist for some anxiety he was experiencing at the time. It is apparent from the narratives of both Paul and Rebecca, that Paul has been the priority in her life and that she was dedicated to raising him and nurturing him so that he could have the best life possible. For the most part, it has just been Rebecca and Paul - his father was not a strong presence in his life and there was not a lot of extended family around either.

It was a traumatic birth for both mother and child, and as a result Paul was followed by a research team at the local children's hospital. Despite the initial difficulties at birth, Paul developed on par with other children his age except that his speech was a little delayed. As he grew older, Rebecca maintained her vigilance and found that Paul was actually developing into an extremely bright and somewhat precocious young child. He had an advanced vocabulary and an inquisitive nature, constantly asking questions and expanding his understanding of the world around him. Rebecca describes him as somewhat unconventional, an "out of the box" kid from the very beginning. She took him to a variety of preschool groups, including carpentry and science. He also demonstrated a love and a natural affinity for music which Rebecca nurtured by taking him to performances and enrolling him in music programs for toddlers and young children. He did well in these individual pursuits, but he found the more formal play group she

registered him in more challenging. In this larger group, it was hard for him to share the toys and materials and to deal with the noise and unpredictability of the other children.

Through the years, Rebecca continued to provide opportunities for Paul to develop his interests. She enrolled him in numerous extra-curricular activities, including fiddling and drama, as well as sports activities like gymnastics, fencing, and swimming. They went to the same music camp each summer where he could fulfill his love of music and connect with the same families year after year. Paul was better at some activities than others, but Rebecca saw how much he enjoyed them and the benefits he derived in terms of gaining much needed social interactions and building his skills and confidence. They also provided an opportunity for Paul to develop some positive relationships with other adults – the coaches and instructors that mentored him in these areas. Paul remembers these activities fondly as well, recalling how his mother always seemed to find a way of making things happen even when they did not have a lot of money. He believes that this early encouragement allowed him to find his passion at an early age.

My mom signed me up for extra curricular activities. She just threw things at me. She'd drag me into all sorts of really boring things but every now and then one would become a hobby or passion of mine and she never really stopped me from doing things. She found ways I could do them safely or found ways I could do them within our budget... I think I've been really lucky to have that in my life because I think that's how I figured out where I wanted to be in my life so young (Paul).

It is obvious from both of their narratives that the relationship between Paul and Rebecca is very strong. Paul was Rebecca's number one priority, as she worked hard to make sure he had everything he needed to be able to pursue all of his interests and passions. As Rebecca explains,

“we have a really good relationship, my son and I. I mean, he knows I’m there for him. I set the bar high... We communicate and I trust him”. Paul, in turn, is aware of everything that Rebecca has done for him over the years and realizes how fortunate he has been. You can hear the love and admiration in his voice as he credits his success to her pushing him over the years, “I was really fortunate. My mom really pushed me to pursue activities and I guess I was really privileged in that respect”.

In addition to this strong family foundation, Paul also talks about the important role that friends have come to have in his life. When he was younger, friendships were difficult for him and consequently he felt quite isolated and excluded from his peers for most of his elementary years. He did not have a good understanding of common social interactions and conventions. His mother remembers these difficulties as well and struggled with how to help him through it. It was not until he went to middle school, where a variety of students were coming together from a number of different schools that he started to develop some meaningful friendships.

There was just a whole bunch of us who were bullied in elementary school so we just kind of felt really threatened and kind of sought each other out and formed such a big group that no one bothered us (Paul).

He reports that he started to feel more comfortable around people as he matured and learned the social conventions he had been lacking. He slowly began to make some positive connections and friendships. Many of his current friendships were established back during these middle school years.

### **Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis**

Even before Paul started school, Rebecca knew that the school setting was probably going to be challenging for him. He had accumulated so much knowledge in his early years that her

friends warned her that he would be bored in school. She decided against putting him in any kind of preschool or playgroup when he was younger because he had difficulty interacting and sharing with the other children. Junior kindergarten was a struggle for him, as he had difficulty following the classroom routines and socializing with the other children. Paul liked doing things his way and seemed to find it difficult to adapt to the external demands imposed by the teacher or his peers. He had an understanding teacher who noticed the social challenges that he was having and suggested that he be seen by a speech and language pathologist. Rebecca made the arrangements and the testing revealed that while his vocabulary was extremely well-developed and years beyond his grade level, his articulation for some sounds was quite delayed. Both of these factors interfered with his ability to communicate effectively with his peers and Rebecca feels that it may have contributed to the social difficulties he experiences when he was young.

The adults were so impressed with his vocabulary they didn't notice he couldn't speak and the little kids, not only couldn't they understand him because his vocabulary was too big, they couldn't understand him because he couldn't say the sounds in the words (Rebecca). Rebecca and the speech therapist worked hard with him and over time his speech began to improve.

The same challenges continued in his senior kindergarten French immersion program and a poor fit with the teacher made matters even worse. Paul's recollections of these years are that he was trying hard, but that it always seemed he focused on the wrong things and was not able to do things the way his peers did. By the time Paul reached grade one, the teacher was recommending that Rebecca take him for a psychological assessment. She recognized that he was an intelligent, creative child but she could not figure out why he was having so much

difficulty learning the basic skills of the grade one program. Rebecca followed her advice and arranged to have Paul tested by a private psychologist before he entered grade two.

### **Diagnosis**

The assessment process was generally a positive experience for Paul. He remembers that he was able to take a day off school to go and work with the psychologist playing interesting games and completing tests which he enjoyed. Rebecca had been very cautious in choosing the right psychologist for Paul, interviewing several before settling on the one he saw. It seems as though she made a good choice, however, as they were pleased with his services and went back to him in later years, when Paul was in grade four and grade eight to update the assessment.

While Paul's abstract thinking and reasoning skills were approaching the gifted range, his overall profile resulted in a diagnosis of nonverbal learning disabilities. The psychologist went through the results with Rebecca, explaining what they meant and how they impacted his schooling. At first Rebecca was upset with the results, but as she processed the information, she quickly began to take action to find out all that she could about nonverbal learning disabilities in order to make sure that Paul received all of the support he needed and to which he was entitled. Using the diagnosis as a starting point, Rebecca took it upon herself to seek out the resources and information that she needed to help him. This was a relatively new diagnosis, and consequently there was not a great deal of information available on the subject. She read through every book and article she could track down and sought out any opportunity she could to learn more about it. She contacted the local learning disabilities association, consulting with the director and attending all of the courses and workshops that they provided on the topic. As a result, Rebecca was well informed on nonverbal learning disabilities and learning disabilities in general, and she

used this expertise to advocate for Paul and support him throughout the course of his educational journey.

Rebecca talked quite openly about the diagnosis with Paul, because she wanted him to understand his situation and to have a good sense of both his strengths and his challenges. She was always careful to refer to it as a learning difference rather than a disability to ensure that Paul did not see it as something negative and become discouraged or disheartened.

I didn't want it to squelch him or take away his self-esteem, so I said to him that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and that he knew words in junior kindergarten that grade six students don't know but that there are things that you can't do that other kids can do easily.

We are just going to have to figure them out (Rebecca).

Looking back, Paul has a very positive perspective on the assessment itself and the whole process of being identified with learning disabilities or what he, like his mother, refers to as a learning difference. He believes that without that diagnosis, and the ensuing understanding and support it brought with it, he would not be where he is today.

If I wasn't diagnosed, I'm not sure I wouldn't have gotten through until now... Just the fact that the teachers knew and understood that they had to accommodate me, I think without that I probably wouldn't have gotten through (Paul).

### **School Experiences after the Diagnosis**

**Elementary school.** Armed with the assessment results and the diagnosis, Rebecca went back to the school to share the results with Paul's teachers and the school staff. She arranged a meeting for the psychologist to share the results with the staff directly. This was a significant expense for her, but she felt that it was important for the school to have a good understanding of her son's learning profile so that she could ensure that he received the best education possible.

As a result of the assessment and subsequent feedback, Paul transferred out of the French immersion program and he was formally identified as a student with learning disabilities. An individual education plan (IEP) was developed to ensure that he would receive the support and specialized programming that he needed. Rebecca worked closely with Paul's teachers every year, making sure that they were aware of the testing results and recommendations of the report and helping them prepare his IEP and learning goals. She tried to use the expertise she was developing to help them interpret the results and see how they could work with Paul to help him within their classrooms.

Paul remembers his mother's active involvement in his education positively, both at home and at school. At home she provided him with enrichment activities in his areas of interest and helped him with his school work. She worked diligently to keeping him organized and on top of his assignments. At school, she volunteered her time in the classroom, in the milk program, and on the school council. She checked in regularly with his teachers to advocate for his academic needs and make sure that all of the supports he required were in place. Rebecca admits that she was probably one of the most demanding parents many of Paul's teachers had ever encountered, as she says,

I know I pushed, I can be like a mother bear and I know there were times when I didn't make it easy in terms of what I was asking for, but on the other hand I did go into the classrooms and volunteer (Rebecca).

While some children might have resented their parents taking such an active role in their education, Paul seemed to appreciate his mother's involvement and realizes what a benefit the positive relationships that she built with his teachers were. "My mom was really involved... She

was good friends with a lot of my teachers and she probably told them way more about me than they needed to know”.

Most of the teachers were receptive to Paul’s needs, but there were a couple of years when this understanding was not there and this made things challenging for Paul. Throughout his elementary school years, Paul continued to struggle with many of the basic skills that the other students seemed to learn so easily. This could be quite frustrating for him, as he was forced to work on these basic skills when in so many other areas he was focusing on higher level ideas and issues.

There he is in grade two learning to read and everybody else is reading and he’s like pouring over these words, stumbling and in between words he’s saying “I wonder if…” and “Do you think that…” Paul’s fluency was zero and his comprehension was off the chart (Rebecca). Throughout the elementary grades, Paul was withdrawn from the regular classroom to do some specialized programming in reading and writing with the special education teacher. She created a warm and supportive environment for him to work in and he had a strong connection with her. As Rebecca recalls, “it [the resource room] was this warm, supportive place where she cared desperately about him as a kid, as a person, you know, and not just the academic side”. Rebecca remembers, however, that there were challenges that came with being withdrawn from the regular class, as “the withdrawal part was hard because he always left with the Down Syndrome kids and so all the kids told him he was stupid”. Paul remembers that the special education teacher tried to help him academically, but in retrospect he believes that the program they were using with him did not really address his needs and did not challenge him.

They cared, they really cared. They were using the best information that was available to them at the time... but they basically treated me like I had verbal disabilities when I had nonverbal learning disabilities (Paul).

**Middle school.** While this support focused on his academic challenges, what Paul remembers the most from his elementary school years are the social difficulties that he experienced. He did not have many friends and generally felt quite isolated and excluded from his peers. Fortunately, this aspect of his life improved when he moved on to middle school and found a group of friends with whom he could relate and feel comfortable. One reason for this positive development was that he attended an alternative middle school that provided a slightly different approach to education. This school's approach was a little more child-focused than most schools, and to Rebecca's mind a little more accepting and willing to work with students with learning differences. All in all, it was a good change for Paul and it seemed to be better suited to his learning style and overall nature. There was no longer any withdrawal, as all of the support was delivered within the classroom and children were generally working on more individualized programs. As Paul says, "there wasn't the same support system there because all the teachers were the support system".

One thing that Rebecca appreciated was that the school focused on his organizational skills and put some supports in place to ensure that he developed these kinds of more functional skills in addition to the typical academic skills. Paul worked with an educational assistant for one block each cycle to stay on top of things and to make sure that his locker and notebooks were organized. Paul did not enjoy this intervention, but Rebecca appreciated that the school took on this responsibility that had for so long been something she tackled on her own. In the long run, Rebecca believes that it prepared Paul to be able to manage himself and keep himself organized

when he reached high school. Overall, Paul recollects that it was at middle school that things seemed to turn around for him, both academically and socially.

I went to an alternative school so I think that was a big factor. There was just a whole lot of us who were, you know, bullied in elementary school so we just kind of felt really threatened and we kind of sought each other out and formed such a big group that no one bothered us (Paul).

With the social aspects under control, Paul found himself focusing more on his friends and enjoying his time with them. Consequently the academic aspects of school took on a more secondary role. He is quick to assert, however, that he still maintained good marks at the B+ level.

As the end of middle school approached, Paul had to decide what he was going to do for high school. While most of his friends were moving on to the local high school, Paul decided that he wanted to study drama at a specialized high school dedicated to the arts. It was a lengthy process to apply to this school, requiring auditions or a portfolio depending on the program. Paul reflects that his mother helped him a lot through this process, both financially and practically. Paul was accepted and formally started his journey towards his goal of creating and making films.

Because none of his close friends had chosen this route, Paul was on his own once again to navigate the social world and establish some new friendships. He maintained contact with some of his friends from middle school, but the difficulties he had experienced back in elementary school were buried just beneath the surface and made him a little tentative in reaching out and opening up to new people. Thus, it took him a little while to settle in with some new friends at high school.

I think most of the problems I had were self-inflicted. I was still just really nervous about other people and put up walls and really isolated myself. No one ever gave me a hard time, I just made it hard for myself. I did kind of work through that and had a big group of friends by the time grade ten came around and I'm still friends with a few of them but not to the same extent as my middle school friends (Paul).

On the academic front, Paul's individual education plan was maintained at the high school level which allowed him to receive extra time for tests and exams, as well as access to a special setting for exams. Paul was permitted to use a computer in class, but he was not comfortable with this accommodation, because no one else in his classes used a computer in high school and he did not want to stand out. The support he had received through the special education teacher back in elementary school continued, although not to the same extent. The high school special education teacher connected with him periodically to check in and help keep him organized. It was arranged that the same teacher followed Paul throughout his four years of high school which worked well because it allowed both Paul and his mother to establish a good working relationship with her. Rebecca went to her with any concerns she had about his classes and sometimes she re-organized his schedule knowing that a certain teacher would be a better fit for him. Overall, as Paul moved through the education system, he seemed to settle in more comfortably and find greater success each year.

### **Transition to University**

As his high school years came to an end, Paul began preparing for the next stage of his educational journey. He had known since an early age that he wanted to study film production, but he was uncertain as to which university to attend. The application process for this kind of program is extremely lengthy involving writing, staging, and filming movies to create a detailed

portfolio of work. Paul began writing and filming the first of his films during the summer before starting grade twelve and consequently, he had everything he needed in order to be ready to apply to three potential programs by the December deadlines. All three programs were in different cities, and no matter what school he chose, it meant that he would be moving away from home. Knowing this rift was coming was difficult for Rebecca, because it had been just the two of them for so long. She did not want it to be hard for Paul or to interfere with his university experience, and she tried to prepare him as best she could. They traveled to each of the universities he was applying to several times to provide him opportunities to experience daily life on the campuses, to learn more about the specific programs at their open houses, and to hear from the professors what should be in a successful applicants' portfolios.

We did a lot of work so that he knew what he was going to, because when he was little he hated change. Transitions were so hard for him so I figured he had to know what he was doing so that's why we went three times to each university (Rebecca).

While Rebecca did a lot of preparation and planning for Paul's transition to university, there was not much formal support from the high school during the application process. Both Paul and Rebecca remember working through it together at home and financing his portfolio themselves. In the end, Paul was accepted into two of the three schools to which he had applied and he consulted with one of his film teachers from high school to decide which one to accept. He ended up taking this teacher's advice and going to the school that would provide him with the most experience in not only the technical aspects of filming and movie making, but also in the hands on experience of writing. This school was about a five hour drive from his home, which meant he would be living on his own.

While there was no formal transition plan initiated by the school for Paul as he moved on to university, Rebecca took it upon herself to start the process early and to make sure that everything he needed was in place for him. Fortunately, the university he chose had many supports for students with learning disabilities. Paul and Rebecca went to the learning disabilities orientation program to learn about what supports would be available for him at the university. At his mother's urging, Paul registered as an exceptional student and his individual education plan from high school was implemented at the university level. This allowed him to use the computer during his classes and exams and to have extra time when writing his exams. It is Paul's responsibility to take the initiative and let his professors know that he is entitled to these accommodations for his learning disabilities, but he has been comfortable self-advocating and has generally had positive responses from his professors.

Living away from home for the first time was another significant component of Paul's transition to university. While his mother was nervous about the prospect of him moving away from home, she felt a little reassured by the fact that she had provided him with the experience of being away at camps over the summer holidays. As she recalls, "in grade eight I had sent him off to camp because I just wanted him to have a sense of who he was without me because I knew we were really close". He had done well at the camps and did not seem to be too nervous about his new living situation. Rebecca took time to move Paul into his new home at the university and to help him settle in. Knowing that keeping himself organized is challenging for Paul, she helped him get his room set up and figure out the general routines of daily life in a new environment, things like where to eat and where to do his laundry. During the first year, Paul lived in residence, and his mother put in a request for him to have a private room. She feels that this made a big difference in that first year, because he did not have the distractions and potential

social difficulties that can come with a roommate. Since then, however, Paul has chosen to live off campus with a number of other students. He really enjoys the camaraderie of the house, as there is a wide variety of individuals living there. Socially, he has come a long way from the young elementary school student who felt isolated and excluded from the social lives of his peers.

While university semesters are in session Paul focuses on his school work, but over the summers he has held a number of interesting jobs that earn him money and provide enriching life experiences. Sometimes they are focused on gaining experience within the field of film making, while other times they are more focused on developing specialized skills, such as business planning and management that will serve him well throughout his life in general. He was part of a special program that taught him how to run a small business one summer, he worked on some film sets another summer, and he interned in a production office for a television show this past summer. He or his mother have had to actively seek out these positions, but they are helping him gain experience and make contacts in his field.

I find these programs that I put him in. He needs structure and so between first and second year I know he needs to make films but I knew he wouldn't make them on his own – he needed the structure of these programs (Rebecca).

Thus, while it has not always been an easy journey and there have been a number of challenges along the way, Paul is finding success at the university level and is looking ahead to his upcoming transition to the world of work.

### **Challenges over the Years**

**Social challenges.** Reflecting on his educational journey, Paul and his mother have highlighted several challenges that confronted him along the way. The most significant

challenges with which he had to contend were within the social domain. As a young child, Rebecca found that Paul had difficulty sharing and interacting with other children when they went to playgroups. Paul remembers a lack of friendships in his early years and he also realizes that he was not always aware of a lot of the social conventions that other children seem to have understood automatically. He realizes that this interfered with his relationships with other children when he was growing up.

A big challenge was picking out social expectations... not so much like moral expectations, just like what is laughable or bad behavior. I picked my nose much later than I should have and I knew that it was gross but I didn't really know there's a huge social stigma attached to it. Just things like that, I didn't get a lot of things about our culture (Paul).

These difficulties continued when Paul entered school, as he had problems with the routines and interactions of kindergarten. Even as he grew a little older, he did not seem to fit in with the other students. Paul remembers feeling excluded during these elementary school years and both he and Rebecca reflect on the times when he was bullied. Rebecca recalls that Paul "was always bullied and he was always bullied by even the kids who weren't popular. He was like at the bottom". The exclusion and isolation that Paul felt in elementary school took its toll on him, and both he and Rebecca wonder if it gets in the way of him allowing himself to open up and trust other people at times.

He just didn't always have that strong connection with people... I don't know if that was because he'd been rejected so much that he was unwilling to or if it's who he is (Rebecca).

In accordance with the characteristics of nonverbal learning disabilities, relationships and social conventions can still be a challenge for Paul at times. However, he has made progress in this

area. In middle school he connected with other students who had similar experiences in their pasts and he was able to develop some friendships that have endured over the years.

**Academic challenges.** Another significant challenge for Paul during the early years was the extreme discrepancy between his strong reasoning and thinking abilities and the struggles he had learning some of the basic, elementary skills like printing and reading that many other children learn much more quickly. Paul was very much aware that these tasks were challenging for him and this led to a great deal of frustration on his part. He wanted to be learning new things and extending his knowledge on higher levels, and it was quite disheartening for him to be forced to practise these basic skills over and over again.

**Organizational challenges.** While most of these academic challenges lessened over the years with practice and the extra support he received through speech therapists, occupational therapists, and special education teachers, some have endured throughout his life. Paul has always found it difficult to keep himself and his belongings organized, and he believes that this disorganization has created challenges for him throughout his educational career.

I'm incredibly disorganized. I have been and probably to a lesser extent always will be. It makes it hard to find work that I have been doing. I misplace everything and it's cost me a lot of money in things that I've lost. It's cost me marks. It's cost me a lot of things (Paul). Rebecca has played a large role in helping him manage this challenge. When he was younger she worked hard to keep him organized at school. She stayed in close contact with his teachers and checked in with him every day to work on his homework and make sure he was ready for the next day. It could become quite difficult at times and she was very glad when some of the school personnel took on that role when Paul reached middle school. As he grew older and left home for university, Rebecca's role changed again but she still supported him as much as she could.

She helped him with his original move into residence, returning several times to help him organize his room and belongings. While he is living quite independently in another city, his mother still plays a pivotal role in helping him organize his summers in terms of arranging jobs, applying for internships, and finding other opportunities for him. Paul appreciates this support, knowing that he will benefit from it in the long run.

If I'm not given any structure, I will just sit around all day and do nothing which is kind of bad, but if I have deadlines, if I have something that needs to be done, I will always get it done (Paul).

Thus, there have been a number of challenges that Paul has faced along his journey through the education system, including the social difficulties interacting with his peers when he was younger, academic struggles he had learning the basic skills most of his peers had already mastered, and his difficulties with organization.

### **Capacities and Resources that have Helped**

Despite these challenges, Paul graduated from high school on the principal's honor roll and is in the final year of a film production degree at a major Ontario university. He is working and living the life he dreamed of as a young child and is actively preparing to embark on the next phase of his life after graduation. Both Paul and his mother identified some specific capacities and resources, at both the individual and ecological levels, that have helped him.

**Confidence and self-awareness.** On an individual level, there are many personal capacities and characteristics that Paul and Rebecca identify as having assisted him through his educational journey. At the core of his success is the fact that he is an intelligent and determined individual who is confident and at ease with himself. Over the years he endured a number of social challenges and rejections, but he never speaks of not liking who he is or wishing that he had been

different in some way so that it would have been easier to fit in. He knows who he is and is comfortable and confident in his own skin. This characteristic is something that resonated strongly throughout Rebecca's narrative, as she often talked of how much she respected this quality in her son, describing him as "his own person, an out-of-the-box, self-assured kid". To illustrate this, she recalls a drama class production back when he was just a young teenager, a time of insecurity and uncertainty for so many children. He had written a play about an individual coming out of the closet, and Rebecca was so impressed to see that he was comfortable enough to act it out on stage. She recalled that he "was so secure in his gender and his sexuality when nobody else was - a strong character and so clear about who he is". Both Paul and his mother talked about his inquisitive nature, and they both see his creativity as an important part of his success. Paul loved learning and exploring new ideas all of his life, and he tends to think about things in new and different ways. These traits are at the heart of his passion for film production and writing, and he has been able to channel them productively into his projects and work to create innovative and dynamic films.

**Goal orientation.** Paul knew that he wanted to work in the world of film from a very early age. He was interested in watching movies, talking about movies, and even making his own movies from a very young age.

I think I started movie ideas when I was two years old – as far back as I can remember. My mom says I really started talking about it when I was six or seven, but that was pretty much the only thing I talked about (Paul).

Knowing that he wanted to have a life in film making from a very early age has served him well over the years. Having this goal to work towards has channeled his energies and motivated him every step of the way. These goals led him to apply to special programs and to work in the film

industry over his summers and it kept him focused and drove him to pursue his goals. Rebecca always set high goals for him as well and pushed him to work hard towards them. Her unrelenting belief in him and that he could achieve whatever goals he set for himself also served as a strong motivator and it helped him believe in himself.

**Openness and awareness of learning disabilities.** Rebecca always talked with Paul very openly and honestly about everything in their lives, including his learning disabilities and the strengths and challenges that were part of them. This awareness resulted in a level of personal confidence that has allowed him to accept himself as he is. Even when he was younger he was able to see the benefits of learning the way he does, and he does not think he would be the person he is today if he did not have his learning disabilities. Rebecca remembers a post he put on Facebook listing ten things about himself – one of the things was that he benefited from his learning disabilities.

Throughout his schooling Paul has been willing to access and use the resources and supports that were available in his environment. He and Rebecca have identified a number of ecological resources that they feel have contributed to his success.

**Family support.** First and foremost, Paul has always felt the support of his family, particularly from his mother. She helped him with his homework and his learning, she advocated for him at school with his teachers, she searched out opportunities and special activities for him to participate in, and she always managed to find a way to support his interests financially, even when money was tight. In order to ensure that she was working with him in the right ways and accessing all of the supports that were available to him, Rebecca took it upon herself to learn as much as she could about learning disabilities and the education system. She read books and journal articles, she went to workshops and conferences, she joined and

participated in the local learning disabilities association, and she took on active roles in Paul's schools and the school board itself. In essence, Rebecca became an expert not only on her son, but on his learning disabilities and the system he was working within. For Rebecca, Paul was the biggest priority in her life and Paul is very grateful for all that she did and for all the sacrifices she made over the years for him, as he states, "I'm glad I've got the support I have and I don't think I would have gotten this far without it. I feel that the support I've had has overcompensated for my weak spots".

**Teacher support.** In addition to this family assistance, Paul also received support from his teachers at school as well as some of the instructors and coaches that he worked with over the years. Rebecca made strong connections with many of the people working with Paul, and in turn many of them seemed to take a special interest in Paul. This special attention and guidance meant a lot to Paul and helped to push him forward towards his goals.

Overall, Paul's success seems to come from to a combination of these ecological supports and the personal capacities that have enabled him to take advantage of them. Rebecca acknowledges the support that she and others provided helped Paul graduate successfully from high school and move on to pursue his dreams of producing movies and films at university. She also believes that what is most important are the personal qualities and capacities that he possesses which allow him to take advantage of those supports.

### **Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities**

Paul was diagnosed with learning disabilities at a young age, and it is the only thing he has ever known. While he finds it a difficult construct to define or put into words, for him it is not something negative or a deficiency. Rather, it is a different way of processing information or a different way of learning. Paul perceives himself as an intelligent individual with an academic

mind whose creativity allows him to process and think through things differently than most other people. He reports that he likes to learn in a hands-on, experiential manner.

While Paul has a positive perception of his abilities and the way he processes information, he acknowledges that society does not generally have an accurate understanding of learning disabilities. For most people, the word learning disability is synonymous with unintelligent or stupid. Most people's understanding of learning disabilities is based on individuals who are not able to learn, and for Paul nothing could be further from the truth. For Paul, a learning disability is not a deficit, but just a different way of learning and thinking. Moreover, he believes that it is a superior way of learning and thinking.

**CHAPTER EIGHT**

**CASE #5: KRISTA**

### **Krista's Profile**

Krista is a 32 year old graduate student working on her Master's degree in social work at a central Ontario university. Not diagnosed until the end of high school, Krista went through much of her education without any supports or accommodations in place. While her determination and strong work ethic helped her overcome many of the challenges that she faced, it took a toll on both her and her family, as she had to work harder than most of her peers in order to complete her homework and pass her courses. Additionally, she experienced social difficulties and underlying feelings of anxiety and frustration, as she did not understand why school had to be so much effort. While the diagnosis of nonverbal learning disabilities did not answer all of her questions or solve all of her problems, it did help to explain some of the challenges she had faced over the years and it gave her some additional insight into herself as a learner and an individual. When she was initially diagnosed, there was not a lot of information about nonverbal learning disabilities available, but as more information surfaced Krista endeavored to gain a deeper understanding about her learning disability and herself. She was able to use her increased awareness to advocate for herself and her rights as an individual. Recently, she has come to see her struggle to ensure that she has the supports she needs not just as a personal need, but as a human rights issue affecting other people as well. She believes that there should be a better understanding and empathy for individuals with learning disabilities and she has taken it upon herself to help make that happen. Krista's story gives us the chance to experience another perspective on living with learning disabilities as it allows us to understand the educational experiences of an individual with a later diagnosis. The following narrative describes Krista's educational journey, as recounted by Krista, her mother Madelaine, and her older sister Kate.

## **Early Life Experiences**

Growing up in a small family, Krista spent the first years of her life living on a farm where her mother and father ran a small business. Her father, Richard, was very busy with the business, but she had a close relationship with her mother, Madelaine, and her sister, Kate. When she was seven years old her parents separated and she, her mother, and her sister moved into the town. Krista continued going to the same school until the following year when her mother decided to return to school and the three of them moved into a family residence at the university. Madelaine has always been academically oriented, pursuing a number of degrees over the years and Krista feels that this is the source of her desire to study at the post-secondary level.

Madelaine was the primary caregiver for Krista when she was growing up and she remembers her mother as being very loving and encouraging, saying that she “was always comforting and making sure that all my needs were met and just making sure that I wasn’t struggling in any way”. Her sister, Kate, is older by seven years which created a different kind of relationship when they were younger. While they still connected as sisters typically do, talking and playing together and fighting and tormenting each other occasionally, the age difference really separated them at times. Kate remembers that there was only one year when they attended the same school, the year that she was in grade eight and Krista was in grade one – what she refers to as “bad sister times”. Consequently, there was not a lot of overlap in their lives outside the home and they were often at very different stages of development. While Krista always wanted to be around her older sister, Kate was often looking for her own space away from Krista and she would often push her away when she was with her friends. At home however, Kate often ended up taking on the role of being a second mother to Krista, as Krista

reflects, “she would look after me and she would kind of direct me if I was not sure about something or I needed help with a social situation or how to do school work or something”. Kate continues to assume this role, as Krista often goes to her for help and support when she is having difficulty with something in her life or when she just needs someone to talk to.

Krista has a large extended family, as her mother was one of seven children. While these extended family members were not a constant presence in their lives, they tended to come by periodically, depending on what was going on in their lives at the time. Krista remembers two aunts in particular, Laura and Barbara, as having a special impact on her life. Her Aunt Laura would come to visit and take her out on special excursions from time to time. They would go on trips into the city or just for walks in the park. For Krista, it did not matter what they did, it was the special one-on-one time that made her feel important. Her Aunt Barbara was not as present early on in her life, but later she had a very important impact and the two became closer. When Krista started struggling in high school, her mother confided in Barbara, who was a psychologist at one of the local universities, and she recommended and arranged for Krista to have an assessment done there. Barbara ended up being a good source of support for the family after the diagnosis was made as well.

Living on the farm, the family was somewhat isolated, as there were not a lot of children for Krista to play with when she was young. Her mother recalls that while Kate was at school during the day, Krista ended up being on her own and was left to entertain herself.

She had a good imagination. She used to set all her toys up in a circle and I’d come in and look and she had eight or nine stuffed toys and then eight or nine pieces of paper and eight or nine drawings started at each one and she’d be sitting at the front holding everything up like this and showing them how to draw (Madelaine).

Looking back at those early years, Madelaine now questions some of Krista's behavior and some of her "little quirks" that did not really stand out to her at the time. She recalls having to explain to Krista that when you whisper to someone, you don't whisper into their eye or neck, but into their ear so that they can hear you, and that when someone says I love you, you say it back to them. She also remembers that Krista found it uncomfortable to look people in the eye when she was talking with them or to have anyone look directly at her. Thus, some of the social conventions that people take for granted did not come naturally to Krista. While Madelaine now realizes that this was part of Krista's learning disabilities, at the time she did not think much of it.

The social stuff was always hard for her. She did weird things and I don't know if this is related to the social piece and her [lack of] understanding of social conventions... And her responses to things were sometimes just odd (Madelaine).

### **Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis**

**Elementary school.** When Krista was nearing school age, Madelaine realized that she needed some experience with other children her own age, and she enrolled her in daycare. The following year, she started kindergarten at the local public school. When Krista reflects on her first years of schooling, she remembers generally liking school, but not really being overly passionate about anything in particular. As she recalls, she was more "indifferent" to school than anything else. Reading and writing came quite easily for her, but math could be a little challenging at times, especially concepts like time and money. While she remembers seeing other students going to the resource room for support, she never received any extra support or assistance herself. Madeleine does not remember having any academic concerns about her during those early elementary years either and she reports having just the typical involvement in

Krista's education, going to parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in the school, and helping with her homework.

While Krista does not remember having any significant academic difficulties in elementary school, she does recall some other challenges. Socially she did not feel very connected with her peers and did not really understand a lot of the social conventions that others seemed to take for granted.

In terms of peers, I remember being kind of confused about situations like different friendships or just something that would happen... I remember I was really shy but now looking back I don't know if that's shyness or that I just had difficulty understanding social situations (Krista).

Kate remembers her sister spending time with other children when they were growing up, but she cannot recall any close friends or strong connections.

She would hang out with kids and she would go to their houses and things, but I don't remember them being terribly close. I can't name any of the kids from that town that she was really best friends with or anything (Kate).

Her mother saw these social challenges as well, but did not know what to make of them at the time. Being a bit of a "loner" herself as well, she thought this was just part of Krista's personality. Madelaine recalls that "there were challenges with her getting along with other kids and she was always very much a kind of a loner, and I think that had to do with not understanding what was going on". This social awkwardness went even deeper though, as Krista never remembers feeling very connected or comfortable at school. Looking back on it now, she sees it almost as a kind of anxiety and she wonders why more was not made of it at the time.

I think I always felt kind of uncomfortable in school. I know I've always taken a lot of days off of school, especially in grade one, two, and three I had a lot of stomach aches (Krista).

Her mother remembers the physical complaints and the stomach aches which resulted in school absences, but she never made the connection to anxiety.

When Krista was going into grade six, she and her mother and her sister moved into the city so that Madelaine could attend university, and consequently Krista and Kate were enrolled at new schools. Krista preferred the city to life on the farm, but acknowledges that it was quite an adjustment for her at first. One thing that helped was that she made a new friend at her school and they remained friends for a few years. This connection really helped Krista settle in and feel more comfortable in the new environment.

**High school.** As she moved into high school, Krista really started to notice a change in the workload and the academic demands. Suddenly things were becoming more challenging for her.

It was kind of the opposite of what most people would say. It was like it got harder over time. I guess it's because I have a nonverbal learning disability and they say it's one you grow into (Krista).

In order to deal with the academic pressures she was feeling, Krista decided to stop socializing altogether even though she did not have a lot of close friends to begin with.

In grade ten I really stopped socializing. I had to just decide to be a studious student or not be in school and like kind of quit. Like I had to make that choice, so I was more focused on school.... When I was more into not doing social stuff and doing work stuff, it was too exhausting to take the energy to go and socialize and whatever (Krista).

Math became so hard for her that she was actually failing. Still not receiving any support through the school, it meant that she had to spend more time working at home with the assistance

of her mother and her sister. Her mother would spend hours helping her with her math every night and both she and her sister would work with Krista to edit her essays. Frustrated that she was not getting the assistance she needed from her teachers, Krista took it upon herself to access some additional support in the school. She saw that there was a resource centre where other students would go for help, and she started going there too. She spent her spare period in the resource centre working on her math with the special education teacher who was in there at the time, and he allowed her to write her tests in there with him. With his assistance, she was able to pass her math course, but she did not feel she had gained a solid understanding of the concepts.

In grade ten I started at a 40 something percent in the first half and so I went to see him [the resource teacher] and in the second half I had like 85, but I still didn't know what I was doing (Krista).

Despite a limited knowledge of the math concepts that had been covered in the course, Krista enrolled in advanced math the following year to ensure that she was not limiting her choices at the university level. She worked hard at home, she took a spare class to work on her math in the resource room, and she went to the teacher for extra help, but to no avail. She ended up failing that course and had to go to summer school in order to gain the credit.

While math was by far the most difficult subject for her, Krista was also finding some of the demands of her other courses challenging as well. While she understood the concepts in the courses, it was difficult for her to organize her thoughts and ideas in order to express them in writing. Consequently, she estimates that producing written assignments took her two to three times longer than her peers. At the time, her determination and desire for success drove her forward, but looking back on it, she realizes just how hard she had to work in high school.

I know that I was working much harder than other people, especially for tests... I was studying a lot to remember the material and spending hours putting together the essays, not necessarily the ideas but just getting it in order (Krista).

Her mother noticed the same things and both were starting to feel the frustration of putting in so much effort and hard work but not seeing the high marks they assumed should follow. Her mother remembers how hard Krista worked and all the pressure she put on herself. Time and again, she saw this frustration build up until it would finally erupt in an angry outburst directed at a seemingly innocuous event or situation. She recalls one time when they could not find the paper she needed to complete a project.

We went to get paper and the store was closed and she had a whole rant about how could they close, she had a project to do, she should be able to pick up paper and you expect to have paper in this world (Madelaine).

Madelaine was worried about her daughter as she entered grade 12, the final year of high school, and she shared her concerns and her own frustrations with her sister, Barbara.

### **Diagnosis**

Once she heard what they were going through, Barbara recommended that they have some psycho-educational testing done. She worked in the Psychology Department at one of the local universities and was able to arrange for Krista to be tested there. Krista enjoyed the testing process and she could see where she was stronger and where she had more difficulty. When it was completed, the psychologist shared the results with Krista and her family. As Krista recalls, the nonverbal learning disabilities with which she was diagnosed affected two main areas: her short term memory and her visual spatial skills. This made sense to her because they related to the challenges she was having at school in math and writing and in studying for tests.

Krista and her mother talked about the diagnosis and tried to implement some of the suggestions and recommendations made by the psychologist. While Krista has come to accept her diagnosis over time, both her mother and her sister recall that initially she had a lot of anger about it and was not willing to accept that anything was wrong. She wanted to do everything on her own and did not want to admit that she needed any support.

I think when she got the diagnosis, she was angry... For a long time, she didn't believe it and she was angry. She felt as though she ought to be able to just get through it and no one would know and that she wouldn't need help so she fought it for a long time (Madelaine).

Madelaine was glad to have the diagnosis and to learn how to help Krista, but at the same time she admits to feeling very upset about it. She felt guilty that she had missed the symptoms and did not seek help earlier, which in turn led to Krista's long struggle in school.

I was devastated because I thought I should have known long before... It's awfully hard to see that there's something wrong with your child. That was hard (Madelaine).

Krista remembers these feeling of guilt in her mother as well. The testing made her realize that Krista's challenges were not due to something she was or was not choosing to do, but rather something within her that made her learn differently.

I just remember my mom feeling really guilty because when she was helping me with math she was always saying, "Pay attention, pay attention". So, she felt guilty about that (Krista). Madelaine supported Krista in the ways that the psychologist recommended and tried to be there for her as best she could, but she felt torn at times. Krista needed her support and help, but she was almost an adult at this point and was looking to establish her independence. When Madelaine stepped in and helped too much, she felt that she was undermining Krista's power and blossoming independence. She tried to help Krista feel comfortable advocating for herself and

for what she needed. Krista credits her mother for helping her to feel confident in talking to her teachers about her disability and for helping her believe that she had the right to ask for the things she needed to be successful.

Krista received most of her support from her immediate family, particularly her mother and her sister, and also from her Aunt Barbara who had made the diagnosis possible. Barbara was also an important source of support for Madelaine, because Kate was away at university at the time. Krista reports that there was not much information on nonverbal learning disabilities available at the time of her diagnosis, but notes that research now shows a link between nonverbal learning disabilities and Asperger's Syndrome. She laments the lack of publicly available information and that the psychologist and her teachers did not tell her more about her disability. In retrospect, she feels as though having that information at the time of diagnosis would have made a significant difference in her life and how she dealt with her disability.

Somehow I found the connection that nonverbal learning disabilities are actually very similar to Asperger's. I had no idea, nobody told me that. So, once I looked at the resources for Asperger's there were so many and I was really mad because I was like, "Why didn't anybody tell me that?"... I think it would have been nice if professionals could have made that link for me (Krista).

### **School Experiences after the Diagnosis**

After the testing, the psychologist who worked with Krista came to the school and shared the results with her teachers. By the time this happened though, Krista was already in grade 12, her final year. While the school seemed to be receptive to the meeting, not a lot changed afterwards. As Kate recalls, "she had the diagnosis and nobody changed, nothing changed". Krista had assumed that all of the accommodations and supports recommended in the report would

automatically be in place, things like extra time and an alternative setting for exams, but this was not the case.

I felt it was a weird disconnect because that [meeting] was kind of the end of it and there were no supports in place. They had said that I needed extra time for exams so I assumed that everyone was aware of that (Krista).

While an individual education plan (IEP) was created, Krista had to talk with each of her teachers individually to ensure that the accommodations listed on it were implemented. Some teachers were willing to give her the accommodations to which she was entitled, while others questioned the need from them and made her justify why she should have them. Krista had the feeling that people thought she was “trying to pull one over on them” and “trying to get advantages over other students”. For a student just coming to terms with her disability and the implications of it, this was a lot to ask and a difficult position to be placed in. Krista persisted in self-advocacy, and made sure that the accommodations were in place for her.

High school continued to be a difficult time for Krista, both socially and academically. Through hard work and perseverance, she graduated on time and ensured that she was in a position to continue on to university.

### **Transition to University**

Even though high school had been a challenging time for Krista, she always knew that she wanted to go to university. Both Krista and her mother attribute this to the fact that Madelaine herself was working through university programs from the time Krista was 10 years old. Additionally, because she saw her older sister Kate attend university, it was a natural goal for her to want to achieve as well.

I always thought I would go, maybe because my mom was in university at the time and she really wanted us to go to university so it was always kind of my assumption that I would just go right into university (Krista).

While she was not sure what she wanted to study, Krista decided that she would go to one of the universities near her home so that she could take advantage of the support, both emotional and academic, that she continued to receive from her mother. The high school did not provide any support during the application process, and consequently it was up to her to apply on her own. Similarly, it was up to her to find out about any special services for students with disabilities. Krista applied to three universities and was accepted into all three, an accomplishment which was a source of pride for her. She chose an international development program offered at a university that was about 45 minutes away from her home. The plan was for her to live in residence during the week and come home on the weekends.

Before starting at the university, Krista participated in a volunteer youth exchange in India that ended up extending into the first semester. She had always been interested in working with refugee populations in developing nations and was looking forward to the experience. Krista recalls her comfort at traveling across the world and at living in a foreign country, and she marvels at how easily she can handle these kinds of major stressors, while she typically finds small everyday things such as getting to class on time or shopping for school supplies so stressful.

While it was a valuable and very positive experience for her, Krista realizes now that the timing made her transition into university very difficult. She was away for the first semester, which resulted in her missing all of the typical start-up supports that universities have in place for freshmen students – the orientations and welcomes and the frosh week activities. When she

returned after Christmas, it was a very “chaotic and disorganized” time, and in hindsight she now realizes that she did not set herself up for success. She had not prepared for moving into residence and she had not organized the classes she was going to take ahead of time. Things happened very quickly when she returned and she never really felt as though she settled in properly. With her mother’s support, however, she was able to move into her residence, sign up for her classes, and register at the Disability Service Centre. However, she did not feel connected with the rest of the university, as her peers had started in the fall and had shared common experiences and established connections.

Because she registered at the university’s Disability Service centre, Krista had an individual education plan with accommodations for extra time on tests and exams and an alternative setting for exams. She remembers that the centre wrote a letter for her to bring to each professor outlining these accommodations, but that it was up to her to go to each professor individually to let them know about her diagnosis and the supports to which she was entitled. Because the diagnosis was still so new to Krista, she was not very comfortable with the label or with talking about it, and consequently this task was difficult for her. The reactions of her professors were mixed. Some of them were comfortable providing accommodations, but there were a few who showed a lack of understanding and challenged her claim of having learning disabilities, as her mother recalls,

She’d go to some profs and they would say, “Well, you shouldn’t take the course if you can’t do the work”. That was awful, so they reinforced her all the time that this was her problem and that there was something wrong with her (Madelaine).

Krista remembers one professor who would not accommodate her and actually told her that she should feel lucky that she had even been accepted into university and that she should not expect

more than that. She went to the Disability Services Centre to report it, but nothing was done. She was left feeling quite powerless and even less comfortable talking about her disability with professors than she had been previously.

The academic and social difficulties she faced that first semester at university, evoked feelings of frustration and anger in her.

I felt like it was pretty chaotic and I felt really disorganized and I had no idea what I was doing or what I wanted to be doing... It felt really stressful and overwhelming. I started with a full course load because I was like well I can do that, whatever, it's fine. So that was probably too much which I didn't really know at the time and I wasn't really socializing much. So it started out being okay and then I felt like I was getting worse. I was getting more angry about school in general and less interested and less passionate about my school.

(Krista)

**Social challenges.** Just as she had in high school, Krista isolated herself from her peers and did not socialize very much. She saw herself as different and did not know how to fit in to her classes or with her peers, as she explains,

I felt really isolated from peer groups because I felt like I could start to see the ways I was different than normal people, if there are like specific normal people. I was more insecure about myself so I didn't want them to know... I felt like any time I was compared to my peers I always came up short so I just didn't want to be involved with them (Krista).

After two years of isolation, Krista finally befriended another student in her third year. They had both had the same kinds of experiences, and they enjoyed commiserating with each other. She also tried to socialize by joining student association groups, but admits that rather than making close connections with the people in these groups, she just kept herself busy with their activities

and fundraisers. Krista reflects that she may have felt more comfortable with people from other cultures because there were already different behavioral expectations. This way any social breakdowns or challenges that she encountered were not because there was something wrong with her, but simply because she was Canadian and from a different culture.

I always tended to get along better with people from other cultures and I wonder if it's because if they find you strange socially, they just say, "Oh, it's because you're Canadian."

(Krista)

Her mother shares these sentiments, as she feels that by interacting with people from different cultures or by living in foreign countries, Krista was putting herself in positions where she was expected to be different. Thus, when she felt different from the people around her it was to be expected and she did not have to feel like an outsider in her own culture and country.

**Academic challenges.** Academically, it was difficult for Krista to obtain the support she needed at the university level. She felt as though she had to fight for everything and even when she received some support, it often was not always exactly what she needed. As she recalls, "Exams were really hard for me. I started to get more angry about what is extra time going to help if I can't memorize things". Because studying and writing exams are such a big part of university life, Krista found herself not having the success that she had anticipated. Because she is such a goal driven individual and because she is so motivated to succeed, this was very hard on her and had her questioning herself and her abilities.

I was always thinking about the philosophy of intelligence. So if you're intelligent there should be a way to measure that. The assessment says I'm intelligent but then there's no output that can measure that so how can I actually really be intelligent? So I was always thinking through this in my mind (Krista).

Another thing that undermined her confidence was her part time job as a cashier at a shop near the university. While it was a good source of income, Krista found it very overwhelming and it just became an extra pressure and stress that she did not need. Her learning disability made it difficult for her to work with money, and as a result the basic job functions, like calculating taxes and discounts, were hard for her. The challenges she had at work just added to her feelings of frustration and failure, and she felt as though she could not do anything right. The gap between her potential and her achievement was clearly a source of frustration for Krista. She felt that she was underperforming in both her studies and her part-time job. This was extremely hard on her self-esteem and her self-confidence.

Throughout all of these challenging times, Krista continued to go to her mother and her sister for support. They were always there for phone calls during the week and for face to face time on the weekends. The emotional support was very important, but the academic and practical support continued as well – editing her papers and helping her with administrative tasks like attending meetings at the resource centre and paying her bills.

Because of the challenges she was encountering in her courses, Krista decided to transfer from the international development program to the history department, where she had encountered more academic success. Thus, in the end she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in history.

### **Later University Years**

After completing her undergraduate degree, Krista was not sure what she wanted to do. She ended up moving back home to enroll in a Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) program at a local college. Her sister Kate had worked as an ESL teacher, and Krista thought it would appeal to her interest in different countries and cultures. After graduating, she went to

Korea to teach for one year and then returned to Ontario to work, teaching adults for the next five years. This period of her life involved trying different jobs and hoping to find one that felt right. Unfortunately, she was not satisfied or happy in any of the positions she tried, and she was not able to find the passion or the joy that the other teachers she worked with seemed to feel.

It was a fun environment. People were coming here to have fun and to learn English and I know the other teachers would talk about this being the best job they've ever had, it's so fun, but for me it was just not fun (Krista).

This was very discouraging for her and left her feeling quite unhappy, as she says it got to the point where "every day going in [to work] was like complete misery". She did not disclose that she had learning disabilities to her colleagues or her superiors at work, because she did not feel that it would be well received. Additionally, there did not seem to be anything set up in the workplace to accommodate disabilities, as there was no resource centre or disability service that she could access for support. Thus for Krista, the world of work has been even harder than school, as there seem to be even fewer support available to help her through it.

Feeling as though she was never going to be happy, Krista decided to go back to school to try another path – social work. She is currently enrolled in a Master of Social Work program at another university near her home. Krista reports that "switching was kind of out of desperation and I felt that's my last resort, like this career has to work, like nothing is working". This program seems to be a better fit for Krista, as she has completed more than half of the program with the appropriate accommodations in place, and is now in her final year. It seems to be more in line with her interests and she has made better connections with the other students. Other things in her life have changed as well. Krista has started to explore her learning disabilities, researching them for papers at school and just for her own interest and knowledge. Initially, the

research she found was focused primarily on children, and as a young adult the information was not very relevant to her life. She needed to find research that targeted people her age and the unique needs and situations that she encountered. With perseverance, she has learned more about her disabilities, and she has come to accept them as part of who she is. Two things resonated strongly with her. First, she found that some of the symptoms of Asperger's Syndrome overlap with nonverbal learning disabilities. The Asperger's Syndrome literature is vast and she was able to find more information directed towards adults living with the condition, which has been very helpful for her. It also helped explain some of the social difficulties she has always encountered. Second, she now understands that her mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression, are also linked to nonverbal learning disabilities. What she read was aligned with her own experiences and helped her understand what she went through when she was younger and why she had felt the way she did.

As Krista discovered more about herself and became more accepting of her disabilities, she started to find it easier to open up to other people around her and to other students in her program. She started to talk with other people who had learning disabilities and learned a lot from hearing about their experiences. In the past, she had always tried to distance herself from other people with disabilities, but now she finally started to see some commonalities between her experiences and those of other students. This allowed her to make social connections with others and gain support from the people around her. She surprised herself by befriending a fellow student who had a physical disability.

I have a friend in the program who has a physical disability and when I stopped trying to differentiate myself and we just had a really good talk about all kinds of things and they're the same, which was weird (Krista).

While Krista has been growing and opening herself up to new experiences, she also gives a lot of credit to the environment of the social work program that she is in.

In doing the social work program, people are more open about talking about their own experiences and that was my first time to meet people with learning disabilities and have conversations with them. (Krista)

Another significant change in her life is that she has hired a disabilities coach. The same aunt who arranged the diagnostic testing in high school connected her with Caroline, a disabilities coach. As a disabilities coach, Caroline works with individuals with a wide range of disabilities to help them navigate the education system in order to set themselves up to be successful. On an academic level, Krista now has someone to talk to about the academic difficulties she faces at school. Caroline is able to listen with an experienced ear and enlighten her as to what her options are and to what she is entitled. This empowers Krista to return to the university and advocate for herself and her rights.

I guess in some ways it put me in an adversarial position with them, but that's good because now I can be like "No, you are wrong" instead of just being "Okay, I'm sorry I did the wrong thing". So, it's kind of a satisfying adversarial [position], but then frustrating because why are disabilities such an adversity? (Krista)

Through her work with Caroline, Krista now sees advocacy not so much as a personal need, but more of a human rights issue. Where she used to question whether she personally deserved the accommodations that were in place for her, she now sees them as universal rights to which all students with disabilities are entitled. Additionally, she now sees that she has to fight for these rights so that they will be available for all students who need them.

The work they do together goes much deeper than just academics and school issues. Krista's work with Caroline is also very focused on life issues and general strategies that will help her on a daily basis. Caroline helps her reflect on sources of anxiety and recommends strategies to manage the situations. One example is with her feelings of anxiety. What Krista initially perceived to be an all-encompassing feeling of anxiety in her life, she has now come to see as situation specific and this makes it more manageable and easier to control. For example, she realized that grocery shopping made her anxious, and by implementing some strategies to help make grocery shopping more manageable (making lists, figuring out where to go in the store), she has eliminated a source of anxiety in her life. This awareness leaves her more in control of her life and more empowered and confident that she can be successful in the little things that used to feel so overwhelming for her.

According to Krista, her mother, and her sister, Caroline is the single biggest support that she has had in her life. This support however, has a cost which is not covered by the university or any other agency. Consequently, Krista has to find a way to pay for this resource. Madelaine is able to support her in this, but as she asserts not all students or individuals have the means to do this.

She struggled with the university to get funding to pay for Caroline and they said no. They said no, they have someone that should cover that here, but that person is only dealing with academic stuff. So, it's almost like the silos are divided so she can't get the ongoing support that she needs without resources, which thank goodness I can do that. Ordinarily, I don't know how people manage (Madelaine).

As she nears the end of her university career, both Krista and her family know that transitioning into the world of work will be a big step for her and that the support that she receives from Caroline

will be important as she navigates this new stage of her journey. As Krista states, “I always feel like transitions are easier than settling in because the settling in didn’t ever seem to work”.

### **Challenges over the Years**

**Social challenges.** Reflecting on her educational journey, Krista and her family highlighted several challenges that have confronted her along the way. Both Krista and her mother believe that the most significant problems she faced were social rather than academic. As Madelaine says, “It’s absolutely social. The biggest piece is non-academic.” While she did struggle in school with some subjects, it was the social difficulties she experienced interacting with peers and classmates that affected her the most. Her inability to understand the social conventions and the disconnect that it created with others has been a resounding theme throughout her story. Krista has endured long periods of isolation, when she did not interact with peers in school or even socialize at all. Thus, she has missed out on a potential source of support for a large portion of her life. It has not been until recently, in her social work program, that Krista started to connect with her peers and open up and talk about her experiences with them.

**Emotional challenges.** These social difficulties have been accompanied by emotional struggles as well. From an early age, Krista has reported feelings of anxiety about school and different situations as well as what she now believes was periods of depression.

I wonder about depression when I was a kid and when I was in high school because I was really, really pessimistic and just had a negative outlook on things. And not feeling really happy about stuff because you’re just focusing on work and there’s just anxiety about everything (Krista).

While she was able to get some support at school for her academic challenges, she finds that it is much harder to get any support for these emotional challenges.

**Lack of academic support.** The lack of academic support available within the education system is another challenge that Krista has had to contend with over the years. She had to seek out and advocate strongly for every accommodation she received at the high school and university level.

There are more supports now [at the graduate level], although she still fights with them all the time. I need this and they say no, you shouldn't need the support for this and she's like this is what I need and they're trying to put one over on me (Madelaine).

**Teachers' lack of understanding of learning disabilities.** She also had to deal with unsupportive and insensitive teachers throughout her journey. Teachers who did not understand her learning disabilities would make things worse by not providing the support and accommodations to which she was entitled and by making remarks that hurt or upset her. It especially infuriated her when it came from people she felt should know better, such as the professor in her graduate program who actually worked within a hospital setting with students with disabilities. After asking if she could have the lesson overheads ahead of time to prepare for the class, the professor refused. She then directed Krista to disclose her disability to the other students and accept that she will not be able to achieve as much as her peers. This response really angered Krista, because she was not trying to get away with doing less work, she was just trying to get the most out of the class lectures.

**Lack of emotional support in education system.** Emotional or more personal support was even harder to come by – it did not even exist within the school context and was something she had to go out and find on her own outside the school system. Madelaine complains about the lack of collaboration among the different sources of supports, what she calls “disconnected

silos”. There are different services that Krista can access for support but none are connected and there is not a common financial coverage.

**Financial challenges.** Another challenge that Krista faced over the years is the financial burden of paying for the supports she needed and still needs. Some support is provided through the university, but it only covers academic needs. It does not provide the full range of support that she needs – the support for her anxiety and the social challenges that she contends with. Fortunately, her mother is able to pay for this type of assistance for her.

One of the supports she has needed is financial support because she hasn’t got [financial] resources and the resources aren’t there... You’ve got a person who has limited resources and you don’t have much time because everything takes longer, and you don’t have the resources to understand the processes (Madelaine).

**Late identification of her learning disabilities.** While Krista believes that the social and academic challenges have increased as she has grown older, she and her mother recognize that earlier intervention would have been helpful. Krista was not diagnosed until she was 17 years old and in her final year of high school. Her mother experienced guilt over not realizing earlier that something was wrong and she regretted that they had waited so long to do the testing. Once they did have the diagnosis, there was not a lot of information about nonverbal learning disabilities and the information that was available was directed towards children and Krista was a teenager, almost an adult. Without a solid understanding of her disabilities, it was more difficult for Krista to come to terms and accept them. This lack of awareness and acceptance hindered Krista’s development, as it was only when she acknowledged and accepted the diagnosis that she was willing to talk about it openly and access the support that was available to her.

My own not wanting to address it [was one of the biggest obstacles]. I think that I didn't want to address it because it's portrayed so negatively... You don't want to address it because addressing it is not viewed as a positive thing. It's wasting time and that means you're not succeeding because successful people would have just been able to succeed on their own (Krista).

Thus, there have been a number of challenges that Krista has faced along her journey through the education system, including social and emotional challenges, a lack of understanding and support for these needs, a later diagnosis, and the financial burden of trying to address some of her social needs.

### **Capacities and Resources that Have Helped**

Despite these ongoing challenges, Krista graduated from high school and completed an undergraduate degree in history and a Teaching English as a Second Language program. After working in the ESL field for a number of years, she returned to university to pursue studies in social work at the graduate level. Both Krista and her mother identified a number of capacities and resources that have helped Krista over the years.

**Determination and effort.** On an individual level, there are a number of personal capacities and characteristics that Krista and her family identify as having helped her through the years. First and foremost, she is a determined and driven individual, what her sister describes as "stubborn". When she sets her mind on a specific goal, she will not let herself be deterred. Krista was determined to go to university and did not want to limit any of her options, and she insisted on taking advanced math classes in high school even though they were extremely difficult for her. She narrowed her focus onto this challenge and worked at it to ensure that she

succeeded, seeking out and going for extra help during the school year and taking summer courses when needed.

**Resourcefulness.** Krista is also very resourceful and has been able to observe her environment to see what services are available and could be of benefit to her. In high school she saw that other students went to a resource room for support, and she took the initiative to go there to obtain help in math without an IEP. She realized that assistance was available and she went ahead and accessed it without any direction from her mother or the school staff. Krista makes her own opportunities and is not afraid to go after what she feels she is entitled to. As her mother recalls, “she would go for an extra period sometimes to work on her math, but she didn’t need me to do that kind of stuff. She was really good at coordinating stuff”. Krista wanted to go to university and realized that she would have to have accommodations and support in order to do that.

Initially, Krista did not accept her diagnosis and was not ready to come to terms with it, but when she was finally ready to accept it, she started to do some research on nonverbal learning disabilities and she persevered even though there was not much information available. She found resources on her own and made the connections to Asperger’s syndrome and mental health issues that helped her better understand her own experiences. This acceptance and understanding helped her come to better terms with not only the academic effects of her disability, but also the social and emotional aspects as well. As Krista states, “I felt like for me the label was really important... When you’ve got it, you know where to start and you can start figuring things out and you know what kinds of things you can do”. As she came to terms with her disability and gathered more information on it, she came to perceive it differently which helped her a lot.

I'm not seeing it as a deficit or a disability but seeing it as an actual difference. Like there are lots of different types of brains and I think there always has been. It's just now we're seeing it as normal and fine (Krista).

**Family support.** Krista and her family also identified a number of ecological resources that they feel contributed to her success. Family support has been the most important and consistent form of support in her life. She is very close to her mother and her sister and she leans on them for different kinds of support: emotional, academic, practical, and financial. As her mother says,

The role for parents is to be an unwavering source of positive regard and support. You know there is a need, not just academic, not just personal, not just any one of those things, but to help them figure everything out (Madelaine).

Aside from her immediate family, Krista also received a great deal of support from her aunt who recommended and arranged the psycho-educational testing. Without her aunt recommending the assessment, Krista feels as though she would not have the success that she has experienced.

I'll say what helped me was having an aunt who is a psychologist. If I didn't have her I wouldn't have gotten any of those things and I probably wouldn't know now that I have a learning disability or how I would have ever come to that (Krista).

**Resources in the community.** Krista's aunt Barbara also directed her towards Caroline, her disabilities coach. Caroline is someone that Krista can talk with about her learning disabilities and the challenges and frustrations that come with them. Caroline has the knowledge and expertise to help her work through any issues that arise and she can provide her with the strategies and actions that will help her. Krista, her mother, and her sister all consider Caroline to be her biggest source of support at this point in her life.

Overall, Krista's success seems to come from a combination of these ecological supports and the personal capacities that have enabled her to take advantage of them.

### **Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities**

Krista was not diagnosed with learning disabilities until she was in grade 12. Because it happened so late for her, it was not something that she grew up with or that was part of her in any way. She had completed most of her secondary education when she was suddenly given this label of nonverbal learning disabilities. For Krista, it was difficult to accept this label and to process what it meant. While she resisted it initially, she eventually started to come to terms with the diagnosis as she started to learn more about it. Krista reports that it has not been until recently, until this past year when she has been in the social work program and working with her disability coach, that she has been able to fully process it and understand what having learning disabilities means. That is a long journey of almost 15 years.

Krista grapples with the label "learning disabilities", or in her case nonverbal learning disabilities. On one hand, she does not like being labeled with a "disability" or a deficit that appears to make her less capable or able than her peers. On the other hand, however, this label gave her a place to start looking for the reasons for some of her experiences. Having an accurate label allowed her to research and explore her disability and for Krista, the knowledge that she accumulated empowered her to help herself.

**CHAPTER NINE**  
**CROSS CASE ANALYSIS**

The five profiles that were presented in the preceding chapters reveal students' personal journeys through the education system from the perspectives of the students and their families. The focus of their narratives is the challenges they faced and the capacities and resources they feel helped them along the way. Their stories reveal the struggles and successes they have encountered over the years as they worked to complete their education. While each student's story is unique, there are some common themes and perspectives that emerge. The following cross case analysis will compare and contrast the five experiences and identify these common themes. The information is summarized in a table at the start of each section.

### **Early Life Experiences**

All of the participants came from close families and reported having especially close relationships with their mothers. Their mothers assumed many of the important roles in the participants' lives, as they were the ones who sought out help for them initially, explained their learning disabilities to them, advocated for them at school, tutored them and helped them with their homework, encouraged them and set goals for them, and provided them with emotional and financial support. Both Kathleen's mother and Amy's mother battled cancer when they were growing up. Kathleen's mother was first diagnosed when Kathleen was an infant. The cancer returned when Kathleen was starting high school, and even though it is in remission, she saw the toll that it took on Kathleen. Amy's mother was first diagnosed around the time that Amy was diagnosed with her learning disabilities. While she went into remission at the time, she later relapsed and eventually passed away from it when Amy was in middle school. Because of this, Amy's father stepped into the role of primary caregiver and came to play a more significant role in her life as she became older. Kathleen's father has recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and the two of them seem to be growing closer as a result.

Table 3  
Early Life Experiences

Amy	Mark	Kathleen	Paul	Krista
<p>Mother, father, 2 older brothers Close to family</p>	<p>Mother, father, 3 older brothers Close to parents (especially mother) and relationship has grown over time with brothers</p>	<p>Mother, father, no siblings Close to both parents: mother is action oriented, father is comforting</p>	<p>Mother, father, no siblings Very close to mother Father not as involved Parents separated when he was 13</p>	<p>Mother, father, older sister Close to mother, sister like a second mother Parents separated when she was 7</p>
<p>Close to grandparents and cousins</p>	<p>Close to extended family</p>	<p>Close to maternal grandparents</p>	<p>Not much extended family - isolated</p>	<p>Close to aunts on mother's side</p>
<p>Not many friends when young, but always had 1 or 2 close friends Friends are important to her Mother diagnosed with cancer when she was in grade 3 and then passed away when she was in middle school</p>	<p>Not many friends until high school One close friend since middle school Behavior difficulties from untreated ADHD when young</p>	<p>No real friends until high school Bullying was an issue Friends are important in her life now Traumatic birth Epilepsy from 2 years to 13 years of age Mother had cancer twice</p>	<p>Not a lot of friends until middle school Bullying was an issue  Traumatic birth</p>	<p>Not a lot of friends or close connections outside of her family</p>
<p>Hockey, swimming, soccer, scouts</p>	<p>Not involved in sports like his brothers, but involved in drama later</p>	<p>Many different activities: gymnastics, fencing, camps</p>	<p>Many different activities: film, drama, gymnastics, music, camps</p>	<p>Tended to isolate herself and just focused on school</p>

The family constellations of the participants are quite varied, but there are some important similarities. Kathleen and Paul are only children, while Mark has three older brothers, Amy has two older brothers, and Krista has one older sister. The commonality among them is that all of the student participants are either the youngest child or the only child in their families. In the cases of Krista and Mark, they are the youngest by quite a few years, as Krista's sister is seven years older than her and Mark's brothers range from four to eight years older than him. Consequently, they all recall receiving considerable time and attention from their parents when they were growing up. Two of the participants' parents separated when they were younger – Paul's parents separated when he was 13 years old and Krista's parents separated when she was seven years old. In both cases, the participants lived with their mothers who remained the primary caregivers, as they did not have much contact with their fathers.

Four of the five participants reported having strong connections with their extended families as well. They remember having supportive grandparents and aunts or uncles who spent time with them and made them feel special. While Paul was very close to his mother, they were a little more isolated from other family members and thus he did not have the same level of family support that the other participants did.

Although all of the participants had supportive families, most went through some difficult times in their early lives that they feel brought them closer to their families. As noted earlier, both Amy and Kathleen's mothers had cancer when they were children, with Amy ending up losing her mother when she was in middle school. Both Kathleen and Paul had traumatic births, which made their mothers feel very protective towards them as they were growing up. Additionally, Kathleen was diagnosed with epilepsy when she was just two years old. She and her family went through a lot as they dealt with its effects and the side effects of the medication

that she had to take to control it. There were many challenges in her early life that they attribute to her epilepsy.

Four of the participants, Amy, Kathleen, Mark, and Paul reported that their parents had enrolled them in a lot of extracurricular activities when they were growing up and they felt that this involvement helped them a lot. It developed their self-confidence and allowed them to feel good about themselves even when things were not going well at school.

Overall, all of the participants came from close, supportive families. Many of them went through difficult times, but these challenges seemed to bring them closer. While peer relationships did not come easily to them, over time four of the five participants developed close friendships as they grew older and now consider friends an important part of their lives.

### **Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis**

Academically, most of the participants had difficulties in their early years at school. Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul all struggled with the basic reading and writing skills that are so much the focus in elementary school. Mark and Kathleen also had the additional challenge of attentional difficulties which impacted on their ability to focus on their school work and interact with their teachers and peers. Krista did not encounter these academic challenges until she got older, but she did require a lot of support at home to help her be successful in her math courses even in the elementary school grades. These academic challenges led to feelings of frustration in the participants and to negative evaluations of themselves as learners, as they all talked about social comparisons and feeling as though they did not measure up to their peers. All of the participants were aware that they were struggling with the concepts and tasks that seemed to come so much more easily for their peers and their siblings. These feelings of frustration and failure resonated strongly throughout their narratives. Because of the medication she was taking

Table 4  
Early School Experiences before the Diagnosis

Amy	Mark	Kathleen	Paul	Krista
<p>Difficulty with printing, spelling, and writing School recommended special class Frustration from not being able to do what her peers could do</p>	<p>Could not control his behaviour – got in trouble and was put out in hall a lot Frustration, anger at self, talked of killing self</p>	<p>Could not attend or pay attention in class – School recommended special class Does not remember the early years due to medication</p>	<p>Very bright but could not learn the basic skills that were easy for peers Frustration from not being able to learn what he was interested in and at finding the basics challenging</p>	<p>No support at school – needed considerable support at home Frustration from not being able to do the work and that she had to spend so much time on homework</p>
<p>One or two good friends - shy</p>	<p>Social difficulties due to behaviour – isolated / excluded from peers when young</p>	<p>Socially isolated – medication for epilepsy kept her in world of her own Bullied Speech therapy, occupational therapy, social worker</p>	<p>Social difficulties - did not get along well with peers and did not understand social conventions Bullied Speech therapy, occupational therapy</p>	<p>Social difficulties - did not get along well with peers And did not understand social conventions Not a lot of friends</p>
<p>Speech therapy, occupational therapy</p>				

for her epilepsy, Kathleen does not have much recollection of her elementary school years, but her mother reported how difficult it was for her at school.

Socially, most of the participants experienced difficulties as well. They generally reported that they did not have a lot of friends and had trouble interacting with their peers. Paul and Krista, both of whom were diagnosed with nonverbal learning disabilities, recollect that they did not have a good understanding of social conventions and how they were supposed to interact with their peers when they were younger. Mark attributes most of his early social difficulties to his ADHD and the pattern of behavior that it created: his impulsive behaviour caused friction with the teacher, the teacher sent him out of the room, and being out of the room meant he was excluded from the group and isolated from his peers. Like Paul and Krista, he wanted friends but did not know how to make these connections. Kathleen describes her elementary school years as “being in a world of her own” because of her medication. Consequently, she was not able to establish any close ties with her peers during this period. Amy was the only participant who established some enduring friendships during these early years, one with her next door neighbour and another with a classmate at school.

For some of the participants, there were some supports in place to help them in school before they were formally diagnosed with their learning disabilities. Amy, Kathleen, and Paul all received speech and language therapy through the school and some occupational therapy to work on their fine motor skills. Mark and Krista, however, did not receive any support, academic or otherwise, at school until after they had been formally diagnosed. The challenges the participants faced and the lack of support they received led the parents in this study to seek support on their own. They all had assessments done by a private psychologist, even though it was a considerable expense for the family.

Table 5  
Diagnosis

Amy	Mark	Kathleen	Paul	Krista
<p>Diagnosed with language based LDs in grade 3 Testing done privately Parents had a positive reaction - knew what it was and how to help Researched, read, talked with LDAO and school board</p>	<p>Diagnosed with language based LDs in grade 1 Testing done privately Mother had a positive reaction - knew what it was and how to help Researched, read about it Harder for father</p>	<p>Diagnosed with language based LDs in kindergarten Testing done privately Parents had a positive reaction - epilepsy had prepared them Wanted to go beyond doctors' expectations Researched, read, talked with LDAO</p>	<p>Diagnosed with nonverbal LDs in grade 1 Testing done privately Mother had a positive reaction Researched, read, attended conferences, talked with LDAO Took initiative to get supports in place</p>	<p>Diagnosed with nonverbal LDs in grade 12 Testing done privately Mother felt guilt that she did not recognize the symptoms earlier</p>
<p>Positive reaction - she understood her difficulties Parents very open about it and explained it positively Went to meeting with the psychologist</p>	<p>Too young at first, but as he got older his mother explained it to him in a positive way</p>	<p>Too young at first, but as she got older her mother explained it to her as she would have to work a little harder than others to understand things</p>	<p>Too young at first, but his mother was very open about it with him</p>	<p>It took her quite awhile to accept it</p>
<p>Support from psychologist, LDAO, school board, teacher, books and articles</p>	<p>Support from mother's sister, books, LDAO</p>	<p>Support from mother's mother, books, LDAO</p>	<p>Support from director at LDAO, psychologist, books, journals, conferences</p>	<p>Support from mother's sister who was a psychologist</p>
<p>Brought report to school and met with teachers School wanted to place her in a specialized class, but parents fought to keep her regular class</p>	<p>Met with teachers right away to go over report, but teachers were not receptive New school (grade 2) was much more receptive</p>	<p>School wanted to place her in specialized class, but parents disagreed Moved to a new school Shared results without disclosing actual scores</p>	<p>Shared report with teachers and brought the psychologist in to the school to share results and strategies</p>	<p>Shared test results with teachers and brought the psychologist into the school</p>

## **Diagnosis**

All of the participants, except for one, were diagnosed with their learning disabilities early on in their academic journeys. Kathleen was diagnosed in kindergarten, Mark and Paul were diagnosed when they were in grade one, and Amy was diagnosed when she was in grade three. Early diagnosis and intervention had a positive impact on the participants' understanding and acceptance of their learning disabilities. Their parents saw how difficult school was for them and actively sought out help. Krista, who was diagnosed much later when she was 16 years old and in her final year of high school, had a more difficult time accepting her learning disabilities.

Initially the parents were upset that their children had these learning challenges, but they all expressed relief at knowing the reasons for the challenges and knowing that there was a way to help them. Once they knew what it was and how they could best help their children, they actively worked to support them. Amy's, Mark's, Kathleen's, and Paul's parents researched learning disabilities by reading books and articles, by going to conferences and workshops, and by talking with experts within their community such as learning disabilities association directors, teachers, and school board personnel. Krista's mother tried to learn about learning disabilities by reading books and talking with her sister who was a psychologist, but her predominant reaction was a feeling of guilt that she had not considered the possibility of learning disabilities earlier.

The differences seen in the parents' reactions to their children's diagnosis had an impact on how they shared the information with the participants. The parents of children who had an early diagnosis were very open about it with their children. Initially Mark, Kathleen, and Paul were too young to learn all the details, but as they matured their parents shared more information with them. Amy was there for some of her family's initial feedback meeting with the psychologist, and as they got older and had subsequent assessments Kathleen and Paul also attended feedback

sessions to learn about their learning disabilities first hand. For all of the participants who were diagnosed early, their parents tried to report it to them in as positive a manner as possible, always stressing how intelligent they were and pointing out their strengths and talents. They let them know that because they learned differently than many of their peers, they might have to work harder than their classmates to attain their goals, but that they could successfully reach whatever goals they set.

Consequently, for the participants who had their learning disabilities identified early, the typical sequence of events was as follows: (1) the parents were initially upset about the diagnosis, but by educating themselves and arming themselves with information they developed a good understanding of learning disabilities and their children's learning profiles, (2) the parents came to terms with the diagnosis, (3) the parents shared the diagnosis with their children and talked about it openly with them, and (4) the children developed an accurate understanding of themselves as learners and accepted their learning disabilities. For Krista, who was diagnosed much later, this sequence of events did not run as smoothly. After the diagnosis was made, her mother felt guilty for not taking action sooner and Krista was in denial. Over time, Krista took it upon herself to learn more about nonverbal learning disabilities, and with this knowledge, she is now starting to accept and come to terms with her disabilities and with herself as a learner.

Another difference that was seen among the participants was among their diagnoses. Three of the five participants were diagnosed with language based learning disabilities (Amy, Mark, Kathleen), while the remaining two were diagnosed with nonverbal learning disabilities (Paul, Krista). The three participants with the language based learning disabilities experienced more academic difficulties (e.g., reading, writing), especially early on, while the two participants diagnosed with nonverbal learning disabilities struggled more socially.

Table 6  
School Experiences after the Diagnosis

Amy	Mark	Kathleen	Paul	Krista
<p>Elementary: withdrawal support for part of the day Effective and beneficial for these years – focused and challenging She saw the benefit Middle school: started with withdrawal but it was not a good fit Returned to regular class Not as much support</p>	<p>Elementary: withdrawal support for part of the day Effective – built his skills and his confidence but he did not want to be withdrawn Middle school: continued with withdrawal support but did not like it – mother insisted and it was good in the long run</p>	<p>Elementary: combination of in class (EA) and withdrawal support Parents preferred in class support  Middle school: less support in middle school A lot of social issues - bullying</p>	<p>Elementary: withdrawal support for part of the day  Middle school: moved to alternative school where it was all in-class support Much better fit for him and he developed some friendships</p>	<p>Elementary: no support in elementary school – not identified yet  Middle school: no support in middle school – not identified yet</p>
<p>High school Accommodations: extra time, alternate setting for tests, computer Some difficulties with teachers Some supportive teachers, but some that did not understand LDs – guidance counselor Parents advocated with school but passed it on to her as she got older Parents helped with homework</p>	<p>High school Accommodations: extra time, alternate setting for tests, computer Some difficulties with teachers Some supportive teachers, but some that did not understand LDs – grade 1, guidance counselor Mother advocated with school Mother helped with homework but this lessened as he got older</p>	<p>High school Accommodations: extra time, alternate setting for tests, computer Friendships developing Some supportive teachers – grade 12 teacher made her use computer and it helped Mother was a strong advocate – not intimidated Parents helped with homework and studying</p>	<p>High school Accommodations: extra time, alternate setting for tests, computer High school for the arts Support for organization Some supportive teachers – high school resource teacher supported him and mother Mother was a strong advocate – very involved with school even in high school Helped with organization</p>	<p>High school Accommodations: extra time, alternate setting for tests, computer Isolated herself from peers Some supportive teachers, but they did not seem to understand LDs after her diagnosis Mother tried to advocate at the school Helped with homework a lot, especially math</p>

### **School Experiences after the Diagnosis**

Once they received the diagnosis from the psychologist, all of the parents brought the report and its recommendations to the school in order to inform the teachers and make some plans for their children. Paul's mother and Krista's mother brought the psychologist into the school to talk with the teachers directly. Most of the schools were receptive to the recommendations that were made by the psychologist. The only teachers who did not respond well to the recommendations were at Mark's school in Quebec. When he and his family moved to another city the following year, however, they received much more support from not only his grade two teacher but from the administration as well. Two of the families (Amy and Kathleen) were encouraged to put their children into specialized classes, but in both cases the parents fought against it. In the end, Amy stayed in the regular program and Kathleen's parents transferred to another school system so that she could remain in the regular class with her peers. Consequently, all of the participants in this study were educated in regular classrooms for their schooling – none of them attended a specialized class.

In the elementary years, four of the participants, Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul, received a combination of in-class and withdrawal support in language arts and math. While all of the participants saw the benefit of being withdrawn to work within a smaller group, two of them had mixed feelings at the time. Mark did not want to be withdrawn at all and he fought hard against it with his parents. They persevered, though, and made the decision that he would continue to receive this more intensive level of support because they felt that he needed it in order to succeed academically. Kathleen usually enjoyed the small group support, but there was one resource teacher with whom she did not get along.

When the participants moved into middle school, they all reported that the support changed. While most of the students found that the level of support decreased and that they remained in the regular classroom for all of their subjects, both Amy and Mark continued to be withdrawn for special programming in both language arts and math. Amy found that the assistance was not as effective as it had been in elementary school, and she returned to the regular class for the full day part way through the first year. Mark also returned to the regular class after two years of withdrawal support. While most of the participants found that the level of support in middle school declined in both intensity and efficacy, Paul experienced just the opposite. He transferred to an alternative school for middle school where all of the support was provided in the classroom, and he found this to be a much better fit for him, both academically and socially. Krista did not have a diagnosis of learning disabilities in middle school, and consequently received no academic support.

At the high school level, all of the participants continued in the regular academic program except for Paul. He went to a special high school for the arts, but still participated in the regular academic program. The four participants who had been receiving support up until this time reported that the level of support decreased significantly at this level. In high school, there was no longer any extra support for the participants, just accommodations for tests and exams (extra time and an alternate setting) and the opportunity to use a computer in class. Krista, who was formally diagnosed with learning disabilities when she was in high school, received these same accommodations. Paul did receive some organizational support from the learning support teacher during his first year of high school, but it did not continue in the other years. In terms of receiving extra academic support, the participants reported that this varied depending on the

teacher. Some teachers were willing to work with students outside of class time to help them learn the material, but others were not.

Throughout their educational journeys, the participants' parents, particularly their mothers, were strong advocates for them within the school system. They communicated with the school, met with the teachers, attended IPRC meetings, had input into their IEPs, and confronted school personnel when the IEPs were not followed. As the students grew older, however, their parents' advocacy roles decreased. The students began to assume more responsibility for their learning in terms of completing their assignments and requesting accommodations from their teachers. While all of the students reported this transfer of responsibility, Mark and Amy in particular recall that their parents actively encouraged them and explicitly taught them how to advocate for themselves. For the others it was a more unconscious adoption of the behaviour their parents had modeled for them over the years. Consequently, all of the participants developed their own self-advocacy skills.

### **Transition to University**

After graduating from high school, all of the participants were accepted into a post-secondary program. The programs they selected, however, varied according to their interests, abilities, and learning needs. Amy selected a combined political science and human rights program with small class sizes, Mark selected a psychology program at a local university, Paul selected a film production program in a city approximately five hours away, Krista was accepted into a general arts program at a nearby university, and Kathleen registered in a general program at a nearby college. While most of the participants experienced a smooth transition into their programs, Kathleen did not have a good experience at college. She struggled academically and the college

Table 7  
Transition to University

<b>Amy</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Kathleen</b>	<b>Paul</b>	<b>Krista</b>
Human rights / Political Science (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	Psychology (final year)	Psychology / criminology (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	Film production (4 <sup>th</sup> year)	Social work (Masters)
No formal transition plan from school	No formal transition plan from school	No formal transition plan from school	No formal transition plan from school	No formal transition plan from school
She and parents did it on their own	He and parents did it on their own – his older brothers helped	She and parents did it on their own	He and his mother did it on their own	She and her mother did it on their own
Registered immediately with student services for accommodations	Registered later with student services for accommodations	Started at college but transferred to university Registered immediately with student services for accommodations University better support than college	Registered immediately with student services for accommodations with mother's prompting	Difficult start - missed first semester Registered with student services More support available in graduate program
Accommodations for extra time and alternate setting for exams and computer	Accommodations for extra time and alternate setting for exams and computer	Accommodations for extra time and alternate setting for exams and computer	Accommodations for extra time and alternate setting for exams and computer	Accommodations for extra time and alternate setting for exams and computer
Most profs supportive but two negative experiences	Most profs supportive One negative encounter, but it led him to student services	Writing is still difficult Had a lot of negative experiences in college, but university has been fine	No issues with professors	Finds graduate program more accommodating than undergraduate
Has made new friends in university and now they are a main support	Maintained friends from high school	Has made new friends who are important sources of support	Has made new friends at university	Has made acquaintances in Masters, but no true friendships

was not willing to provide the basic accommodations that she had received in high school. As a result, she transferred to a nearby university during her second year.

Two of the participants, Amy and Mark, decided to attend a local university so that they could live at home. The other three, however, selected programs outside their cities. Consequently, Kathleen, Paul, and Krista all had to deal with moving away from home for the first time while they adjusted to the academic requirements and living independently. Kathleen and Paul fared well, as they both maintained close contact with their families so that they could continue to rely on them for support. The adjustment was more difficult for Krista, as her lack of social experience left her feeling quite isolated. None of the participants had a formal transition plan in place to help them with this transition from high school to university or college, and they reported doing most of the planning and preparation for their post-secondary applications with their families rather than with their teachers in high school. Additionally, there was not a lot of information provided to them about the supports and services that could be available to them at the university level. The exception to this was Amy, as she attended some information sessions at the local universities that had been arranged by her school. While all of the participants ended up registering with the universities' centres for student with disabilities, only two, Amy and Kathleen, did it right away. Mark, Paul, and Krista were all reluctant to register at the centres at their universities, and it was only with their parents' or professors' urging that they did.

Once they registered at their universities' centres for students with disabilities, the participants reported that they were eligible to receive accommodations similar to what they had received in high school, such as extra time and an alternate space for exams and the use of computers in class. All of the participants were surprised at how easy their universities made the registration process. They reported that the centres liaised with their professors and provide

letters documenting the accommodations that were on their IEPs. While all of the participants generally had positive interactions and experiences with their professors, Amy, Mark, and Krista had a few negative experiences at the university level and Kathleen had negative experiences at the college level.

All of the participants commented that friendships have been an important part of their post-secondary life. Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul all reported that they now turn to friends for emotional support. Their friends relate to what they are going through and know how to support them when they need a break or someone to talk with. Krista still tends to go to her mother and sister for emotional support, although in her current program she has also been finding more support through the disabilities coach with whom she has been working.

At the time of the interviews, most of the participants were nearing the end of their degrees. Mark was completing his BA and had a permanent job offer with the government. Amy was in the final year of her BA and was considering applying to some graduate level programs when she finished. Kathleen still had one to two years remaining in her psychology program, but was also considering the possibility of continuing at graduate level. Paul was in the final year of film production program and was eager to gain more work experience in his field. Krista, who had already spent five years working as an ESL teacher after graduation, had returned to university and was half way through her Masters in social work.

### **Challenges over the Years**

The participants reported a number of challenges that they faced over the years due to their learning disabilities, some common to all or some of the participants and some unique.

**Academic challenges.** All of the participants discussed the academic challenges they faced in school and the feelings of frustration that came with them. Kathleen, Amy, Mark, and Krista

Table 8  
Challenges over the Years

<b>Amy</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Kathleen</b>	<b>Paul</b>	<b>Krista</b>
Mother had cancer and passed away when she was in middle school	Undiagnosed and untreated ADHD in early years	Epilepsy as a child Mother had 2 episodes of cancer	Parents separated when he was 13 years old	Parents separated when she was 7 years old
Academic challenges in spelling and writing	Academic challenges in reading and writing	Academic challenges, especially in writing	Academic challenges Disorganization	Academic challenges in math and writing
	Withdrawal support in early years excluded him from his peers	Social difficulties when she was young	Social challenges and lack of friendships in early years	Social difficulties interacting with peers and lack of friendships
	Talked of killing himself when he was in kindergarten	Bullied Counseling when her mother had cancer	Bullying Counseling for anxiety after parents' separation	Emotional difficulties – anxiety, depression
Lack of academic support in later years				Lack of support for her academic challenges
Lack of understanding of LDs from teachers, education system, society	Lack of understanding of LDs from teachers	Lack of understanding of LDs from teachers and society		Lack of understanding of LDs from professors
		Lack of support at college level		Financial challenges of paying for supports

all identified writing difficulties as one of their biggest academic challenges. They recalled the difficulty they had, and still have, transferring their ideas from their minds to the page and then organizing and structuring their ideas into meaningful texts. While the assistive technology that they use can help them with spelling and editing, they all had to learn how to construct their essays. While Paul identified writing as a challenge early on in his schooling, he is now quite proud of his writing.

**Lack of academic support.** Three of the participants highlighted the lack of support that was available to them in the schools for their academic challenges. For both Amy and Krista, this lack of support occurred at a number of levels, including middle school, high school, and university. For Kathleen, however, the lack of support occurred mainly at the college level. Interestingly, Mark reported a different situation. He felt that once he arrived in Ontario, he received a great deal of academic support through the schools. In retrospect, he is aware that the withdrawal support he received at the elementary and middle school levels was important for him academically, but he feels that it had some negative effects as well, as it excluded and isolated him from his peers at times.

**Social and emotional challenges.** Social challenges, like those faced by Mark, were also reported by a number of the participants. Paul and Krista, both of whom were diagnosed with nonverbal learning disabilities, recounted feeling disconnected from their peers and not having many close friendships. While Paul started to establish some friendships by the time he entered middle school, Krista still has very few social connections. The side effects of Kathleen's epilepsy medication prevented her from interacting with her peers until she was in middle school. While Amy reported being shy, she did have some solid friendships from an early age. Krista also identified some emotional challenges that she faced as a result of her learning

disabilities. As she reflected on her life, she identified ongoing experiences of anxiety and what she believes may have been periods of depression.

**Lack of understanding of learning disabilities.** In addition to the academic challenges that they faced in school, all of the participants reported that some of their teachers and professors did not have an accurate understanding of learning disabilities. This impacted on the efficacy of the support that they provided to the participants and played a role in how they interacted with them. Both Amy and Paul feel that some of their teachers' mis-understandings about learning disabilities interfered with the support that they provided. For Amy, it occurred at the middle school level when she was being withdrawn for language and math support. The work was too easy for her and she felt as though she missed out on some valuable learning opportunities. For Paul, it occurred at the elementary level when he was being given very simple tasks to do, such as copying out texts to strengthen his fine motor skills without being challenged to think critically about what he was reading and writing. Some participants faced these challenges at the high school level, as both Amy and Mark had upsetting encounters with their guidance counselors whose recommendations seemed ill-informed.

**Additional challenges.** In addition to all of these challenges that the participants reported as having accompanied their learning disabilities, some of them reported some additional challenges in their lives. Both Amy and Katheen had to witness their mothers fighting cancer when they were young, and Amy actually lost her mother when she was in middle school. These experiences alone are traumatic and difficult to deal with. Additionally, Kathleen was diagnosed with epilepsy when she was just two years old and was treated with very strong medication for it until she was in middle school. The side effects of the medication kept her isolated in her own world, and thus had a significant impact on her early development and socialization. Mark's

additional diagnosis of ADHD was another challenge with which he had to contend, especially the years before it was diagnosed. His mother recalled just how difficult those times were for him, as she painfully remembered him talking about killing himself. Both Kathleen and Paul reported being rejected by their peers and bullied in elementary school, which on its own can have damaging effects. This bullying combined with his parents' separation created a great deal of anxiety for Paul and consequently, he saw a counselor during this time.

Thus, all of the participants have had to contend with a number of challenges in their lives, some directly related to their learning disabilities and some in other areas of their lives.

### **Capacities and Resources that have Helped**

In sharing the story of their educational journeys with the researcher, the participants revealed the things that helped them advance through their schooling and transition into a post-secondary program. Their stories revealed a number of personal capacities and characteristics that helped them achieve their goals, as well as some ecological resources that helped them along their journeys.

**Personal capacities.** The key personal capacity identified by the participants was a sense of determination and a willingness to work hard. All of the participants reported the challenges that they faced academically, but they were all determined to succeed and were willing to put in the necessary effort. This resonated most powerfully through the narratives of Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Krista, as they all had to persevere through long hours of homework and tutoring just to learn the basic skills. Being goal-oriented was another important capacity that contributed to their success. All of the participants knew from an early age that they wanted to attend university, and they all were committed to achieving that goal. Mark even went against his teacher's advice, taking high school summer courses to ensure that he was eligible for the

Table 9  
Capacities and Resources that have Helped

<b>Amy</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Kathleen</b>	<b>Paul</b>	<b>Krista</b>
Determination Hard working - willing to put in time and practice (like in sports)	Determination Perseverance despite challenges	Determination and willingness to work hard	Determination Self-confidence Creativity and inquisitive nature – wants to learn	Determination and drive to succeed
Goal orientation – determination to succeed and meet goals Competitiveness Awareness and understanding of her LDs and herself as a learner Willingness to talk about her LDs and advocate for herself from a young age	Goal orientation - determination to meet his goals and go to university Awareness and understanding of his LDs and himself as a learner Willingness to talk about his LDs and advocate for himself as he matured	Goal orientation - set high goals and worked to go to university Awareness and understanding of her LDs and herself as a learner Willingness to talk about her LDs and advocate for herself as she matured	Goal orientation - he pursued his goal to work in films from a young age Awareness and understanding of his LDs and himself as a learner	Goal orientation – determined to go to university and worked to make sure she did Took some time, but she came to understand and accept her LDs Willingness to talk about her LDs and advocate for herself as she matured and had a better understanding
Willingness to use supports available to her	Willingness to use supports available to him	Willingness to use supports available to her	Willingness to use supports available to him	Willingness to use supports available to her
Family support from her mother and father	Family support especially from his mother	Family support especially from her mother	Family support especially from his mother	Family support from her mother and sister
Parents advocated for her and taught her to advocate for herself	Mother advocated for him at school and he started when he was older	Mother advocated for her at school	Mother advocated for him at school	She advocated for herself at school
Friendships and peer support	Peer support as he matured	Peer support at the university level	Support from friends from middle school onwards	

---

Support from some teachers - resource teacher in elementary school, math / language teachers in high school	Support from school and teachers - grade 2 teacher stands out	Support from extended family - grandmother	Support from teachers and coaches	Seeks out and finds support she needs - math support in high school and disabilities coach in university
Extra curricular activities Travel through school Part-time job in university	Part-time job in high school and university	Extracurricular activities Travel and jobs over the summers	Extracurricular activities Jobs and work experience over the summers	Travel after high school
Tutoring when younger	Tutoring when younger	Tutoring when younger	Tutoring when younger	Tutoring when younger

---

university level courses. Paul had the advantage of knowing that he wanted to pursue a career in film from an early age and was able to select specialized programs and work placements to support this goal.

Another personal capacity that was revealed through most of the participants' narratives was having an accurate understanding of their learning disabilities and an awareness of their strengths and challenges as a learner. This allowed them to see themselves realistically and to not be overwhelmed by negative feelings about their challenges. Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul were all diagnosed with their learning disabilities early in their lives, and their parents made sure to explain the diagnoses to them in the most positive and encouraging manner possible. Thus, they were able to accept their learning disabilities and themselves more easily. Having this self-acceptance and self-awareness developed their self-confidence and allowed them to assert themselves and explain their learning disabilities to others, which eventually led to the important skills of self-advocating. This acceptance did not come as easily for Krista, as she was diagnosed much later in life and her mother was not able to present it to her in as positive a light as the others, as she was blaming herself for not having recognized it earlier.

A final personal capacity that was revealed as being particularly important to the participants' wellbeing was a willingness to use the supports that were made available to them. All of the participants were willing to accept the support of their families, as well as the additional support added from teachers or tutors. Had they not be willing to take advantage of these opportunities, they would likely not be where they are today.

**Ecological resources.** In addition to these personal capacities, the participants also revealed some ecological resources that helped them throughout their educational journeys. The key ecological support came from the family, and the necessity of this support resonated strongly in

each participant's narrative. All of the participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for the support that they received from their families and from others. This support included assistance with their homework, help with organization, advocating on their behalf with their teachers, as well as emotional support and encouragement. For most of the participants this assistance came most strongly from their mothers, but for Amy it came from both her mother and her father.

While Kathleen and Mark assert that most of the active assistance came from their mothers, they both recall receiving emotional support and encouragement from their fathers. Similarly, Krista talked mostly about her mother's support, but also highlighted the importance of the support that she received from her older sister.

In addition to the strong support they received from their families, most of the participants also talked about the emotional backing they received from their friends. Thus, peer support was another important source of ecological support for the participants, particularly as they became older. Peers mostly provided emotional support, as the participants revealed that friends are the people they often turned to when they were feeling stressed about their school work or going through difficult times. While friendships did not come easily for most of the participants, Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul have all really come to value the friends they have made and report that they are often the people to whom they turn for emotional support now. Only Krista continues to be bolstered by family and her disabilities coach.

A final source of support identified by the participants was support from an adult outside the family. For Amy, this was an elementary resource teacher who worked with her over the summers. For Krista, this support came later in life through a disabilities coach that she hired to help her cope with the demands of her learning disabilities. Throughout the schooling, all of the participants had the opportunity to work with tutors, who helped them improve their lagging

skills and provided them with some additional encouragement. While most of the parents recognized that not everyone is able to afford private tutors, they felt fortunate to be able to provide them for their children.

A final ecological resource that was identified by some of the participants was extra-curricular activities and interests outside of school. These activities were an important part of the lives of Amy, Kathleen, and Paul in particular. Their parents made sure that they were involved in special activities where they could have the opportunity to develop interests, skills, and friendships outside the school setting. Amy was involved in hockey from elementary school right through to university, as well as Cubs and Scouts when she was younger. Her father took an active role in these activities, which strengthened their relationship as well. Kathleen's parents enrolled her in a variety of camps and activities during the school year, providing her with opportunities to develop her fine and gross motor skills and make some new friends for short periods of time. Paul's mother created similar opportunities for him over the years, choosing interesting areas such as fencing, music, and drama. Additionally, Amy, Kathleen, Paul, and Krista all found opportunities to travel as they were growing up, either through school trips or by going away to summer camps. Thus, most of the participants had experience trying new activities and meeting new people.

### **Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities**

All of the participants have come to view their learning disabilities as a learning difference rather than a "disability". They believe they are intelligent, capable learners who just happen to process and work through things in a different way. Thus for them, it is not a deficit but a different way of learning. They feel that society in general does not have an accurate

Table 10  
 Personal Understanding of Learning Disabilities

<b>Amy</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Kathleen</b>	<b>Paul</b>	<b>Krista</b>
It is a learning difference not a “disability” Society does not have an accurate understanding of LDs	It is a learning difference not a “disability” Society does not have an accurate understanding of LDs	It is a learning difference not a “disability” Society does not have an accurate understanding of LDs	It is a learning difference not a “disability” Society does not have an accurate understanding of LDs	It is a learning difference not a “disability” Society does not have an accurate understanding of LDs

understanding of learning disabilities and they want to help educate people and help other individuals who have learning disabilities.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the cross case analysis of the five cases. Each student's educational journey was unique and reflects their personal experiences as a student moving through the education system. Some common themes and perspectives emerged, however, to provide some insight into the challenges that they faced and the personal capacities and ecological resources that helped them along the way.

**CHAPTER 10**

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The preceding chapters presented a description of the participants' profiles and a comparative analysis of their narratives. This chapter briefly reviews the study and responds to the three guiding research questions. The themes that emerged from the data are described and discussed in relation to the literature and the conceptual framework that guided the study.

This retrospective, multiple case study explored the educational experiences of post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families and their perceptions of what challenged them along the way and what helped them reach their goals. Using a series of semi-structured, individual interviews the researcher sought to understand what helped these students succeed from the perspectives of the students themselves and their parents and siblings. Five post-secondary students who had been diagnosed with learning disabilities and representatives from their families participated in the study (four mothers, one father, two older brothers, and one older sister). It was hoped that the knowledge generated from this research would provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of students with learning disabilities and thus inform special education practice and policy. The use of Ungar's (2012) ecological conceptualization of resilience and the poly-vocal nature of the study allowed the researcher to focus on the processes and interactions occurring among the students and their environments that contributed to their success. The following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What were the lived educational experiences of students with learning disabilities as recalled by these students and their families when they were at the post-secondary level?
2. What capacities and resources did students with learning disabilities and their families identify as having helped them in school at both an individual and ecological level?
3. How did students with learning disabilities and their families conceptualize and make sense of their learning disabilities?

The data generated from the interviews provided rich descriptions of the students' and their families' experiences and their reflections on those experiences. The researcher created a personal narrative for each student by merging the voices of the family members who participated in the study. The data generated from each participant's interview or interviews were reviewed and coded so that the key ideas could be extracted and organized into specific themes. Then the data from the two (student and parent) or three (student, parent, and sibling) family members were combined into one narrative. Once each student's story had been told, a cross case analysis was conducted so that recurring themes could be identified. Unanticipated experiences and divergent cases were taken into account in the analysis as well. This chapter will describe and discuss the specific themes that emerged in the participants' stories in the context of Ungar's (2012) ecological theory of resilience, Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bio-ecological theory of development, and the extant literature. Research contributions and recommendations will be presented and discussed.

### **Research Question One: Educational Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities**

The first research question sought to explore and describe the lived educational experiences of students with learning disabilities from the perspectives of the students and their families. This question yielded the most salient findings, and thus it will receive the majority of the focus in the discussion.

While each participant's personal story was unique, the overarching path of their journeys revealed a number of commonalities. The challenges that they faced were by no means identical, but the participants and their families went through some similar experiences over the years as they identified and came to understand their learning disabilities. As the participants described their educational experiences, a number of common themes emerged within the courses of their

narratives, including: (1) early academic or socio-emotional challenges; (2) early diagnosis and intervention; (3) common family characteristics and parent support; (4) development of self-awareness and self-advocacy in the students over time; (5) goal setting and determination; (6) the important yet complex role of peers; and (7) the impact, both positive and negative, that teachers had on the students. Each of these themes will be examined in relation to the study's conceptual framework and the extant literature.

**Academic and socio-emotional challenges.** All of the participants reported experiencing some academic and socio-emotional challenges from an early age. Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul all struggled to learn the fundamental academic skills that are so much the focus of the early elementary curriculum: learning the letter names and sounds, reading, printing, and spelling. While Krista did not have difficulty learning these basic literacy skills, she always struggled with math and encountered challenges with writing when she was older. All of the participants reported feeling the frustration of not being able to learn what their classmates seemed to have mastered so easily. These academic difficulties are some of the key characteristics of learning disabilities (American Psychological Association, 2000), and researchers have consistently demonstrated that students with learning disabilities encounter more academic challenges than their peers (Al-Yagon and Mikulincer, 2004a; Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004b; Daniel et al., 2006).

In addition to these early academic challenges, the participants in the current study noted a number of social and emotional difficulties as well. Mark, Kathleen, Paul, and Krista all reported having difficulty making friends when they were younger, while Amy recalled being shy and only having a few friends. Additionally, Paul and Kathleen both remember being unaware of the social conventions that were expected of children their age and both described

experiences of outright peer rejection and bullying when they were in elementary school. The literature demonstrates that elementary school students with learning disabilities tend to report feeling lonelier than their peers and that their teachers perceive them as having more social problems than their classmates (Haager & Vaughn, 1995; Margalit, Tur-Kaspa, & Most, 1999; Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2000; Vaughn et al., 1993). Additionally, some of the participants experienced emotional difficulties, as Krista and Paul both recalled periods of anxiety when they were young and Mark's mother remembers him talking about taking his life when he was going through a difficult time in grade one. Elevated levels of anxiety and depression in students with learning disabilities have been reported by a number of researchers in the literature (Alexander-Passe, 2007; Feurer & Andrews, 2009; Wright-Strawderman & Watson, 1992; Palladino et al., 2000).

Within Ungar's (2012) resilience framework, the early academic and socio-emotional challenges that are associated with learning disabilities are conceptualized as the stress or adversity that students face. The concept of resilience is predicated on the existence of some kind of adversity in an individual's life – a stress or negative condition that puts the individual's development at risk. As Ungar (2012) asserts, “we can only speak of resilience in the presence of at least one stressor (p.1)”. Consequently, the learning disabilities with which the students were diagnosed and the challenges they presented are considered to be the stresses or adversities in the student participants' lives.

**Early diagnosis and intervention.** A second theme that emerged in the participants' narratives was the importance of early diagnosis and intervention for students with learning disabilities. Once parents were aware of the challenges their children were encountering, most of them acted quickly to determine what the problem was and how they could help. They made

arrangements to have their children tested by private psychologists in their communities, even though this could be quite costly. Consequently, Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul were tested and diagnosed with learning disabilities before the third grade. Because of this early diagnosis, all four of them received specialized support from the resource teachers at their schools and individual education plans were created to ensure that they received the accommodations and modified programming that they needed in the classroom. Thus, supports and accommodations were implemented quickly and before too much frustration and disillusionment could develop in the students. Krista was not diagnosed until grade 12 and she did not receive any formal accommodations or supports until then. Not having the same level of support as the other students did growing up may be one reason that she encountered more frustration over the years and faced more emotional challenges in her journey than the others. These findings are consistent with the learning disabilities literature which has established that early identification and intervention is one of the key factors in children's successful development (Litner, Mann-Feder, & Guerard, 2005; Shaywitz, 2003; Winzer, 2007).

The ability to identify academic challenges and implement the appropriate supports and interventions early in students' lives is predicated on good communication and interactions at both the microsystem and the mesosystem levels. At the microsystem level, parents need to be actively involved in their children's lives so that they are aware of any challenges that they are facing. Just as importantly, teachers need to be invested in their students so that they can detect when they are struggling and showing some of the early signs of learning disabilities. However, these isolated microsystem interactions may not be enough. The current study revealed that it was also the interactions that occurred at the mesosystem level between the home and the school that led to parents seeking help for their children. If left solely to the school, intervention would

likely not have occurred as quickly, as the waiting time for psychological assessments in the education system can be years. Similarly, the family microsystem needed input from the school in order to know the challenges their children were facing and to know to explore the next step of having their child assessed. Thus, reciprocal and ongoing communication between the home and school microsystems is essential for early intervention. An additional mesosystem level interaction that contributed to the students' early identification and intervention was the interaction that occurred between the parents and the psychologists in the community. This interaction allowed the parents to negotiate for and access the resources that they needed in order to help their children, in this case the psychological testing.

**Family characteristics and parent support.** A third and closely related theme that emerged in the participants' narratives was with regards to family characteristics and the role that the families played in building resilience with their children. All of the students came from stable, close-knit families. They reported that they spent quality time with their families when they were growing up and that their parents were an important source of support in their lives. Paul and Krista's parents separated when they were younger, and while they each had only limited contact with their fathers after the divorce, they both remained very close with their mothers. The family constellations were also similar, as all of the students were either only children (Paul and Kathleen) or the youngest child in the family (Amy, Mark, and Krista). Krista and Mark were the youngest by quite a few years, seven in Krista's case and four years in Mark's case, and thus they were like only children themselves in a lot of ways. Consequently, they received a lot of attention and support from their parents when growing up. While Amy, Mark, and Krista all described the typical rivalries and quarrels that occur among brothers and sisters and reported that they did not receive any special support from their siblings concerning their learning

disabilities when they were younger, none of them reported any significant discord or aggression within the family. Thus, all of the students came from close, supportive families and positive home environments. According to Ungar's (2012) resilience framework and Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bio-ecological theory of development, these positive interactions between the students and their parents and siblings facilitated the development of resilience at the microsystem level.

Other family characteristics helped facilitate resilience at the mesosystem level, as there were ongoing interactions between the students' parents and schools and among the students' parents, schools, and broader communities. All of the families had their children's assessments done through private psychologists in the community and they all brought the results into the school to ensure that the teachers understood their children's learning strengths and needs and that the psychologists' recommendations were implemented properly. Thus, in these cases there was a three-way interaction at the mesosystem level involving the parents, the school, and the community psychologists. Additionally, after receiving their children's diagnoses the parents in this study educated themselves by reading books and talking with experts in the community so that they could advocate for their children and make sure that the appropriate supports and accommodations were in place at school. Parents also provided support for their children in the home, by helping with their homework and arranging for additional tutoring in the community when necessary. Thus, interactions and relationships were occurring among different microsystems in the students' environments and these interactions contributed to their resilience.

Another family characteristic contributing to the student participants' resilience was that the majority of the students' parents had been university educated themselves and were professionals with stable careers. This afforded them the financial resources and the knowledge they needed to access private testing for their children, something that many families are not in a position to do.

Education was important to them and they passed this belief along to their children by encouraging them to do their best and by helping them with their work at home. Additionally, all of the parents revealed that they were comfortable working with the schools and communicating with their children's teachers. In most cases, these interactions were positive, as the parents were volunteering and spending time in the schools, but there were occasions for some of the families when they were not. For example, Mark's parents had some extremely negative interactions with his original school when his teacher refused to support or accommodate him in the classroom and both Kathleen's and Amy's parents fought with the schools to keep their children out of specialized classes. Not being intimidated by the school system allowed the parents to advocate for their children when they felt that they were not receiving the supports and accommodations to which they were entitled or when they felt that the schools were making decisions that were not in their children's best interest. The students saw their parents working collaboratively, and sometimes adversarially, with the schools. They were able to learn from these models in order to replicate the behaviours they saw in their own interactions with their teachers. Amy, for example, was able to stand up to one of her teachers and her father when she was in high school to ensure that she was in the appropriate French class, just as she had seen her parents stand up to her teachers when she was younger. Thus, as Ungar's (2012) ecological conceptualization of resilience posits, the interactions that occurred between parents and their children at the microsystem level and the interactions that the children witnessed between their parents and their teachers at the mesosystem level served to build the capacities necessary in order for them to negotiate for the resources they needed. While parents' active involvement in their children's education has consistently been shown to facilitate resilience in students with learning disabilities (Freeman et al., 2004; Goldberg et al., 2003;

Raskind et al., 1999), this more interactive relationship in which the skills and responsibilities are transferred from parent to child over time is a novel way to look at the connection.

**Development of self-awareness and self-advocacy in students over time.** While it was important for the parents in this study to support and advocate for their children when they were younger, it was also important that they help their children develop these skills themselves so that they could self-advocate as they matured. Thus, a fourth theme that emerged in the participants' narratives was the importance of developing self-advocacy skills. By communicating openly about their learning disabilities, parents helped their children develop an authentic understanding of themselves as learners which supported them in becoming advocates for their own needs when they were older. In order to do this, the parents required an accurate understanding of their children's learning disabilities themselves. The parents in the current study educated themselves about learning disabilities by reading books, taking courses, and talking with experts in the field. They then shared this knowledge with their children as it was appropriate, and the students came to have an accurate understanding of their learning disabilities and themselves as learners. This awareness allowed the students to accept themselves and their learning challenges over time and it made them more comfortable sharing this information with others. Krista, who was diagnosed later in life, did not develop this self-awareness and understanding as quickly as the other student participants, and consequently she struggled to accept her learning disabilities more than the others.

In addition to building their self-awareness and capacity to self-advocate through education and knowledge, the parents in this study also helped their children by modelling these skills. The students saw their parents working with their teachers and speaking on their behalf when they felt that they were not receiving the support or understanding they deserved. This responsibility

gradually shifted from parents to children, as the students began to use these skills themselves to advocate on their own when they were older. Thus, it was the scaffolding that occurred during the ongoing interactions between the parents and their children at the microsystem level that helped the children develop the capacities they needed to self-advocate and negotiate for the supports and resources that helped them succeed in school. In the end, all of the students in this study took on the responsibility for advocating for the accommodations they needed. Without an accurate understanding of their learning disabilities and without an acceptance of themselves as individuals with learning disabilities, they likely would not have been able to take over this responsibility. The importance of self-awareness and acceptance of the diagnosis in students with learning disabilities and the critical role that self-advocacy can play in the successful development of students with learning disabilities is well-demonstrated in the literature (Goldberg et al., 2003; Heiman & Kariv, 2004; Higgins et al., 2002; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; Litner, Mann-Feder, & Guerard, 2005; Miller, 1997; Raskind et al., 2002). Perceiving it as a capacity that is developed through the microsystem level interactions that occur between parents and their children is a new way of looking at it.

**Goal setting and determination.** A fifth theme that emerged in the participants' narratives was the importance of setting goals and persevering in order to achieve those goals. This was a message that resonated strongly in all of the participants' narratives. Initially, it was the parents who set goals for their children and worked with them in order to achieve them, but as they grew older the students began assuming more of this responsibility. Through their ongoing interactions and by observing what their parents had done, the students developed these goal setting skills themselves. All of the students knew that they wanted to go to university from a young age, and they all worked hard toward achieving this goal despite the setbacks and

challenges they encountered along the way. Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Krista were described by their families as being incredibly determined and hard-working individuals who were able to persevere through numerous challenges in their lives. This perseverance and willingness to work through challenges was nurtured through the active support they received from their parents. Both Krista and Mark went to great lengths to ensure that they had the courses needed to qualify for whatever university program they wanted to pursue, and Paul knew that he wanted to pursue film making from a very early age. Amy set goals for herself throughout her educational career, working hard to improve her academic skills and to “get out of spec ed”. Kathleen went to extra tutoring sessions in the evenings throughout her elementary and middle school years in order to improve her math skills. Thus, through the microsystem level interactions of the students and their parents, the students took over the responsibility for setting long term goals, and the importance of persevering and working hard in order to achieve them emerged as an important theme in their narratives. This finding is supported by the research of Freeman and his colleagues (2004) and Hall, Spruill, and Webster (2002) that emphasizes the importance having a “goals orientation” or a “goal directed” approach to life for students with learning disabilities.

**Important yet complex role of peers.** A sixth theme that emerged in the participants’ narratives was the important yet complex role that friends played in the students’ lives. The importance of peer support and friendships is well documented in the literature by researchers such as Freeman and his colleagues (2004) and Miller (1997). Most of the students in the current study (Amy, Mark, Kathleen, Paul) have come to identify friends as their primary source of emotional support. This situation was not always the case, however, as these relationships developed over time. When they were young, most of the students reported having difficulty relating to their peers, and Paul and Kathleen recalled times when they were bullied. However,

by the time they had reached middle school and high school, Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul were all able to develop some connections with their peers and establish some friendships that have endured over the years. These friendships became very important to them and consequently their friends are an important source of support in their lives, taking over some of the role that their families filled when they were younger. Thus, at the microsystem level, the students' capacity to build and sustain friendships developed over time, and in the end peer relationships have come to be an important source of support in their lives. The only participant who does not rely on peer support is Krista, as her family is still the primary source of support in her life.

**Impact of teachers.** The seventh and final theme that emerged in the participants' narratives concerned the relationships that they developed within the school microsystem. This theme encompasses both positive relationships and negative relationships, as both were present and influential in their lives. On the positive side, Amy and Mark both recalled teachers who went out of their way to help them. Amy's elementary school resource teacher worked with her both in class and over the summers to help her strengthen her academic skills and then later at the high school level, she valued the support of a math teacher and an English teacher who made themselves available outside of class time to help her when she struggled with certain concepts. After an extremely difficult grade one year that left him talking about ending his life, both Mark and his mother remember the support that he received from his grade two teacher, as they felt that she understood him and cared about him.

While these kinds of supportive and helpful interactions with teachers assisted the students along their educational journeys, all of the participants also reported at least one negative interaction with a teacher or a guidance counselor at some point in their educational careers.

Amy, Mark, Kathleen, and Paul all remember elementary school teachers who did not understand their learning disabilities and thus were not able to support or nurture their development. For Amy, Mark, and Kathleen the lack of understanding and compassion that some of their teachers showed really offended them and hurt their feelings, while Paul's reflections indicate more of a disappointment in how the teachers' lack of understanding about learning disabilities impacted on the quality of support and programming that he received. Amy and Mark both reported negative encounters with guidance counselors when they were in high school, and then again, along with Krista, at the university level with professors. These negative interactions really stood out for the students and their families, as they expected more compassion and understanding from professionals who were trained in education.

At the microsystem level, the interactions that occur with teachers can have a substantial impact on the lives of students with learning disabilities, both positively and negatively. Positive interactions with teachers have the potential to strengthen students' capacities and help them gain access to the resources that they need, while negative interactions have the potential to compromise or detract from their educational experiences and overall well-being. While the literature recognizes the positive role that teachers can assume in the lives of students with learning disabilities (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004a; Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004b; Miller, 2002), there is not as much attention devoted to the negative effects that they can have.

**Summary.** The lived educational experiences of students with learning disabilities, as recalled by the group of post-secondary students and their families who participated in this study, while not identical, did follow a similar trajectory. Their narratives revealed a number of common themes, including: early academic or socio-emotional challenges, early diagnosis and intervention, family characteristics and parent support, development of self-awareness and self-

advocacy in students over time, goal setting and determination, the important yet complex role of peers, and the impact that teachers can have on the lives of students with learning disabilities. Many of these findings are consistent with the extant literature, but some new aspects are brought to light by the current study as well. While the participants revealed that there were a number of individual capacities that contributed to their well-being, the findings show that these capacities were developed and strengthened by the ongoing interactions that the students had with their environments over the years. These interactions started within the family microsystem as the parents assumed most of the responsibility for their children's wellbeing. As the students grew older and developed and strengthened their own capacities, however, they began to take on more of the responsibility themselves and were able to use supports that were available to them through other microsystems in their lives, such as their peers and their teachers. Thus, it was the interactions that occurred among the students and their environments at the microsystem level and the interactions that occurred among their microsystems at the mesosystem level that empowered them to navigate towards and negotiate for the resources and supports that they needed to sustain their well-being.

### **Research Question Two: Capacities and Resources that Helped Students with Learning Disabilities**

Within the seven themes described in the preceding section, a number of capacities and resources can be identified that helped the students on their educational journeys. While they have been discussed in detail in the preceding section, this section will identify these capacities and resources and briefly analyze the processes and interactions that occurred among the students and their environments that helped them evolve. As Ungar (2012) contends in his ecological conceptualization of resilience, resilience is both “the capacity of individuals to

navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (p. 17)”. Thus, these capacities and resources will not be shown as isolated entities, but as processes or interactions occurring among the students and their environments over time. It is the interaction between the students and their environments and the capacity of each environment to provide what is necessary for positive development that is key. Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) emphasize the importance of this interaction, asserting that, “an adequately resourced environment makes it more likely that the child’s motivation, temperament, and special talents contribute to successful developmental outcomes (p.351)”. Bronfenbrenner’s (2007) bio-ecological model of development will be used to organize these interactions and processes into the following systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The processes at the microsystem and mesosystem levels are more proximal to the students and more closely and directly related to their development, while the processes at the exosystem and macrosystem levels are more distally or indirectly linked to the students, and thus had less of an impact on their development. This information will first be summarized within a table format (See table 11 on page 254) and then presented briefly in the section below.

**Microsystems and resilience.** Microsystems represent the immediate environments with which individuals have direct contact, such as the family, the school, or the neighbourhood community. According to Ungar’s (2012) ecological model of resilience, it is an individual’s capacity to navigate his or her way to the appropriate resources in the environment and to negotiate for and utilize these resources that constitutes resilience. Thus, the capacities that have been nurtured and developed in the students by their families and their other environments

Table 11  
 Capacities and Resources in the Environment that Helped Students with Learning Disabilities

System	Capacities and Resources
<p><b>Microsystem</b> (proximal processes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Parent – student interactions:</b> capacity building relationships that helped develop students’ self-awareness and self-advocacy skills, their ability to set and work towards goals, and their willingness and ability to use the supports that are available to them</li> <li>• <b>Extended family – student interactions:</b> special relationships with grandparents and aunts</li> <li>• <b>Peer – student interactions:</b> development of friends over time that became a main source of emotional support when they were older</li> <li>• <b>Teacher – student interactions:</b> supportive teachers who encouraged the students and spent time working with them outside of class</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mesosystem</b> (proximal processes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Parent – school interactions:</b> parents advocating for their children in the school; parents volunteering; positive parent-teacher relationships</li> <li>• <b>School – parent interactions:</b> teachers communicating their concerns about children to the parents</li> <li>• <b>Parent – community interactions:</b> parents accessing private psychologists in the community to test their children</li> <li>• <b>Parent – community interactions:</b> parents getting children involved in activities and groups in the community to build their confidence and social skills (e.g., hockey, gymnastics, camps)</li> <li>• <b>Parent – community interactions:</b> parents accessing tutors in the community to support their children</li> <li>• <b>Parents – school – community interactions:</b> parents bringing in private psychologists from the community to share results and recommendations with the school</li> </ul>
<p><b>Exosystem</b> (distal processes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Parent’s workplace:</b> coverage for psychological testing</li> <li>• <b>School board:</b> identification of learning disabilities through IPRC process</li> <li>• <b>School board:</b> provision of withdrawal and in-class support for students with learning disabilities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Macrosystem</b> (distal processes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Society:</b> conceptualization of learning disabilities as formal diagnosis</li> </ul>

through microsystemic processes are an important component of resilience. The students and their families revealed a number of capacities that helped them through their educational journeys, including a self-awareness and acceptance of their learning disabilities, self-advocacy skills, a goal orientation and a determination and willingness to work hard to achieve their goals, and an ability to recognize and use the supports that were available to them. These capacities were developed through the students' interactions with their families and other environments at the microsystem level.

Over time, all of the participants developed an accurate understanding of their learning disabilities and of themselves as learners, particularly those students who were diagnosed when they were in elementary school. As they were growing up, their parents talked with them openly about their learning disabilities and their strengths and challenges as learners. Over the years these interactions accumulated and the students developed a realistic perception of their abilities. Consequently, the students were quite comfortable talking about their learning disabilities with others and self-advocating for any accommodations that they needed at school. The importance of self-awareness and an acceptance of one's learning disabilities is well documented in the literature as an important component of resilience (Goldberg et al., 2003; Heiman & Kariv, 2004; Higgins et al., 2002; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; Miller, 2002; and Raskind et al., 2002).

Because the participants had an accurate understanding of their abilities and challenges, they were able to set attainable goals for themselves. As mentioned earlier, at first it was the parents who set the over-arching goals and pushed the students to achieve them, but after working with them over time the students developed this capacity themselves and began to set their own personal goals. This goal orientation motivated the students to work hard and kept them focused on a larger purpose when things became challenging for them. All of the participants showed a

high level of determination and a willingness to work hard to achieve the goals that they and their parents set. It meant that they often had to expend more effort than their peers, or work longer hours on their homework, or attend summer school to complete a course that they needed, but their determination to achieve their goals propelled them forward. These findings are consistent with the literature demonstrating the importance of setting realistic yet attainable goals for students with learning disabilities (Freeman et al., 2004; Gerber et al., 1992; Hall, Spruill, & Webster, 2002; Higgins et al., 2002; Raskind et al., 2002; Raskind et al., 1999).

A final capacity that was developed through the students' interactions with their immediate environments was an ability and willingness to use the supports that were available to them. In order to accept the support that was offered to them, the students had to have accepted the fact that they had learning disabilities and that some things were more challenging for them. Along with this awareness, they also had to believe that putting in additional time and effort would help them and bring them the positive results they desired. At first their parents helped them do this by assisting them with their homework and assignments, and then the teachers who encouraged them and worked with them at school reinforced it. All of the participants were willing to put in extra work with a special education teacher in the resource room, with a tutor after school, or with their parents in the evenings. In fact, Krista and Mark even took the initiative to seek out these opportunities, as Mark actively pursued summer school so that he could obtain credit for a course he needed for university and Kathleen arranged to have some resource support even before she was formally identified with learning disabilities in order to pass one of her math courses. The importance of being willing to accept the supports that are available in the environment is well documented in the literature (Gerber et al., 1992; Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 2002; Raskind et al., 1999).

The participants identified microsystemic resources beyond the family as well, particularly relationships and interactions with peers. While forming friendships had initially been difficult for some of them, by middle school and high school almost all of the student participants had developed the capacity to build and maintain friendships and thus had established a solid network of friends. At this point in their lives, they report that it is usually peers to whom they turn for support, and as discussed earlier these friendships have come to replace some of the support that initially came from their families. The only participant who has not yet developed any close friendships is Krista, as her primary source of support continues to be her immediate family. The importance of peer support for students with learning disabilities is well established in the literature as an important contributor to resilience (Freeman et al., 2004; Miller, 1997; Miller and Fritz, 1998; Weiner, 2004).

A final microsystemic resource that was identified by the participants is support from an adult outside the family. In most cases this support came from a teacher who took an active interest in their lives and who made an effort to help them through some challenging times. An interaction between the students and these teachers appeared to develop that propelled the relationship forward. The teachers wanted to help the students, and the students' willingness to accept their help and to work with them reinforced the teachers' efforts as they saw the positive effect that their support had on the students. Thus, the students' capacity to accept and use the supports that were provided to them helped them procure and maintain the support that they needed. For Mark, this support came from his grade two teacher who said that he reminded her of her own son and took a special interest in him while he was in elementary school. For Amy, it was her elementary school resource teacher who worked with her over the summers and then later her high school math and English teachers who worked with her outside of class time to

help her learn certain concepts and procedures. For Kathleen and Krista, it was members of their extended families as Kathleen had a special relationship with her grandmother and Krista felt special when she was able to spend some one-on-one time with her aunt. While most of Paul's support came from his mother, he did develop some close relationships with the coaches and mentors who ran the extracurricular activities in which he participated. The importance of a caring adult, such as a teacher, in the lives of students with learning disabilities has been documented in the literature as an important contributor to resilience (Miller, 1997; Vogel, Hruby, & Adelman, 1993; Werner, 1993a. Werner, 1993b), and Werner's (1993a; 1993b) pioneering research on resilience recognized the effect that positive child characteristics can have on acquiring that support from the environment.

The participants in the current study have identified a number of capacities and resources at the microsystem level that helped them through their educational journeys. These capacities and resources were nurtured and developed through their ongoing interactions with their environments. The study's findings point to the critical role that the students' immediate environments, in particular their parents, play in providing support during their early elementary and middle school years and in helping them develop the capacities they need to succeed in school and sustain their well-being. In many cases, the family was the only source of support the students had at that point in their lives. However, as the students grew older and developed the skills and capacities they needed to form relationships with their peers and significant adults in their lives (e.g., teachers), their support base broadened. Thus, as the students matured, most of them were able to accumulate multiple sources of support as well as the capacities they needed to negotiate for the resources they needed to sustain their well-being. While most of the capacities and resources that helped the participants through their educational journeys were developed at

the microsystem level, the next layer, the mesosystem was also very important as it encompasses the interactions that occurred among the different environments in the students' lives.

**Mesosystems and resilience.** The relationships and interactions that occur among the environments of the individual's microsystem are an important component in Ungar's ecological conceptualization of resilience (2012). It is through these relationships and interactions that the resources are made available for students, especially when they are young. In the current study, these relationships occurred mainly between the participants' home environment and their school environment. All of the participants reported that their parents, particularly their mothers, were actively involved in their school lives. They volunteered for special activities and generally made a point of being around the school, developing positive relationships with the teachers and being available to talk with them when something came up. On a more formal level, the students' parents collaborated with their schools to create their individual education plans and to make programming and placement decisions at parent conferences and IPRC meetings. All of the parents in the study made a point to share the results of the assessments that they had done privately with the school to help establish an open and collaborative relationship. While it was important to maintain positive relationships with the school to ensure that the necessary accommodations and supports were in place, these parents also advocated for their children's needs if they felt that they were not receiving the accommodations to which they were entitled. As discussed earlier, the parents in the current study were all professionals who were comfortable interacting and collaborating with the schools and who had the capacities necessary to negotiate for the resources their children needed.

This communication needs to be reciprocal, however, as the participants revealed how important it was for the school to share information as well. If Amy's grade three teacher had

not talked with her parents about the spelling and writing difficulties she was having and the frustration she was exhibiting in the classroom, they likely would not have had the testing done so early. Similarly, it was Paul's grade one teacher who recommended that his mother consider having him tested. The reciprocal or two-way nature of the collaboration at the mesosystem level is key. The school needs to make the family aware that the child is experiencing some challenges so that the family can use their resources to have the child assessed and determine the nature of the problem. Then, the parents need to share the results of the assessment with the school and work with them to ensure that the appropriate supports are implemented in the classroom. Thus, the collaboration and interaction of their home and school environments showed itself to be an important resource for the participants in the current study. While there is considerable research documenting the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education (Freeman et al., 2004; Goldberg et al., 2003; Raskind et al., 1999; Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997), not as much information is available examining the collaborative relationships that exist between the home and school environments at the mesosystem level.

**Exosystems and resilience.** In Bronfenbrenner's (2007) conceptualization of the environment as ever-broadening layers extending out from the individual, the exosystem encompasses the more distal social conditions or those parts of the environment that affect the students more indirectly. The participants in the current study revealed a few resources within the exosystem that helped them on their educational journeys. All of the student participants in this study were formally identified with learning disabilities through the IPRC process. This process allowed them to access the supports and resources that were available within the schools. Additionally, the four students who were diagnosed in elementary school all received specialized programming within small group or one-to-one settings during their elementary school years,

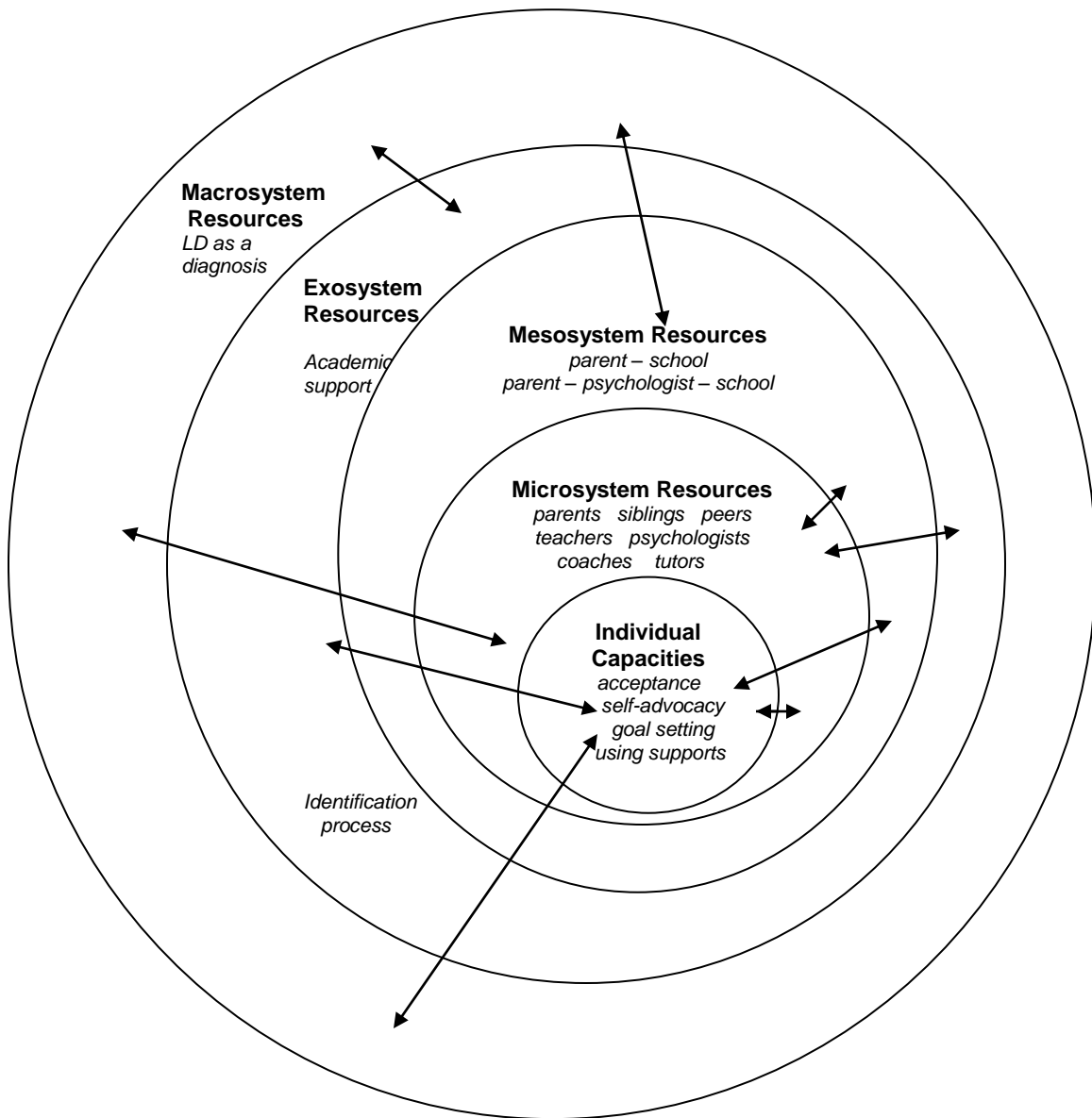
which was a school board level policy. The parents consistently reported that this specialized support was an important component in their children's success. Upon reflection, the student participants also acknowledged that this support was instrumental in their academic success. Thus, at the exosystem level, the school boards' policies for formally identifying students with learning disabilities and their practices of providing withdrawal support for students with learning disabilities had a positive impact on the participants' educational development. As Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) note, however, research is just starting to accumulate on the impact that broader policies can have on resilience.

**Macrosystems and resilience.** The outermost layer of the environment within Bronfenbrenner's theory (2007), the macrosystem, encompasses the overriding cultures and norms of the environment in which individuals live. While this layer did not directly impact the participants in the current study, they believe society's general perceptions and beliefs about learning disabilities had an effect on them. The student participants have come to conceptualize their diagnoses not as learning deficits or deficiencies, but rather as learning differences as they learn differently from the "norm". Unfortunately, they do not feel that Canadian society in general has adopted this same belief and that many Canadians equate learning disabilities with a lack of intelligence. They feel that this inaccurate conceptualization of learning disabilities is what led to some of the negative experiences they had with teachers and professors over the years. On a more positive note, the fact that learning disabilities are formally recognized as an exceptionality in Ontario and Canada means that the participants had the legal right to an individual education plan with the accommodations and programming that would best meet their needs. This entitlement had a positive impact on their academic success.

**Summary.** The participants in this study identified a number of capacities and resources that helped them through their educational journeys. These capacities and resources were nurtured and developed over time through the reciprocal interactions they had with their environments and the interactions that occurred among their environments. As Ungar (2012) contends, resilience is both an individual's capacity to navigate his or her way to the resources he or she needs and his or her capacity to work with the environment to negotiate for these resources. Through their interactions with their environments, particularly those at the more proximal microsystem level, the students in the current study were able to develop the capacities they needed to access and use the resources that helped them on their educational journeys. The findings of the current study reveal the importance of the environment, especially the family, in developing these capacities in students with learning disabilities. If they were in different environments – environments that were less supportive and well-resourced – the students may not have developed these capacities to the same degree and they may not have found the same level of educational success. Thus, microsystem level interactions, particularly those with parents, appear to be the most important in developing the individual capacities that can foster resilience. Parents are equipped with their own capacities and through their interactions with their children and the other microsystems in their children's lives (e.g., the school), students developed the capacities they needed to navigate towards and negotiate for the supports and resources they needed. The students may have been born with the potential to develop these capacities, but their interactions with their environments brought them to fruition. As Ungar, Ghazinour, and Richter (2013) assert, "an adequately resourced environment makes it more likely that the child's motivation, temperament and special talents contribute to successful developmental outcomes (p. 351)." Thus, the interaction of the student and their environments

fosters the resilience that sustains their well-being. The environments and the interactions that emerged within and among them in the current study are depicted on the following page in a revised representation of the study's conceptual framework (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Ecological Conceptualization of Resilience based on the Findings of the Study



### **Research Question Three: Conceptualization of Learning Disabilities**

The third research question sought to explore and describe how the student participants understand and make sense of their learning disabilities. While this finding is an important component of the current study, this research question was not as salient as the others and the interviews did not provide as much information. Thus, the findings are not as detailed or in-depth as those of the other research questions.

While the participants' personal experiences and conceptualizations of their learning disabilities were unique, there were some striking similarities among the narratives. For all of the student participants, understanding and making sense of their learning disabilities was a process that evolved over time. Most of them were in elementary school when they were diagnosed. Consequently, having learning disabilities has been part of their identity for most of their lives. Because they were so young at the time of the diagnosis, the details were shared with them in stages. Initially, their parents just told them that they learned differently from their classmates and that they would have to work a little harder to achieve success in school. All of the parents reassured their children that they were intelligent individuals who were very capable of learning. As the students matured, their parents were able to share more details about the diagnosis and their learning styles. This enabled the students to develop a deeper understanding of themselves as learners, and they became aware of their areas of strength as well as those areas that were more challenging for them.

Because it was the parents who were disseminating the information about learning disabilities to their children, it was essential that they had an accurate understanding of learning disabilities themselves. Thus, the parents in this study went to great lengths to educate themselves about learning disabilities in general and their children's learning disabilities in

particular. To do this, the parents talked with experts in the field, read books and articles, and joined local learning disabilities associations. Then they were able to speak confidently to their children and explain it to them in as positive and empowering a way as possible. Most of the parents emphasized, however, that this explanation was not just given once. This was a topic that was discussed frequently in their homes. Through these conversations, the students developed their own understanding of learning disabilities and themselves as learners. Thus, in order for the students to accept their learning disabilities and develop an accurate awareness of themselves as learners, first the parents had to accept it themselves and present it to their children in as positive a light as possible. This finding underscores the important role that parents play in nurturing their children's resilience and how important it is for parents to have the capacities needed to seek out information on learning disabilities and not remain in denial. The parents in the current study were in a position where they could be focused on their children and were not distracted by other issues in their lives.

The one participant who was diagnosed later in life had quite a different experience than the four who were diagnosed in elementary school. Krista went through many challenges over the years without knowing the reasons for them. When she and her mother, Madelaine, received the diagnosis, both of them had a negative response to it. Madelaine felt guilty for not being aware of the symptoms earlier and for not arranging the support that her daughter needed sooner. Krista was in denial at first and it took many years for her to be able to begin to accept her diagnosis. Thus, her story also reinforces the importance of early acceptance and self-awareness.

This process of sharing information and understanding that occurred between the students and their parents was an important interaction at the microsystem level that helped launch the students on their pathways to resilience. As the students came to accept themselves and their

learning disabilities, they developed the capacity and willingness to accept the support that was offered to them and to seek out and negotiate for the support that they needed. Accepting and having an accurate understanding of one's learning disabilities have been demonstrated in the literature as having a positive impact on adjustment and achievement (Goldberg et al., 2003; Heiman & Kariv, 2004; Higgins et al., 2002; Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell, 2003; Miller, 1997; Raskind et al., 2002). Additionally, this pattern of parental understanding and acceptance leading to children's understanding and acceptance is supported by the literature that has accumulated on the impact that learning disabilities can have on families. This literature suggests that when parents have difficulty accepting their children's learning disabilities, they can experience higher levels of stress and anxiety themselves and in the family unit as a whole (Dyson, 2010; Dyson, 2005; Dyson, 1996; Heiman, 2002).

With time, all of the participants have come to conceptualize their learning disabilities as learning differences. They do not feel as though they have an impairment or deficit in how they learn. Rather, they assert that they just learn and process information differently. This conceptualization of learning disabilities not as deficits or impairments in the individual but as learning differences that have been socially constructed is consistent with the writings of disability studies researchers like McDermott and Varenne (1995), Reid and Valle (2004), and Dudley-Marling (2004). The participants feel that this is something that is often misunderstood by society, as the prevailing message seems to be that individuals with learning disabilities are not able to learn properly or are "stupid". Debunking this message and creating a shift in thinking at the macrosystem level is important to them and one of the things that motivated them to participate in the study.

### **Contributions to Theory**

As educators seek to learn how they can support students with learning disabilities more effectively, researchers are focusing their attention on students with learning disabilities who have encountered success in the classroom. Using a resilience framework, researchers are exploring what helped students with learning disabilities through their educational journeys. The majority of these studies, however, utilize a more individualized conceptualization of resilience, focusing on the individual capacities that help students with learning disabilities and the resources within their environment that have supported them. Less research has been conducted using a more interactive or ecological conceptualization of resilience, such as the one formulated by Ungar (2012).

Guided by this ecological conceptualization of resilience as well as Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bio-ecological model of development, the current study explored the reciprocal relationships that exist between students and their environments (i.e., home, school) as well as how these environments work together to support and empower students with learning disabilities (See Figure 2 on page 263 for a representation of the model that was used in this study). Thus, one of the theoretical contributions of this research study is that it demonstrated that a more ecologically based understanding of resilience can be used to study the lives of students with learning disabilities. Additionally, it illustrated the close and complementary relationship that exists between the theories of resilience and positive development. While Ungar's (2012) ecological theory of resilience is reserved for populations who have been exposed to significant stresses or adversities and Bronfenbrenner's (2007) bio-ecological theory of development does not presume development under stress, the primary focus of both theories is on the reciprocal interactions that occur between individuals and the different levels of their

environments that lead to positive development. Bronfenbrenner's (2007) separation of the environment into ever-broadening layers can be used to isolate the interactions that occurred among the students and their environments into more specific components, thus providing a richer, more detailed description of the processes and interactions that contributed to the students' resilience.

Another theoretical contribution of the current study is that it adopted a more family-based perspective than most of the literature to date. By interviewing multiple family members, attention was focused on the interactions that take place among students with learning disabilities and their parents and siblings and the impact these interactions had on their development. Because a multiple informant approach was employed, more could be learned about the experience of having learning disabilities from not only the perspective of the students themselves, but also from those who were raising them and living with them.

Thus, the current study advances our understanding of the theories of Ungar (2012) and Bronfenbrenner (2007) and demonstrates that their theories may be used together to explain the phenomenon of living with learning disabilities from the perspective of students and their families. By examining the processes and interactions occurring within the environments of students with learning disabilities that help them navigate towards and negotiate for the resources that support their well-being, researchers can strive to facilitate these interactions and processes within the lives and environments of other students with learning disabilities and thus foster their resilience.

### **Contributions to Knowledge**

The current study contributes to our knowledge of learning disabilities and resilience in a number of ways. First, it gives voice to students with learning disabilities and their families.

Extensive research has been done in the area of learning disabilities, but very little is from the perspective of the students themselves and even less is from the perspective of their families.

This study allows the students and some of their family members to share their stories of living with learning disabilities from their own unique perspectives. Consequently, the reader is able to gain a deeper understanding of what they experienced and how they felt about it.

Second, because this study incorporates multiple perspectives into the narratives, it provides access to more information than if only students or parents had been interviewed. Having other family members' perspectives allows us to witness events from the early years that the students themselves may not remember or be aware of. Kathleen's memories of her early years were lost to her epilepsy and the medication that she had to take in order to control it, but her mother was able to recount her early childhood experiences and the challenges that she faced, as she remembered these years vividly. Similarly, while Mark recalled some of the isolation and frustration he felt during his first few years of school, his mother was able to remember the emotional agony he went through as he talked about taking his life. Thus, these multiple perspectives provide the reader with a more complete picture of the participants' lives.

A third contribution is that this retrospective study extends back further than most studies, creating a picture of the participants' lives even before the diagnoses were made. This retrospective perspective allows the reader to understand some of the social challenges that Paul and Krista encountered even before they entered school and the early academic difficulties that Monica noticed as she worked with Mark when he was a toddler and he could not learn his letters.

The participants in this study highlighted some key interactions and processes within their environments that empowered them to take advantage of the resources that were available to

them during their educational journeys. This knowledge can help guide educators and professionals who are working with students with learning disabilities. Knowing what helped these participants, educators can empower families by helping them build the capacities needed to negotiate for the resources and supports that can serve to meet their needs and facilitate their development.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of five post-secondary students who were identified with learning disabilities and their families and their perceptions of what helped them along the way in reaching their goals. While their stories may be similar to those of many other students with learning disabilities, they are not necessarily representative of all students with learning disabilities, as each student's story is unique. This study contains certain limitations, some which are common to all qualitative research and some which are unique to this study's research design.

Because qualitative research relies so heavily on the researcher and his or her interpretations and interactions with the participants, researcher bias is always a possible limitation. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, "our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry (p. 121)". In the current study, the researcher's background as a teacher working with students with learning disabilities and their families could have had an impact on the findings of the study. To address this potential effect, the researcher acknowledged her background and stated her assumptions up front. She worked hard to create an open and unconditionally accepting environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their views and opinions, even if they were not in line with the researcher's.

The fact that this study was retrospective in nature is another possible limitation. The participants were asked to reflect on their educational journeys and to share their memories with the researcher. Thus, the information they shared was comprised of recollections, or reconstructions, of their past experiences. These recollections may have been influenced or shaped by other experiences they have had over time, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posit that memory is “selective, shaped, and retold in the continuum of one’s experiences” (p. 142). Freeman (2004) differentiates between “life as lived and as told in retrospect through narrative (p. 71)”, cautioning that retrospective accounts of events are recollections of the past as told from an individual’s present perspective. Thus, the reflections and memories that the participants shared with the researcher are their perceptions of what happened and have been tempered by their experiences in the interceding years. Both Bronfenbrenner (2007) and Ungar (2014) assert, however, that it is individuals’ perceptions of their environments that are the most important.

There are also some potential limitations that are unique to the current study. This study only focused on students who had encountered success in the education system, as only students who graduated from high school and transitioned to post-secondary education were interviewed. While this limited the students who were able to share their stories, the focus of this study was to explore what capacities and resources helped a group of students with learning disabilities graduate from high school and transition to university. Thus, it was necessary to interview successful students to find out what had contributed to their achievements. It was hoped that by learning what helped them, educators could help other students and families as well.

A second limitation of the study was that only university students participated. One of the student participants had attended college before transferring into university, but all were currently attending an Ontario university when they were recruited for the study. It was hoped

that some student participants would be recruited through Algonquin College, but delays with their Research Ethics Board resulted in all of the participants being recruited elsewhere.

A third limitation of the study was that all of the students came from close-knit, supportive families in which the parents had the capacities and resources to negotiate for the resources and supports that their children needed. Additionally, all of the families had positive relationships with the school and the parents were able to obtain the resources their children needed. Not every child with learning disabilities is in this situation, and incorporating some different perspectives would have added to the research.

A fourth limitation of the study was that not all of the participants had siblings to participate. Two of the student participants were only children, and because of the small number of participants that only left three students with siblings who could share their stories. The siblings were all older than the student participants, by as much as seven years in one case. Consequently, they did not have a great deal of shared experiences with the students or memories of their siblings' experiences, and they were not able to contribute as much information as had been anticipated.

A final limitation of this study was that there was no input from teachers or professors. This dimension would have added to the research, as teachers have the opportunity to see children in different circumstances. However, it was not feasible in the current study given the number of teachers that each student participant would have had over the years.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Despite these limitations, the knowledge gained from exploring the educational experiences of post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families using an ecological conceptualization of resilience can help educators and parents work more effectively with

students with learning disabilities. By reading the stories of five post-secondary students with learning disabilities who successfully navigated their way through the education system, and by learning what they found most challenging and what helped them the most, educators and parents can support their own students and children more effectively. Knowing what capacities allowed these students and their families to negotiate for the supports that they needed will allow educators to develop similar skills and strengths in their own students and children. Similarly, knowing what resources and supports these students and their families found most helpful will allow them to ensure that these supports are set up in their communities and that they are accessible to students with learning disabilities and their families.

Future studies might extend this research in several ways. One way would be to focus not only on successful students, but to also interview students who did not graduate from high school or pursue post-secondary studies. By extending the research in this way, researchers could explore what contrasts exist between these groups. Another way to extend the current study would be to focus not only on university students, but to extend the recruitment to include students attending college programs as well as those who have found their niche in the work force. A third way of extending this study would be by placing a heavier emphasis on the siblings' perspectives to explore whether birth order and other family dynamics may have an impact on students' experiences with learning disabilities or to look for families where more than one child was diagnosed with learning disabilities. Talking with all family members and interviewing the family together as one unit would incorporate more dynamics and add greater depth as well. A fourth way of extending this research would be to interview parents who did not have the capacities and resources that the current parents did, such as financial resources for private assessments or cordial working relationships with the schools. A final way to extend the

current study would be to explore the perceptions of past and current teachers and professors to obtain a broader and more expansive picture of the participants' educational experiences.

While the current study used a retrospective design, it would be informative to explore the educational experiences of students with learning disabilities using a longitudinal approach similar to those used by Werner (1993a) in Hawaii and Raskind and his associates (2002; 1999) in California. This way, students' experiences could be examined proactively to explore what processes and interactions with their environments were helpful in navigating towards and negotiating for the supports that were available in their environments. By following a group of students with learning disabilities through elementary school, middle school, and high school, researchers would be able to witness their journey first hand and watch the interactions with their environment develop and evolve over time. More students with learning disabilities are attending university (Adelman & Vogel, 1990; Adelman & Vogel, 1993; Dulke & Schmitt, 1987), which makes this kind of longitudinal study more feasible and it could provide some valuable information to educators and parents.

A final opportunity for future research is to work at the macrosystem level to explore the resources that are available in the community to help and support students with learning disabilities and their families and to examine how accessible they are to students and their families. As Ungar (2010) recommends, a focus on changing social interventions and improving the availability and accessibility of resources in the community may be more beneficial in facilitating resilience than continuing to focus on changing behaviour at the individual level.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

This retrospective, multiple case study explored the educational experiences of post-secondary students with learning disabilities and their families in order to gain a better

understanding of the capacities and resources that contributed to their resilience. According to Ungar (2012) resilience is, “both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that build and sustain their well-being, and their individual and collective capacity to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in a culturally meaningful way (p.17)” in the presence of a significant adversity. Thus, resilience is a shared quality of individuals and their environments working together that enables them to access and take advantage of the resources in their environment that will help sustain their well-being. This study explored the interactions that occurred between students and their environments and among their environments that helped them along their educational journeys.

The findings of this study reveal a number of interactions at both the microsystem and mesosystem levels that helped students with learning disabilities successfully navigate through the education system. The ongoing interactions that occurred with the students’ parents, teachers, and peers at the microsystem level helped shape and develop the capacities that they needed in order to negotiate for the supports and resources that sustained their well-being. These capacities included an awareness and understanding of their learning disabilities and themselves as learners, the self-advocacy skills they needed in order to seek out and negotiate for the supports and accommodations that would help them succeed, the ability to set lofty, yet attainable goals and the perseverance to work towards these goals in spite of setbacks and challenges, and the willingness to use the supports and resources that were available to them. The interactions that occurred among the students’ environments at the mesosystem level were important as well, as they helped ensure that the resources they needed would be provided for them. These mesosystem interactions included open and honest communication between the

home and school environments so that the parents could have an accurate understanding of how their children were doing in school and what resources they needed to negotiate for their children, as well as a solid link between the home and community environments so that the parents were able to seek out the appropriate supports in the community (e.g., psychologists to do the psychological assessments, tutors to provide academic support).

Understanding the capacities and resources that were helpful for students with learning disabilities and knowing how these capacities can be nurtured and developed in other children through their interactions with their environments can help inform policy and practice within the education system and the broader community. The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study and are arranged according to Bronfenbrenner's (2007) levels of the environment.

**Microsystem recommendations.** The findings of this study indicate that the family microsystem is the most important source of capacity building and support for students with learning disabilities. Consequently, it is recommended that educators and psychologists working with students with learning disabilities inform parents of the capacities that will foster resilience in their children – developing an awareness and acceptance of their learning disabilities, building self-advocacy skills, learning how to set goals and persevere through challenges, and accepting the supports that are offered to them. Parents can help their children strengthen these capacities by modelling them through their own actions and by scaffolding them as they are developing in their children. They can also help their children build relationships with their teachers and peers so that they can begin to develop sources of support outside the immediate family. It would also be beneficial for educators and community support groups to educate parents on how they can best negotiate for the resources in their communities and schools that their children need, such as

early testing, specialized support to strengthen their academic skills, accommodations in the classroom, and extra-curricular activities to build their self-confidence.

The findings of this study also reveal the importance of school microsystems in the lives of students with learning disabilities. Teachers can have a substantial impact on the lives of their students, both positively and negatively. These relationships have the potential to do so much good for students with learning disabilities. It is therefore important to build the capacity and competence of these resources so that students can use the support they can provide to advance their learning and achieve their post-secondary school goals. Conversely, however, a lack of understanding and an unwillingness to accommodate students with learning disabilities can really take a toll on a student's well-being. Teachers need to be made aware of how their actions and attitudes can negatively impact on their students. Amy and her father would both like to see students with learning disabilities be given the opportunity to share their stories and experiences with teachers in training, so that teachers can hear first-hand what it is like to be a student with learning disabilities. Consequently, it is recommended that more education and professional development be provided for teachers and professors around working with students with learning disabilities to increase their understanding of these disabilities and how they can assist students with them.

**Mesosystem recommendations.** The findings of the study also revealed a number of important interactions that occur among the different microsystems in the students' environments. It is important that the students' home and school environments communicate and work collaboratively with each other. Additionally, it is important for parents to be aware of how to navigate towards positive relationships with their children's teachers and to negotiate for the resources and supports in the community that their children need. Schools, and specifically

special education teachers, can be effective conduits for this information to be passed on to parents. Thus, schools and special education teachers should be educated themselves so that they can become a source of capacity building support for families.

**Exosystem recommendations.** The findings of the study revealed several factors at the exosystem level that can have a substantial impact on the lives of students with learning disabilities. Early identification is crucial in order to ensure that the necessary supports and interventions are implemented within the schools and that students do not become frustrated and overwhelmed in the system. Thus, school boards need to make early identification a priority in the system by allocating more resources to ensure that there are professionals in place to perform the necessary testing and by educating kindergarten and primary level teachers on the indicators of learning disabilities so that they can identify those students who may be at risk. The findings of the study also revealed that as students grow older, it can sometimes be challenging for them to access the accommodations and supports that they need and to which they are entitled, especially at the high school level. Many of the students in the current study had to fight for the accommodations they needed, such as using a computer in class or not being penalized for their spelling on exams. Thus, it is recommended that school boards and post-secondary institutions examine the policies that are currently in place in order to determine how they may be able to make it easier for students to access the accommodations and supports that they need to achieve positive academic outcomes.

### **Conclusions and Reflections**

Learning disabilities are the most common exceptionality in the Canadian education system (LDAC, 2007). As a special education teacher employed in an Ontario elementary school, I work with a number of students with learning disabilities and their families each year. I have

known many of these families since the beginning of their educational journeys, before any diagnoses were made, and I will continue to work with them until they transition on to middle school and beyond. I see how difficult it is for some parents to accept their children's diagnoses and how worried they are about their children and their futures. This study has given me the opportunity to hear first-hand the stories of students who have completed their education and gone on to pursue post-secondary schooling. Re-living their stories with them and their families has allowed me to understand how their early experiences affected their overall journeys and to learn about the things that helped them the most along the way. What resonated most powerfully for me was the strong bond that exists between the students and their parents and the important role that families play in the lives of students with learning disabilities. The parents that I interviewed were committed and determined to do everything they could to support and empower their children. Moreover, their children were all aware of and extremely grateful for the support that their parents gave them and continue to provide in their lives. This knowledge informs my practice as I work to empower my own students and their families and to foster their resilience as they begin their journey through the education system.

I have come to see that resilience is not an isolated capacity that exists within children, but rather a process that evolves over time through the interactions that occur between children and their environments and among their environments. These interactions help children build the capacities they need to navigate towards and negotiate for the resources that will sustain their well-being. Thus, it is the relationships that we, as teachers and parents and caring adults, build with children as well as the behaviours and values we model that help them develop the capacities and resources they need to do well.

**References**

- Adelman, P. & Vogel, S. (1990). College graduates and learning disabilities: Employment attainment and career patterns. *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*, 13, 154-166.
- Alexander-Passe, N. (2007). The sources and manifestations of stress amongst school-aged dyslexics compared with sibling controls. *Dyslexia*, 14, 291-313.
- Al-Yagon, M. & Mikulincer, M. (2004a). Socioemotional and academic adjustment among children with learning disorders: The mediational role of attachment based factors. *The Journal of Special Education*, 38, 111-123.
- Al-Yagon, M. & Mikulincer, M. (2004b). Patterns of close relationships and socio-emotional and academic adjustment among school-age children with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 19, 12-19.
- American Psychiatric Association (2014). Specific learning disorder.  
[www.dsm5.org/Documents/Specific\\_Learning\\_Disorder\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/Specific_Learning_Disorder_Fact_Sheet.pdf)
- American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4<sup>th</sup> edition – text revision). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- Baglieri, S., Valle, J., Connor, D., & Gallagher, D. (2011). Disability studies in education: The need for a plurality of perspectives on disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 32(4), 267-278.
- Bender, W., Rosenkrans, C., & Crane, M. (1999). Stress, depression, and suicide among students with learning disabilities: Assessing the risk. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 22, 143-156.

- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugagh, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children, 71*(2), 195-209.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. & Ceci, S. (1994). Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological Review, 101*(4), 568-586.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. & Morris, P. (2007). The bio-ecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 1* (6<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 793-828). New York: Wiley.
- Carroll, J. & Iles, J. (2006). An assessment of anxiety levels in dyslexic students in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 76*, 651-662.
- Chapman, J. (1988). Cognitive motivational characteristics and academic achievement of learning disabled children: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 80*(3), 357-365.
- Cicchetti, D. (2003). Foreword. In S. Luthar (Ed.) *Resilience and vulnerability: Adaptation in the context of childhood adversities* (pp. xix-xxvii). New York NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Clandinin, J. & Connelly, M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco CA: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Dalley, M., Bolocofsky, D., Alcorn, M., & Baker, C. (1992). Depressive symptomatology, attributional style, dysfunctional attitude, and social competency in adolescents with and without learning disabilities. *School Psychology Review, 21*(3), 444-458.

- Daniel, S., Walsh, A., Goldston, D., Arnold, E., Reboussin, B., & Wood, F. (2006). Suicidality, school dropout, and reading problems among adolescents. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 39*(6), 507-514.
- Darling, N. (2007). Ecological systems theory: the person in the center of the circles. *Research in Human Development, 4*(3-4), 203-217.
- Denhart, H. (2008). Deconstructing barriers: Perceptions of students labeled with learning disabilities in higher education. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 41*(6), 483-497.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (2004). The social construction of learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37*(6), 482-489.
- Dulke, C. & Schmitt, S. (1987). Meeting the transition needs of college-bound students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 20*, 176-180.
- Dyson, L. (2010). Unanticipated effects of children learning disabilities on their families. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 33*, 43-55.
- Dyson, L. (1996). The experiences of families of children with learning disabilities: Parental stress, family functioning, and sibling self-concept. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 29*(3), 280-286.
- Feurer, D. & Andrews, J. (2009). School-related stress and depression in adolescents with and without learning disabilities: An exploratory study. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 55*(1), 92-108.
- Freeman, J., Stoch, S., Chan, J., & Hutchinson, N. (2004). Academic resilience: A retrospective study of adults with learning difficulties. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 50*(1), 5-21.

- Freeman, M. (2004). Data are everywhere: Narrative criticism in the literature of experience. In C. Daiute & C. Lightfoot (Eds.), *Narrative analysis: Studying the development of individuals in society* (pp. 63-81). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.
- Gerber, P., Ginsberg, R., Reiff, H. (1992). Identifying alterable patterns in employment success for highly successful adults with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25(8), 475-487.
- Gilbert, J. & Morawski, C. (2005). Stress coping for elementary school children: A case for including lifestyle. *Journal of Individual Psychology*, 61(4), 314-328.
- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Goldberg, R., Higgins, E., Raskind, M., & Herman, K. (2003). Predictors of success in individuals with learning disabilities: A qualitative analysis of a 20-year longitudinal study. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 18(4), 222-236.
- Grolnick, W. & Ryan, R. (1990). Self-perceptions, motivation, and adjustment in children with learning disabilities: A multiple group comparison study. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23(3), 177-184.
- Haagar, D. & Vaughn, S. (1995). Parent, teacher, peer, and self-reports of the social competence of students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 28(4), 205-215.
- Hall, C., Spruill, K., & Webster, R. (2002). Motivational and attitudinal factors in college students with and without learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 25, 79-86.
- Hancock, D. and Algozzine, B. (2006). *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. New York: Teacher College Press.

- Heath, N., Roberts, E., & Toste, J. (2011). Perceptions of academic performance: Positive illusions in adolescents with and without learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 20*(10), 1-11
- Heiman, T. (2002). Parents of children with disabilities: Resilience, coping, and future expectations. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 14*, 159-171.
- Heiman, T. & Kariv, D. (2004). Manifestations of learning disabilities in university students: Implications for coping and adjustment. *Education, 125*(2), 313-324.
- Higgins, E., Raskind, M., Goldberg, R., & Herman, K. (2002). Stages of acceptance of a learning disability: The impact of labeling. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 25*, 3-17.
- Huntington, D. & Bender, W. (1993). Adolescents with learning disabilities at risk? Emotional well being, depression, suicide. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 26*, 159-166.
- Kolb, S. & Hanley-Maxwell, C. (2003). Critical social skills for adolescents with high incidence disabilities: Parental perspectives. *Exceptional Children, 69*(2), 163-179.
- Kozey, M. & Siegel, L. (2008). *Canadian provincial policy: Definitions of learning disabilities*. Canadian language and literacy research network
- Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2007). *Prevalence of learning disabilities*.  
[http://www.ldac-taac.ca/learn-more/prevalence-of-lds/prevalence-oflearning disabilities.html](http://www.ldac-taac.ca/learn-more/prevalence-of-lds/prevalence-oflearning%20disabilities.html).  
<http://www.ldac-acta.ca/en/learn-more/ld-defined.html>.
- Litner, B., Mann-Feder, V., & Guerard, G. (2005). Narratives of success: Learning disabled students in university. *Exceptionality Education Canada, 15*, 9-23.
- Luthar, S. & Cicchetti, D. (2000). The construct of resilience: Implications for interventions and social policies. *Development and Psychopathology, 12*, 857-885.

- Luthar, S. & Zigler, E. (1991). Vulnerability and competence: A review of research on resilience in childhood. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, 6-22.
- Maag, J. & Reid, R. (2006). Depression among students with learning disabilities: Assessing the risk. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39, 3-10.
- Maag, J. & Reid, R. (1994). The phenomenology of depression among students with and without learning disabilities: More similar than different. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 9(2), 91-103.
- MacMaster, K., Donovan, L., & MacIntyre, P. (2002). The effects of being diagnosed with a learning disability on children's self-esteem, *Child Study Journal*, 32, 101-107.
- Margalit, M. (1998). Loneliness and coherence among preschool children with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 31, 173-180.
- Margalit, M. & Heiman, T. (1986). Family climate and anxiety in families with learning disabled boys. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 25, 841-846.
- Margalit, M., Tur-Kaspa, H., Most, T. (1999). Reciprocal nominations, reciprocal rejections, and loneliness among students with learning disorders. *Educational Psychology*, 19, 79-89.
- Margalit, M. & Zak, I. (1984). Anxiety and self-concept of learning disabled children. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 17, 537-539.
- Martinez, R. & Semrud-Clikeman, M. (2004). Emotional adjustment and school functioning of young adolescents with multiple versus single learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37, 411-420.
- Masten, A. (1999). Resilience comes of age: Reflections on the past and outlook for the next generation of research. In M. Glantz & J. Johnson (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 74-88). New York: Oxford University Press.

- McDermott, R., Goldman, S., & Varenne, H. (2006). The cultural work of learning disabilities. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 12-17.
- McDermot, R. & Varenne, H. (1995). Culture “as” disability. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 26(3), 324-348.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Mertens, D. (2010). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Miller, M. (2002). Resilience elements in students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58, 291-298.
- Miller, M. (1996). Relevance of resilience in individuals with learning disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 43, 255-269.
- Miller, M. & Fritz, M. (1998). A demonstration of resilience. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 33(5), 265-271.
- Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morrison, G. & Cosden, M. (1997). Risk, resilience, and adjustment of individuals with learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 20, 43-58.
- Newcomer, P., Barenbaum, E., & Pearson, N. (1995). Depression and anxiety in children and adolescents with learning disabilities, conduct disorders, and no disabilities. *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Disorders*, 3(1), 27-39.

- Omizo, M. & Amerikaner, M. (1985). The Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory as a predictor of feelings and communication satisfaction toward parenting learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, and normal adolescents. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 45*(2), 389-395.
- Palladino, P., & Poli, P., Masi, G., & Marcheschi, M. (2000). The relation between metacognition and depressive symptoms in preadolescents with learning disabilities: Data in support of Borkowski's model. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 15*, 142-148.
- Pavri, S. & Mondo-Amaya, L. (2001). Social support in inclusive schools: Student and teacher perspectives. *Exceptional Children, 67*, 391-411.
- Raskind, M., Goldberg, R., Higgins, E., & Herman, K. (2002). Teaching "life success" to students with LD: Lessons learned from a 20-year study. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 37*, 201-208.
- Raskind, M., Goldberg, R., Higgins, E., & Herman, K. (1999). Patterns of change and predictors of success in individuals with learning disabilities: Results from a twenty year longitudinal study. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 14*, 35-49.
- Reid, K. & Valle, J. (2004). The discursive practice of learning disability: Implications for instruction and parent-school relations. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37*(6), 466-481.
- Reis, S., Neu, T., & McGuire, J. (1997). Case studies of high-ability students with learning disabilities who have achieved. *Exceptional Children, 63*(4), 463-479.
- Rutter, M. (2003). Genetic influences on risk and protection: Implications for understanding resilience. In S. Luthar (Ed.) *Resilience and vulnerability: Adaptation in the context of childhood adversities* (pp. 489-509). New NY: Cambridge University Press.

- Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57, 316-331.
- Schram, T. (2006). *Conceptualizing and proposing qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shaywitz, S. (2003). *Overcoming dyslexia: A new and complete science-based program for reading problems at any level*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Siegel, L. S. (1999). Issues in the definition and diagnosis of learning disabilities: A perspective on Guckenberger v. Boston University. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 32(4), 304-319.
- Silverman, R. & Zigmond, N. (1983). Self-concept in learning disabled adolescents. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 16, 478-482.
- Spekman, N., Goldberg, R. & Herman, K. (1993). An exploration of risk and resilience in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 8, 11-18.
- Spekman, N., Herman, K. & Vogel, S., (1993). Risk and resilience in individuals with learning disabilities: A challenge to the field. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 8, 59-65.
- Stiehr-Smith, D. & Nagel, R. (1995). Self-perceptions and social comparisons among children with LD. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 28, 364-371.
- Ungar, M. (Ed.) (2012). *The social ecology of resilience: A handbook of theory and practice*. New York: Springer.

- Ungar, M. (2011). The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81(1), 1-17.
- Ungar, M. (2008). *Nurturing hidden resilience in troubled youth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ungar, M. (2008). Putting resilience theory into action: Five principles for intervention. In L. Liebenberg & M. Ungar (Eds.) *Resilience in action* (pp. 17-38). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Inc.
- Ungar, M. (2005). A thicker description of resilience. *The International Journal of narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 3, 89-95.
- Ungar, M., Ghazinour, M., & Richter, J. (2013). Annual research review: What is resilience within the social ecology of human development? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(4), 348-366.
- Vaughn, S., Zaragoza, N., Hogan, A., & Walker, J. (1993). A four-year longitudinal investigation of the social skills and behavior problems of students with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 26(6), 404-412.
- Vogel, S. & Adelman, P. (1992). The success of college students with learning disabilities: Factors related to educational attainment. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25, 430-441.
- Vogel, S., Hruby, P., & Adelman, P. (1993). Educational and psychological factors in successful and unsuccessful college students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 8(1), 35-43.
- Waggoner, K. & Wilgosh, L. (1990). Concerns of families of children with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 23, 97-113.

- Weiner, J. (2004). Do peer relationships foster behavioral adjustment in children with learning disabilities? *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 27(1), 21-30.
- Weiner J. & Tardif, C. (2004). Social and emotional functioning of children with learning disabilities: Does special education placement make a difference? *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 19(1), 20-32.
- Werner, E. (1994). Overcoming the odds. *Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 15(2), 131-136.
- Werner, E. (1993a). Risk and resilience in individuals with learning disabilities: Lessons learned from the Kauai longitudinal study. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 8, 28-34.
- Werner, E. (1993b). Risk, resilience, and recovery: Perspectives from the Kauai longitudinal study. *Development and Psychopathology*, 5, 503-515.
- Werner E. & Smith, R. (1989). *Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient child and youth*. New York: Adams, Bannister, & Cox.
- Whitley, J., Lupart, J., & Beran, T. (2007). The characteristics and experiences of Canadian students receiving special education services for a learning disability. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 17(3), 85-110.
- Wilson, A., Deri Armstrong, C., Furrie, A., & Walcot, E. (2009). The mental health of Canadians with self-reported learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 42, 24-40.
- Winzer, M. (2007). *Children with exceptionalities in Canadian classrooms* (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Ontario: Allyn and Bacon Canada.
- Wright-Strawderman, C. & Watson, B. (1992). The prevalence of depressive symptoms in children with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 25, 258-264.

## Appendix A

### Academic Impact of Learning Disabilities

---

#### Academic Effects of Learning Disabilities

---

Effect	Studies
Lower levels of academic achievement	Al-Yagon & Mikulincer (2004b) Brazil, Cummings & Vallance (1993) Daniel, Walsh, Goldston, Arnold, Reboussin & Wood (2006) Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman (2004)
Failing to complete high school / dropping out of school	Daniel, Walsh, Goldston, Arnold, Reboussin & Wood (2006)

---

**Appendix B****Socio-emotional Impact of Learning Disabilities**


---

Socio-emotional Effects of Learning Disabilities	
Effect	Studies
Low self-esteem / academic self-concept	Chapman (1998) Grolnick & Ryan (1990) Heath, Roberts, & Toste (2011) MacMaster, Donovan, & MacIntyre (2002) Margalit & Zak (1984) Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman (2004) Omizo & Amerikaner (1985) Silverman & Zigmond (1983) Stiehr-Smith & Nagel (1995) Weiner & Tardif (2004)
Social difficulties	Brazil, Cummings & Vallance (1993) Haager & Vaughn (1995) Vaughn, Zaragoza, Hogan & Walker (1993) Weiner & Tardif (2004) Whitley, Lupart, & Beran (2007)
Peer rejection / loneliness	Al-Yagon & Mikilincer (2004a) Al-Yagon & Mikulincer (2004b) Margalit (1998) Margalit (2003) - commentary Margalit, Tur-Kaspa & Most (1999) Pavri & Monda-Amaya (2000) Weiner & Tardif (2004)

---

## Appendix C

### Mental Health Impact of Learning Disabilities

---

Effect	Studies
Anxiety / stress	Alexander-Passe (2007) Arnold, Goldston, Walsh, Reboussin, Daniel, Hickman & Wood (2005) Bender, Rosenkrans, & Crane (1999) Carroll & Iles (2006) Feurer & Andrews (2009) Huntington & Bender (1993) – review article Margalit & Zak (1984) Wilson, Armstrong, Furrie & Walcot (2009)
Depression	Arnold, Goldston, Walsh, Reboussin, Daniel, Hickman & Wood (2005) Bender, Rosenkrans & Crane (1999) Dalley, Bolocofsky, Alcorn, & Baker (1992) Huntington & Bender (1993) Maag & Reid (2006) Maag & Reid (1994) Martinez & Semrud-Clikeman (2004) Newcomer, Barenbaum, & Bryant (1995) Palladino, Poli, Masi & Marcheschi (2000) Svetaz, Ireland & Blum (2000) Weiner & Tardif (2004) Wilson, Armstrong, Furrie & Walcot (2009) Wright-Strawderman & Watson (1992)
Suicidality	Daniel, Walsh, Goldston, Arnold, Reboussin & Wood (2006) Bender, Rosenkrans & Crane (1999) Huntington & Bender (1993) Svetaz, Ireland & Blum (2000) Wilson, Armstrong, Furrie & Walcot (2009)

---

**Appendix D**

**Family Impact of Learning Disabilities**

---

Family Effects of Learning Disabilities

---

Effect	Studies
Negative parental reactions	Dyson (1996) Dyson (2003) Dyson (2010) Heiman (2002)
Parental stress and anxiety	Dyson (1996) Dyson (2010) Margalit & Heiman (1986) Waggoner & Wilgosh (1990)
Academic concerns and responsibilities	Waggoner & Wilgosh (1990) Dyson (2010)
Effects on other family members	Waggoner & Wilgosh (1990) Dyson (2010) Heiman (2002)

---

## Appendix E

### Protective Factors

Resilience: Protective Factors		
Studies	Individual Level	Ecological Level
Werner (1993a) Werner (1993b) Werner (1994) <i>Proactive Kauai longitudinal study</i>	Temperamental characteristics that elicit + responses from others, efficacy – efficient use of skills, planfulness, and self-esteem	Parental care-giving styles that reflect competence and self-esteem  Supportive adults, timely opportunities at transitions and second chance opportunities as they were older
Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind & Herman (2003) Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg & Herman (2002) Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins & Herman (1999) Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins & Herman (2002) <i>Frostig Centre 20 year longitudinal studies</i>	Self awareness Proactivity Perseverance Goal setting Emotional stability and emotional coping strategies Control  Acceptance of learning disability	Presence of and use of effective family support systems  Presence of and use of effective social support systems
Gerber, Ginsberg & Reiff (1992) <i>Retrospective interviews with successful adults with LD</i>	Main theme: taking control of life Internal decisions: desire, goal orientation, + reframing of LD External manifestations: persistence, learned creativity (making things work)	External manifestations: goodness of fit between child and environment, seeking and using supportive people (social ecologies)
Freeman, Stoch, Chan & Hutchinson (2004) <i>Retrospective interviews</i>	Sense of purpose, orientation toward personal goals, positive attitude,	Parental support to stay in school, positive relations with parents, parent values

---

<i>of adults with LD (early success vs late success)</i>	sense of autonomy, belief in self	congruent with school values  Structured outlets for pursuit of extracurricular interests, positive relations with teachers, network of school friends
Reis, Neu & Mcguire (1997) <i>Retrospective studies of high achieving students with LD</i>	Employment of compensation and learning strategies, capacity for hard work	Parental support especially from mothers  Participating in university support programs
Miller (1997) Miller (2002) Miller & Fritz (1998) <i>Retrospective interviews with college students</i>	Awareness of success experiences and areas of strength, use of turning points as motivators, self-determination, acknowledgement of LD	Special friendships, encouraging teachers
Vogel, Hruby & Adelman (1993) <i>Comparing successful and unsuccessful college students (questionnaire)</i>		Supportive role of specialist or tutor
Heiman & Kariv (2004) <i>Retrospective interviews with university students with LD</i>	Desire to succeed, belief in self, optimistic perspective, realistic understanding of their LD and situation	Positive social relationships with friends
Hall, Spruill & Webster (2002) <i>Quantitative study comparing university students with/without LD</i>	Initiative, need for achievement	
Kolb & Hanley-Maxwell (2003) <i>Interview with parents of adolescents with LD</i>	Emotional intelligence, character: self-awareness, self-control or self-management of emotions, empathy, getting along with others, motivation, self-efficacy	School emphasis on social competence and social skills

---

## **Appendix F**

### **Recruitment Text**

#### **Fostering resilience in students with learning disabilities: A bio-ecological approach**

My name is Lisa Piers, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Ottawa. I am doing my thesis research in the area of learning disabilities and the effects that they can have on students and their families. Recent research has shown that there are a number of capacities and resources that can help students and their families cope more successfully with their learning disabilities. The purpose of this study is to examine the personal experiences of students with learning disabilities and those of their families and to explore what kinds of capacities and resources they feel have helped them, at both an individual level and within their environment, as they have journeyed through the education system.

I am recruiting students with learning disabilities who are currently attending a post-secondary institution and at least one of their parents and siblings to share their experiences.

I am seeking students with learning disabilities to be involved in a series of three individual interviews. The parents and siblings would each be involved in one interview. The questions will provide the opportunity for students and their families to reflect on their life experiences and to share the things that they feel have helped them on their educational journeys. Each interview will likely take about 60 minutes and will be held at a time and place convenient for the participants. The interviews will be conducted in English only. They will be audio-taped, and transcripts will be shared with each participant to be reviewed and approved.

If you would like to participate in this research project, please contact me at (email address) or by telephone at (phone number). A time to conduct the interview will be arranged and a copy of the consent form will be mailed to you so that you can review it before the first meeting. Informed consent will be obtained at the first meeting before starting the interview.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me at (email address) or by telephone at (phone number) or my research supervisor, Dr. Cheryll Duquette, at (email address) or by telephone at (phone number).

## Appendix G

### Student Interview Protocols

#### Student Interview Protocol I: Early Life and School Experiences

Participant:

Date and time of interview:

#### *Rapport-building Questions:*

**Tell me about what you are currently studying at university/college.**

**What are some of the best things about university/college?**

**What are some of the most challenging things about university/college?**

**Was this always something you wanted to do or saw yourself doing?**

#### *Early Life Experiences:*

**Tell me about growing up.**

- Where did you grow up?
- Did you have any moves along the way?
- What are some of the memorable experiences from your life – positive and negative?

**Tell me about your family.**

- Who was in your immediate family? Who was in your extended family?
- How did you all get along?

**Describe your relationship with your parents when you were growing up.**

**Describe your relationship with your brothers/sisters when you were growing up.**

**Tell me about some of the other important people in your life.**

- For example, grandparents, aunts and uncles, family friends, teachers, coaches, tutors, friends.
- Why were these people important to you?

*Early School Experiences:*

**Tell me about your school experiences.**

- What are some of your first memories of school?
- Tell me about some memories from elementary school / middle school / high school.
- Were you involved in any kinds of extracurricular activities? Tell me about them.
- Describe your friends and how they fit in with your school experiences.
- What were some of the high points for you?
- What were some of the low points for you?

**Did you have any special accommodations or supports while you were in school (i.e., special classes, withdrawal groups, extra support in the classroom)? How did you feel about them at the time?**

- Describe what was involved with these special supports.
- Did you find them helpful or not?
- Can you describe any positive experiences?
- Can you describe any negative experiences?

**How do you feel about those experiences now as you look back?**

- Were they helpful in the long run?
- Did they cause more harm than good or more good than harm?
- Was it worth it?

**How were your parents involved in your schooling?**

- Were they at the school a lot and involved in school activities?
- Did they know your teachers well? Did they talk with them a lot or communicate through notes?
- How did they get along with your teachers and the school staff?
- Did they advocate for you to get extra support or accommodations?
- Did they help you with your school work at home?
- Did they get you a tutor?

*Diagnosis*

**Tell me about your experience of being diagnosed with a learning disability**

- At what age were you diagnosed?
- How you were identified (i.e., within the school system, a private psychologist)?
- Were you aware that you were having difficulties and that you learned differently?
- How it was explained to you and who talked with you about it?
- What did you understand it to mean?
- How did you feel about it about being diagnosed? What was your emotional reaction?

**Did your parents and teachers talk about your learning disability or talk with you about it?**

- What did your parents say to you?
- How do you think your parents felt about it?
- What did your teachers say to you?
- How do you think your teachers felt about it?
- Did your parents talk with your teachers about it much? Did they advocate for you (i.e., ask for support, look into different options)?

***Later School Experiences:***

**Tell me about your school experiences after you were diagnosed. Did things at school change (i.e., academically, socially, stress-wise)? How?**

**As a child with a learning disability, what kinds of things were the most challenging for you?**

**Were there any difficult times that stand out for you?**

- Did you have any difficulties with friends?
- Did you ever feel stressed or anxious? Did you ever go through any times where you were feeling down or depressed?
- Did you ever have any behavior issues in school (i.e., getting in trouble with teachers)?

**What did you do to get through these difficulties? What was most helpful for you?**

- Were there supports within the school (i.e., computers, special groups, special programs, special teachers)?
- Did your family support and help you (i.e., parents, siblings, grandparents)?
- Do you feel that the school and your parents worked together to help you?
- Were there any community supports that you accessed (i.e., tutoring companies, therapists or counselors)?
- Were there any more informal supports that you accessed (i.e., tutor, friends, extracurricular activities)?

**Looking back, what kinds of things helped you succeed in school?**

- Were there any skills or personal traits that were especially helpful (i.e., computer skills, typing, organization skills, perseverance, positivity)?
- Were there any special supports in place that were especially helpful?
- Were there any people (i.e., parents, teachers, tutors, coaches, friends, therapists) that were especially helpful?
- Were there any special activities that you were involved in (i.e., sports teams, drama clubs, horseback riding, dance) that were especially helpful?

**Student Interview Protocol II: Lived Experiences as an Individual with a Learning Disability - Secondary and Post-secondary Years**

Participant:

Date and time of interview:

**Why did you want to go to university/college? When did you decide to apply?**

**What kinds of things do you think helped you successfully complete high school and be accepted into university?**

- Were there any individual qualities that you possessed that helped you?
- Were there any supportive people in your life who helped you?
- What did the high school do to help you prepare for, apply to, and successfully move on to university or college?
- Did you have a transition plan? Tell me about it.
- What did the university or college have in place to help you successfully move on (i.e., transition activities)?
- Which of these activities did your child participate in?

**Tell me about your experiences at university so far.**

**Has your relationship with your family changed since high school? If so, how has it changed? What is it like now and how is that different?**

**In high school what were your relationships like with your friends?**

**Are you still connected with those same friends or have you established some new friendships at university/college? What are your relationships like now?**

**Are you still participating in the same kinds of extracurricular activities as you did back in high school? Are you working?**

**Did you ever experience any kind of stress or anxiety or did you ever go through any periods of time when you were feeling down or upset in high school?**

**Have you experienced any times like that since you've been at university/college (i.e., exam time, at the beginning of a semester, at the end of a semester)? Tell me about them.**

**Who or where can you turn to for help?**

- Can you turn to your family (i.e., parents, siblings)?
- Are there friends you can turn to?
- Is there someone at the university or college you can turn to (i.e., teacher, counselor, social worker)?
- Are there any community resources you can access?

**How do you feel about asking for or seeking out that help?**

- Do you comfortable/uncomfortable?

**How do you feel about talking with your teachers and professors about your learning disability?**

**Do you require any accommodations for your classes now? If yes, what are they?**

**How are the accommodations provided?**

- Do the professors know about them ahead or time?
- Do you have to ask each professor?

**How are you feeling about your life now?**

### **Student Interview Protocol III: Reflection on Meaning**

Participant:

Date and time of interview:

**Reflecting on your experiences to date, how do you understand / conceptualize yourself as a learner? As an individual?**

- Do you feel capable?
- Are you a hard worker?

**Do you feel that your understanding of learning disabilities has changed over time? Explain.**

**Was there ever a turning point in your life, a time when you felt yourself experience a significant life change? Was this for the better or for the worse? Can you describe it for me?**

**Reflecting on your school experiences as an individual with a learning disability, what are some of the things that helped you get to this point? Why did they help you?**

**Reflecting on your school experiences as an individual with a learning disability, what are some of the challenges/obstacles that you faced in getting to this point?**

**How do you think society views or perceives learning disabilities and people with learning disabilities? How has this perception had an impact on your experiences?**

- Are there education policies that have affected you?
- Are the opportunities for high education and jobs affected?
- What is general society's view of learning disabilities and how does this affect you?

**What future goals do you have for yourself? Do you see yourself reaching them? How?**

**What do you think will help you reach them?**

**What do you think could potentially prevent you from reaching them? How would you get around this?**

**What do you see yourself doing in five years? Ten years?**

**Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

## Appendix H

### Parent Interview Protocol

Participant:

Date and time of interview:

#### *Early Life Experiences:*

##### **Tell me about your child growing up.**

What kind of child was he/she (i.e., happy, positive, unhappy, shy, outgoing)?

- Did he/she get along well with the family and with his/her friends?
- What are some of the most memorable experiences from your child's early life – positive and negative?

**Describe your relationship with your child when he/she was growing up.**

**Describe your child's relationship with his/her brothers and sisters when he/she was growing up.**

##### **Tell me about some of the other important people in your child's life.**

- For example, grandparents, aunts and uncles, family friends, teachers, coaches, tutors, friends.
- Why were these people important to him/her?

#### *Early Life Experiences:*

##### **Tell me about your child's school experiences.**

- Tell me about some memories from elementary school / middle school / high school.
- Was he/she involved in any kinds of extracurricular activities? Tell me about them.
- Describe his/her friends and how they fit in with his/her school experiences.
- What were some of the high points for your child?
- What were some of the low points for your child?

**Did your child have any special accommodations or supports while he/she was in school (i.e., special classes, withdrawal groups, extra support in the classroom)? How did he/she feel about them at the time?**

- Describe what was involved with these special supports.
- Did you and your child find them helpful or not?
- Can you describe any positive experiences?
- Can you describe any negative experiences?

**How do you feel about those experiences now as you look back?**

- Were they helpful in the long run?
- Did they cause more harm than good or more good than harm?
- Was it worth it?

**How were you involved in your child's education?**

- Were you at the school a lot and involved in school activities?
- Did you know your child's teachers well? Did you talk with them a lot or communicate through notes?
- How did you get along with your child's teachers and the school staff?
- Were there any teachers who stood out, in a positive or negative way?
- Did you advocate for your child to get extra support or accommodations?
- Did you help you with your child's school work at home?
- Did you get your child a tutor?

***Diagnosis:***

**Tell me about the experience of your child being diagnosed with a learning disability.**

- At what age was your child diagnosed?
- How was he/she identified (i.e., within the school system, a private psychologist)?
- Were you aware that he/she was having difficulties and that he/she learned differently?
- How it was explained to you and your child and who talked with him/her about it?
- What did you understand it to mean?
- How did you feel about him/her being diagnosed? What was your emotional reaction?
- How did your child feel about being diagnosed? Did he/she understand what it meant? What was his/her emotional reaction?

**How did your child react to the diagnosis?**

- Was he/she surprised? Upset? Confused?
- Did he/she accept it right away?
- How did he/she come to terms with it?

**How did you react to the diagnosis?**

- Were you surprised? Upset? Confused?
- Did you accept it right away?
- How did you come to terms with it?

**What kinds of support did you get?**

- Did you get support from your family?
- Did you get support from your friends or from other parents?
- Did you get support from the school?
- Did you get support through community resources (i.e., associations, support groups)?

**Did you share and talk about the diagnosis with the other members of the family? How did they react?**

- Did you tell your child's brothers and sisters?
- Did you tell the extended family?
- What were there reactions?

**What kinds of things did you do to learn more about learning disabilities?**

- Did you read books or articles?
- Did you consult with professionals?
- Did you join community groups or support groups?

*Later School Experiences:*

**How did you support your child (emotionally) with regards to his/her learning disability?**

**Did you talk about the learning disability with him/her?**

- What did you say to him/her?
- How do you think he/she felt about it?
- What do you think they wanted from you? Were you able to support them in that way?

**How did you support your child (academically) with regards to his/her learning disability?**

- Did you work with him/her yourself?
- Did you get tutoring for your child?
- Did you advocate for your child at school?

**How did you share the diagnosis with the school and your child's teachers? What was their reaction?**

- What did you say to the teachers?
- How do you think the teachers felt about it?
- What did the teachers say to you?
- How did they work with/help your child?
- Did you advocate for your child and his/her needs (i.e., ask for support, look into different options)?

**What did the school do for your child after they learned of the diagnosis? Did things change? How?**

- Was there an IPRC meeting?
- Was an IEP created?
- Were any extra supports put into place?

**How would you describe the response of the school?**

- Were they supportive/unsupportive?

**What kinds of things were the most challenging for your child (i.e., academically, emotionally, socially)?**

**Were there any particularly difficult times that stand out for you?**

- Did he/she have any difficulties with friends?
- Did he/she ever feel stressed or anxious? Did he/she ever go through any times were he/she was feeling down or depressed?
- Did he/she ever have any behavior issues in school (i.e., getting in trouble with teachers)?

**What did you do to help your child get through these difficulties? What kinds of things were the most helpful for you and your child?**

- Were there supports within the school (i.e., computers, special groups, special programs, special teachers)? (*microsystem*)
- Were there family members or friends that you could lean on? (*microsystem*)
- Do you feel that the school worked with you to help your child? (*mesosystem*)
- Were there any community supports that you accessed (i.e., tutoring companies, therapists or counselors)? (*exosystem*)
- Were there any more informal supports that you accessed – tutor, friends, extracurricular activities (*microsystem*)

**Looking back, what kinds of things helped your child succeed in school?**

- Were there any skills or personal traits that were especially helpful (i.e., computer skills, typing, organization skills, perseverance, positivity)?
- Were there any special supports in place that were especially helpful?
- Were there any people (i.e., parents, teachers, tutors, coaches, friends, therapists) that were especially helpful?
- Were there any special activities (i.e., sports teams, drama clubs, horseback riding, dance) that your child was involved in that were especially helpful?

***Postsecondary School Experiences:***

**What kinds of things do you think helped your child successfully transition on to university?**

- What did the high school do to help your child prepare for, apply to, and successfully move on to university or college? (*microsystem, exosystem*)
- Did your child have a transition plan? Tell me about it. (*microsystem, exosystem*)
- What did the university or college have available to help your child successfully transition (i.e., transition activities)? (*microsystem, exosystem*)
- What kinds of activities did your child participate in? (*microsystem, exosystem*)

**How did you help your child with the decision to pursue a post-secondary education and the transition into college/university?**

**Has your role changed now that your child is in college/university? If so, how has it changed? What is it like now and how is that different?**

**Have you seen your child experience any difficult times at university/college (i.e., exam time, at the beginning of a semester, at the end of a semester)? Tell me about them.**

**How do you help them during those times?**

- Do they come to you or do you seek them out and ask how you can help?
- Is there someone at the university or college that he/she can turn to (i.e., teacher, counselor, social worker)?
- Are there any community resources he/she can access?

**Does your child require any accommodations for his/her classes now? If yes, what are they and how are they provided?**

- Do the professors know about them ahead of time?
- Does your child have to ask each professor?

**Reflecting on your experiences and your child's experiences to date, what is your understanding of learning disabilities and the role of parents?**

**Do you feel that your understanding of learning disabilities has changed over time? Explain.**

**How do you think society views or perceives learning disabilities and people with learning disabilities? How has this perception had an impact on your child's and your own experiences?**

- Are there education policies that have affected you?
- Are the opportunities for high education and jobs affected?
- What is general society's view of learning disabilities and how does this affect you?

**As a parent of a child with a learning disability, what kinds of things were the most challenging for you?**

**Reflecting on your experiences as a parent of an individual with a learning disability, what are some of the things that helped you the most over the years (protective factors – individual, ecological)? Why did they help you?**

**What future goals do you have for your child? Do you see him/her reaching them? How?**

**What do you think will help him/her reach them?**

**What do you think could potentially prevent him/her from reaching them? How would he/she get around this?**

**What do you see your child doing in five years? Ten years?**

**Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

## Appendix I

### Siblings Interview Protocol

Participant:

Date and time of interview:

#### *Early Life Experiences:*

##### **Tell me about your family.**

- Who was in your immediate family? Who was in your extended family?
- How did you all get along?

##### **Tell me about your brother/sister growing up.**

- What kind of child was he/she (i.e., happy, positive, unhappy, shy, outgoing)?
- Did he/she get along well with the family and with his/her friends?
- What are some of the memorable experiences from your lives – positive and negative?

##### **Describe your relationship with your brother/sister when you were growing up.**

##### **Tell me about some of the other important people in your brother's/sister's life.**

- For example, grandparents, aunts and uncles, family friends, teachers, coaches, tutors, friends.
- Why were these people important to him/her?

#### *Early Life Experiences:*

##### **Tell me about your school experiences.**

- How are things academically for you?
- Are you involved in any extracurricular activities? Tell me about them
- Describe your friends.

##### **Tell me about your brother's/sister's school experiences.)**

- How were things academically for him/her? Did he/she have to work hard and study a lot?
- Was he/she involved in any kinds of extracurricular activities? Tell me about them.
- Describe his/her friends and how they fit in with his/her school experiences.

**Did your brother/sister have any special accommodations or supports while he/she was in school (i.e., special classes, withdrawal groups, extra support in the classroom)? How do you think that he/she felt about them at the time? How did you feel about them?**

- Describe what was involved with these special supports.
- Do you think that he/she find them helpful or not?
- Can you describe any positive experiences?
- Can you describe any negative experiences?

**How were your parents involved in your education?**

- Were they at the school a lot and involved in school activities?
- Did they know your teachers well? Did they talk with them a lot or communicate through notes?
- How did they get along with your teachers and the school staff?
- Did they help you with your school work at home?

**Was this the same or different from how they were involved in your brother's/sister's education? Tell me how.**

*Diagnosis:*

**Tell me about the experience of your brother/sister being diagnosed with a learning disability.**

- Were you aware that he/she was having difficulties and that he/she learned differently?
- How it was explained to you and who talked with you about it?
- What did it mean for you?
- How did you feel about him/her being diagnosed? What was your emotional reaction?
- What do you think that it meant for them?
- How do you think that your brother/sister felt about being diagnosed? What was his/her emotional reaction?

**How did your parents react to finding out that your brother/sister had a learning disability?**

**Did your parents share and talk about the diagnosis with you and the other members of your family? What did they tell you?**

**Did your brother/sister ever talk with you about his/her learning disability?**

**Did things change at home after your brother/sister was diagnosed with a learning disability? If yes, how?**

- Did your relationships change?
- Did the attention that you received from your parents change?
- Did your feelings towards him/her change (i.e., jealousy)?

**How did your parents support your brother/sister (emotionally) with regards to his/her learning disability?**

- What did they say to him/her?
- How do you think he/she felt about what they did?
- What do you think he/she wanted from your parents? Were they able to support them in that way?

**How did your parents support your brother/sister (academically) with regards to his/her learning disability?**

- Did they work with him/her themselves?
- Did they get tutoring for him/her?
- Did they advocate for him/her at school?

**Were they able to share their time equally with all of the children in your family? How so?**

**How do you think your brother's/sister's learning disability has affected you?**

- How has it affected you at home?
- How has it affected you at school?

**What kinds of things do you think were the most challenging for your brother/sister?**

**Were there any particularly difficult times that stand out for you?**

- Did he/she have any difficulties with friends?
- Did he/she ever feel stressed or anxious? Did he/she ever go through any times were he/she was feeling down or depressed?
- Did he/she ever have any behavior issues in school (i.e., getting in trouble with teachers)?

**Was there anything that you were able to do to help your brother/sister get through these difficulties? What kinds of things were the most helpful for your brother/sister?**

- Were there supports within the school (i.e., computers, special groups, special programs, special teachers)?
- Did your family support and help him/her (i.e., parents, siblings, grandparents)?
- Were there any community supports that he/she accessed (i.e., tutoring companies, therapists or counselors)?
- Were there any more informal supports that he/she accessed – tutor, friends, extracurricular activities

**Looking back, what kinds of things helped your brother/sister succeed in school?**

- Were there any skills or personal traits that were especially helpful (i.e., computer skills, typing, organization skills, perseverance, positivity)?
- Were there any special supports in place that were especially helpful?
- Were there any people (i.e., parents, teachers, tutors, coaches, friends, therapists) that were especially helpful?
- Were there any special activities that he/she was involved in (i.e., sports teams, drama clubs, horseback riding, dance) that were especially helpful?

**Now that your brother/sister is in college/university, how have things changed? What is it like now and how is that different?**

**Reflecting on your experiences and your brother's/sister's experiences to date, what is your understanding of learning disabilities?**

**Do you feel that your understanding of learning disabilities has changed over time? Explain.**

**How do you think society views or perceives learning disabilities and people with learning disabilities? How has this perception had an impact on your brother's/sister's and your own experiences?**

- Are there education policies that have affected him/her?
- Are the opportunities for high education and jobs affected?
- What is general society's view of learning disabilities and how does this affect him/her?

**What future goals does your brother/sister have? Do you see him/her reaching them? How?**

**What do you think will help him/her reach them?**

**What do you think could potentially prevent him/her from reaching them? How would he/she get around this?**

**What do you see your brother/sister doing in five years? Ten years?**

**Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

**Appendix J**

**Informed Consent: Student Participants**

## **Consent Form for Student Participants**

### **Title of the Study:**

Fostering resilience in students with learning disabilities:  
A bio-ecological approach

### **Names of Researchers:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Graduate Student  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

### ***Invitation to Participate***

I am invited to participate in the abovementioned Doctoral project research study conducted by Lisa Piers and supervised by Cheryll Duquette.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The main purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students with learning disabilities and those of their parents and siblings. The secondary purpose is to explore the capacities and resources that these students and their families identify as having helped them on their journey through the education system.

### ***Participation***

My participation will consist of participating in three audio-taped interview sessions over a three week period each of approximately sixty minutes duration during which I will be asked to reflect on my personal experiences as a student with a learning disability. I may request a copy of my interview transcripts to review at any time. If I decide to participate in the study, all information will be kept strictly confidential.

### ***Number of Participants***

It is expected that there will be approximately five to eight students with learning disabilities and at least one of their parents and siblings who will participate in this study.

### ***Risks***

My participation in this study will entail that I discuss my experiences, which may cause me to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, specifically, if I am too uncomfortable, I am aware that I can withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequences. I will also be able to contact one of the following counseling services if I feel I need additional support: (1) Counseling and Coaching Services, a counseling and referral service provided for students at the University of Ottawa. It is located at 100 Marie Curie Private and the contact number is (613) 562-5200. (2) Counseling Services, a counseling and referral service for current students at Carleton University. It is located at 2600 Carleton Technology and Training Centre Building and the contact number is (613) 520-6674 for off-campus students. For students in residence it is located at 223D Residence Commons Building and the contact number is (613) 520-2600 ext. 1767. (3) Student Support Services, counseling services for students at Algonquin College. It is located in the Student Commons Building in Room E377 and the contact number is (613) 727-4723, ext. 7200.

### ***Benefits***

My participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of learning disabilities, the effects that they have on individuals diagnosed with them and their families, and the resources and supports that can help individuals with learning disabilities and their families cope more successfully. The information produced will be helpful for other families and for teachers working with students with learning disabilities.

### ***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the information will be used only for the purposes stated above. Confidentiality will be protected because only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to it. My name will not be associated with the research findings in any way and my identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher and her supervisor. Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: nothing to identify the participants will be revealed in any publication or public presentation of the study findings. My personal information will be kept strictly confidential except as required or permitted by law. I will not be identified in any publication or presentation of the study.

### ***Conservation of Data***

The data collected from the discussions during the interviews, the audiotapes, and the notes taken during the interview will be kept in a secure manner. They will be stored for five years in the supervisor's office in a locked filing cabinet. A copy of the data will also be conserved in the researcher's office in a locked filing cabinet for a period of five years. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. The data will be destroyed at the end of this time.

**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 removed from the study and destroyed.

**Acceptance**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Lisa Piers of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, under the supervision of Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

I will be provided with a copy of the results of the study upon request to either of the researchers listed on this form.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact Lisa Piers or Cheryll Duquette at the addresses or phone numbers listed at the top of this form.

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, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5. Telephone: (613) 562-5387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca).

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

Participant's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix K**

**Informed Consent: Parent Participants**

## **Consent Form for Parent Participants**

### **Title of the Study:**

Fostering resilience in students with learning disabilities:  
A bio-ecological approach

### **Names of Researchers:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Graduate Student  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

### ***Invitation to Participate***

I am invited to participate in the abovementioned Doctoral project research study conducted by Lisa Piers and supervised by Cheryll Duquette.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The main purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students with learning disabilities and those of their parents and siblings. The secondary purpose is to explore the capacities and resources that these students and their families identify as having helped them on their journey through the education system.

### ***Participation***

My participation will consist of participating in one audio-taped interview session of approximately 60 minutes duration during which I will be asked to reflect on my personal experiences as a parent of an individual with a learning disability. Transcripts of this interview will be available upon request. If I decide to participate in the study, all information will be kept strictly confidential.

### ***Number of Participants***

It is expected that there will be approximately five to eight students with learning disabilities and at least one of their parents and siblings who will participate in this study.

***Risks***

My participation in this study will entail that I discuss my experiences, which may cause me to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, specifically, if I am too uncomfortable, I am aware that I can withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequences. I will also be able to contact Family Services Ottawa, a counseling and referral service for children, youth, and adults in the Ottawa area, if I feel I need additional support. They are located at 312 Parkdale Avenue and their contact number is (613) 725-3601.

***Benefits***

My participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of learning disabilities, the effects that they have on individuals diagnosed with them and their families, and the resources and supports that can help individuals with learning disabilities and their families cope more successfully. The information produced will be helpful for other families and for teachers working with students with learning disabilities.

***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the information will be used only for the purposes stated above. Confidentiality will be protected because only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to it. My name will not be associated with the research findings in any way and my identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher and her supervisor. Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: nothing to identify the participants will be revealed in any publication or public presentation of the study findings. My personal information will be kept strictly confidential except as required or permitted by law. I will not be identified in any publication or presentation of the study.

***Conservation of Data***

The data collected from the discussions during the interviews, the audiotapes, and the notes taken during the interview will be kept in a secure manner. They will be stored for five years in the supervisor's office in a locked filing cabinet. A copy of the data will also be conserved in the researcher's office in a locked filing cabinet for a period of five years. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. The data will be destroyed at the end of this time.

***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 removed from the study and destroyed.

**Acceptance**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Lisa Piers of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, under the supervision of Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

I will be provided with a copy of the results of the study upon request to either of the researchers listed on this form.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact Lisa Piers or Cheryll Duquette at the addresses or phone numbers listed at the top of this form.

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, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5. Telephone: (613) 562-5387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca).

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

Participant's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix L**

**Informed Consent for Sibling Participants**

## **Consent Form for Sibling Participants**

### **Title of the Study:**

Fostering resilience in students with learning disabilities:  
A bio-ecological approach

### **Names of Researchers:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Graduate Student  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

### ***Invitation to Participate***

I am invited to participate in the abovementioned Doctoral project research study conducted by Lisa Piers and supervised by Cheryll Duquette.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The main purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students with learning disabilities and those of their parents and siblings. The secondary purpose is to explore the capacities and resources that these students and their families identify as having helped them on their journey through the education system.

### ***Participation***

My participation will consist of participating in one audio-taped interview session of approximately 60 minutes duration during which I will be asked to reflect on my personal experiences as a sibling of an individual with a learning disability. I may request a copy of my interview transcripts to review at any time.

If I decide to participate in the study, all information will be kept strictly confidential.

### ***Number of Participants***

It is expected that there will be approximately five to eight students with learning disabilities and at least one of their parents and siblings who will participate in this study.

***Risks***

My participation in this study will entail that I discuss my experiences, which may cause me to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, specifically, if I am too uncomfortable, I am aware that I can withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequences. I will also be able to contact Family Services Ottawa, a counseling and referral service for children, youth, and adults in the Ottawa area, if I feel I need additional support. They are located at 312 Parkdale Avenue and their contact number is (613) 725-3601.

***Benefits***

My participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of learning disabilities, the effects that they have on individuals diagnosed with them and their families, and the resources and supports that can help individuals with learning disabilities and their families cope more successfully. The information produced will be helpful for other families and for teachers working with students with learning disabilities.

***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the information will be used only for the purposes stated above. Confidentiality will be protected because only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to it. My name will not be associated with the research findings in any way and my identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher and her supervisor. Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: nothing to identify the participants will be revealed in any publication or public presentation of the study findings. My personal information will be kept strictly confidential except as required or permitted by law. I will not be identified in any publication or presentation of the study.

***Conservation of Data***

The data collected from the discussions during the interviews, the audiotapes, and the notes taken during the interview will be kept in a secure manner. They will be stored for five years in the supervisor's office in a locked filing cabinet. A copy of the data will also be conserved in the researcher's office in a locked filing cabinet for a period of five years. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. The data will be destroyed at the end of this time.

***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 removed from the study and destroyed.

**Acceptance**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Lisa Piers of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, under the supervision of Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

I will be provided with a copy of the results of the study upon request to either of the researchers listed on this form.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact Lisa Piers or Cheryll Duquette at the addresses or phone numbers listed at the top of this form.

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, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5. Telephone: (613) 562-5387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca).

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

Participant's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix M**

**Sibling Assent for Underage Sibling Participants**

## **Assent Form for Sibling Participants under the Age of 18**

### **Title of the Study:**

Fostering resilience in students with learning disabilities:  
A bio-ecological approach

### **Names of Researchers:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Graduate Student  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

### ***Invitation***

I am being asked to take part in the research study being done by Lisa Piers and Cheryll Duquette.

### ***The Reasons for the Study***

They are doing this study to learn about what it is like to have a learning disability and what it is like for families. They also want to find out what kinds of things helped them while they were in school.

### ***My Role***

I will be asked to answer some questions and talk with the researcher for about 1 hour. I will be asked to talk about what it was like for me having a brother or sister with a learning disability. Our talk will be tape recorded.

The researcher will not share what I say with anyone else.

### ***Number of People***

There will be about five to eight students with learning disabilities taking part in the study along with at least one of their parents and one of their brothers or sisters.

### ***Risks***

When I talk about what it is like having a brother or sister with a learning disability, I might feel uncomfortable at times. The researcher has told me that if I do not feel comfortable, I can stop at any time. She will also find someone for me to talk with if I am upset.

**Benefits**

I will be helping the researcher learn more about learning disabilities and how they make people feel. I will also help her learn more about the things that can help people with learning disabilities and their families. This will help other families and teachers working with students with learning disabilities.

**Privacy**

The researcher has told me that she will not share my name with other people or tell them what I have said. The things that I say to her will only be used for her study. My name will not be used and only the researcher and her supervisor will know who I am. They will not share my name or anything about my life that would let people know who I am.

**Saving the Information**

The tape recordings of our talk and her notes will be kept in a safe way. They will be stored for 5 years in the supervisor's office in a locked filing cabinet. A copy will also be saved in the researcher's office in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years. Only the researcher and her supervisor will be able to get it and they will destroy it after 5 years.

**My Choices**

I do not have to talk with the researcher. I can stop at any time or choose not to answer any questions if I want to. If I choose to stop, then everything I said will not be used and it will be destroyed.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to take part in this study.

The researchers will give me a copy of the results if I want to see them.

If I have any questions, my parents and I can talk with Lisa Piers or Cheryl Duquette.

There are two copies of this form and one is for me to keep.

Participant's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix N**

**Informed Consent for Parents of Underage Siblings**

**Parental Consent Form for Sibling Participants  
Under the Age of 18**

**Title of the Study:**

Fostering resilience in students with learning disabilities:  
A bio-ecological approach

**Names of Researchers:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Graduate Student  
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

***Invitation to Participate***

My child is invited to participate in the abovementioned Doctoral project research study conducted by Lisa Piers and supervised by Cheryll Duquette.

***Purpose of the Study***

The main purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of students with learning disabilities and those of their parents and siblings. The secondary purpose is to explore the capacities and resources that these students and their families identify as having helped them on their journey through the education system.

***Participation***

My child's participation will consist of participating in one audio-taped interview session of approximately 60 minutes duration during which he/she will be asked to reflect on his/her personal experiences as a sibling of an individual with a learning disability. I may request a copy of my interview transcripts to review at any time.

If my child decides to participate in the study, all information will be kept strictly confidential.

***Number of Participants***

It is expected that there will be approximately five to eight students with learning disabilities and at least one of their parents and siblings who will participate in this study.

***Risks***

My child's participation in this study will entail that he/she discuss his/her experiences, which may cause him/her to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, specifically, if he/she is too uncomfortable, he/she is aware that he/she can withdraw from the project at any time without any negative consequences. I will also be able to contact Family Services Ottawa, a counseling and referral service for children, youth, and adults in the Ottawa area, if I feel he/she needs additional support. They are located at 312 Parkdale Avenue and their contact number is (613) 725-3601.

***Benefits***

My child's participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of learning disabilities, the effects that they have on individuals diagnosed with them and their families, and the resources and supports that can help individuals with learning disabilities and their families cope more successfully. The information produced will be helpful for other families and for teachers working with students with learning disabilities.

***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

My child and I have received assurance from the researcher that the information that he/she will share will remain strictly confidential. My child and I understand that the information will be used only for the purposes stated above.

Confidentiality will be protected because only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to it. My child's name will not be associated with the research findings in any way and his/her identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher and her supervisor. Anonymity will be protected in the following manner: nothing to identify the participants will be revealed in any publication or public presentation of the study findings. My child's personal information will be kept strictly confidential except as required or permitted by law. My child will not be identified in any publication or presentation of the study.

***Conservation of Data***

The data collected from the discussions during the interviews, the audiotapes, and the notes taken during the interview will be kept in a secure manner. They will be stored for five years in the supervisor's office in a locked filing cabinet. A copy of the data will also be conserved in the researcher's office in a locked filing cabinet for a period of five years. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. The data will be destroyed at the end of this time.

**Voluntary Participation**

My child is under no obligation to participate and if he/she chooses to participate, he/she can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If my child chooses to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the study and destroyed.

**Acceptance**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree that my child will participate in the above research study conducted by Lisa Piers of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, under the supervision of Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

My child and I will be provided with a copy of the results of the study upon request to either of the researchers listed on this form.

If my child or I have any questions about the study, we may contact Lisa Piers or Cheryll Duquette at the addresses or phone numbers listed at the top of this form.

If my child or I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, we may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5. Telephone: (613) 562-5387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca).

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

Participant's parent's name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's parent's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix O**

**Informed Consent: Student Participants (French Translation)**

## **Consentement formulaire d'élèves participants**

### **Titre de l'étude:**

Favoriser la résilience chez les élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage: Une approche bio-écologique

### **Noms des chercheurs:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Étudiants des cycles supérieurs  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

### ***Invitation à participer***

Je suis invité à participer au projet susmentionné doctorat étude menée par Lisa Piers et supervisé par Cheryll Duquette.

### ***But de l'étude***

L'objectif principal de cette étude est d'examiner les expériences des étudiants avec des troubles d'apprentissage et ceux de leurs parents et frères et sœurs. La deuxième objectif est d'explorer les capacités et les ressources que ces élèves et leurs familles identifiées comme ayant aidés dans leur cheminement dans le système éducatif.

### ***Participation***

Ma participation sera composé de participer à trois des séances d'entrevues enregistrées sur bande - audio plus d'un période de trois semaines chacun d'environ soixante minutes chacune au cours de laquelle je vais être invités à réfléchir sur mes expériences personnelles en tant qu'étudiant avec un trouble d'apprentissage. Je peux demander une copie de mes relevés de notes d'entrevue pour revoir à tout moment. Si je décide de participer à l'étude, toutes les informations seront gardées strictement confidentielles.

### ***Nombre de participants***

Il est prévu qu'il y aura environ cinq à huit élèves ayant des troubles d'apprentissage et d'au moins un de leurs parents, frères et sœurs qui participeront à cette étude.

### ***Risques***

Ma participation à cette étude comprendra que je parle de mes expériences, qui peuvent causer à me sentir mal à l'aise. J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que tous les efforts seront faits pour minimiser ces risques, en particulier, si je suis trop mal à l'aise, je suis conscient que je ne peux retirer du projet à tout moment sans aucune conséquence négative. Je vais aussi être en mesure de communiquer avec les Services de Counseling et de Coaching, une lingue counse et service d'aiguillage pris en charge par l'Université d'Ottawa, si je sens que j'ai besoin de soutien supplémentaire. Ils sont situés au 100 Privé Marie Curie et le numéro de contact est le (613) 562-5200.

### ***Avantages***

Ma participation à l'étude contribuera à une meilleure compréhension des troubles d'apprentissage, les effets qu'ils ont sur les personnes diagnostiquées avec eux et leurs familles, ainsi que les ressources et les soutiens qui peuvent aider les personnes handicapées mentales et leurs familles à faire face avec plus de succès. L'information produite sera utile pour d'autres familles et pour les enseignants travaillant avec des élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage.

### ***Confidentialité et anonymat***

J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que l'information que je vais partager resteront strictement confidentielles. Je comprends que les informations ne seront utilisées que pour les fins énoncées ci-dessus. Confidentialité sera protégée parce que le chercheur et son superviseur aura accès à l'information. Mon nom ne sera pas associé aux résultats de la recherche de quelque façon et mon identité en tant que participant seront connus seulement pour le chercheur et son superviseur. L'anonymat sera protégé de la manière suivante: rien à identifier les participants seront dévoilés dans toute présentation publique de publication ou les résultats de l'étude. Mes informations personnelles resteront strictement confidentielles, sauf tel que requis ou permis par la loi. Je ne vais pas être identifiés dans toute publication ou présentation de l'étude.

### ***Conservation des données***

Les données recueillies à partir des discussions au cours des entretiens, les cassettes audio et les notes prises au cours de l'entrevue seront conservées de manière sécurisée. Elles seront stockées pendant cinq ans dans le bureau du superviseur dans un classeur verrouillé. Une copie des données sera également conservée dans le bureau du chercheur dans un classeur verrouillé pour une période de cinq ans. Seul le chercheur et son superviseur aura accès aux données. Les données seront détruites à la fin de cette période.

**Participation volontaire**

Je n'ai aucune obligation d'y participer et si je choisis de participer, je peux retirer de l'étude à tout moment et / ou de refuser de répondre à toutes les questions, sans en subir de conséquences négatives. Si je décide de retirer toutes les données recueillies jusqu'à ce que le temps de retrait seront retirés de l'étude et détruits.

**Acceptation**

Je, \_\_\_\_\_, acceptent de participer à l'étude de recherche ci-dessus réalisée par Lisa Piers de la Faculté d'éducation de l'Université d'Ottawa, sous la supervision du Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

Je vais être muni d'une copie des résultats de l'étude à la demande des chercheurs figurant sur ce formulaire.

Si j'ai des questions au sujet de l'étude, je peux communiquer avec Lisa Piers ou Cheryll Duquette à l'es-adresse ou numéro de téléphone indiqué à la partie supérieure de ce formulaire.

Si j'ai des questions au sujet de la conduite éthique de cette étude, je peux communiquer avec le responsable de l'éthique dans la recherche, Université d'Ottawa, Pavillon Tabaret 550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5 Téléphone: (613) 562 -5 387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca) .

Il existe deux copies du formulaire de consentement, dont l'un est le mien à conserver.

Nom du participant (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur nom (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur de la signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix P**

**Informed Consent : Parent Participants (French Translation)**

## **Consentement formulaire pour les parents participants**

### **Titre de l'étude:**

Favoriser la résilience chez les élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage: Une approche bio-écologique

### **Noms des chercheurs:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Étudiants des cycles supérieurs  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

### ***Invitation à participer***

Je suis invité à participer au projet susmentionné doctorat étude menée par Lisa Piers et supervisé par Cheryll Duquette.

### ***But de l'étude***

L'objectif principal de cette étude est d'examiner les expériences des étudiants avec des troubles d'apprentissage et ceux de leurs parents et frères et sœurs. La deuxième objectif est d'explorer les capacités et les ressources que ces élèves et leurs familles identifiées comme ayant aidés dans leur cheminement dans le système éducatif.

### ***Participation***

Ma participation sera composé de participer à un audio - session d'entrevue enregistrée sur bande durée d'environ 60 minutes pendant lesquelles je vais être invités à réfléchir sur mes expériences personnelles en tant que parent d'un individu avec un trouble d'apprentissage. Je peux demander une copie de mes relevés de notes d'entrevue pour revoir à tout moment. Si je décide de participer à l'étude, toutes les informations resteront strictement confidentielles.

### ***Nombre de participants***

Il est prévu qu'il y aura environ cinq à huit étudiants ayant des troubles d'apprentissage et au moins un de leurs parents, frères et sœurs qui participeront à cette étude.

### ***Risques***

Ma participation à cette étude comprendra que je parle de mes expériences, qui peuvent causer à me sentir mal à l'aise. J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que tous les efforts seront faits pour minimiser ces risques, en particulier, si je suis trop mal à l'aise, je suis conscient que je ne peux retirer du projet à tout moment sans aucune conséquence négative. Je vais aussi être en mesure de communiquer avec Services à la famille Ottawa, a ling counse et d'orientation pour les enfants, les jeunes et les adultes dans la région d'Ottawa, si je sens que j'ai besoin de soutien supplémentaire. Ils sont situés au 312 L'avenue Parkdale et le numéro de contact est le (613) 725-3601.

### ***Avantages***

Ma participation à l'étude contribuera à une meilleure compréhension des troubles d'apprentissage, les effets qu'ils ont sur les personnes diagnostiquées avec eux et leurs familles, ainsi que les ressources et les soutiens qui peuvent aider les personnes handicapées mentales et leurs familles à faire face avec plus de succès. L'information produite sera utile pour d'autres familles et pour les enseignants travaillant avec des élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage.

### ***Confidentialité et anonymat***

J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que l'information que je vais partager resteront strictement confidentielles. Je comprends que les informations ne seront utilisées que pour les fins énoncées ci-dessus. Confidentialité sera protégée parce que le chercheur et son superviseur aura accès à l'information. Mon nom ne sera pas associé aux résultats de la recherche de quelque façon et mon identité en tant que participant seront connus seulement pour le chercheur et son superviseur. L'anonymat sera protégé de la manière suivante: rien à identifier les participants seront dévoilés dans toute présentation publique de publication ou les résultats de l'étude. Mes informations personnelles resteront strictement confidentielles, sauf tel que requis ou permis par la loi. Je ne vais pas être identifiés dans toute publication ou présentation de l'étude.

### ***Conservation des données***

Les données recueillies à partir des discussions au cours des entretiens, les cassettes audio et les notes prises au cours de l'entrevue seront conservées de manière sécurisée. Elles seront stockées pendant cinq ans dans le bureau du superviseur dans un classeur verrouillé. Une copie des données sera également conservée dans le bureau du chercheur dans un classeur verrouillé pour une période de cinq ans. Seul le chercheur et son superviseur aura accès aux données. Les données seront détruites à la fin de cette période.

**Participation volontaire**

Je n'ai aucune obligation d'y participer et si je choisis de participer, je peux retirer de l'étude à tout moment et / ou de refuser de répondre à toutes les questions, sans en subir de conséquences négatives. Si je décide de retirer toutes les données recueillies jusqu'à ce que le temps de retrait seront retirés de l'étude et détruits.

**Acceptance Acceptation**

Je, \_\_\_\_\_, acceptent de participer à l'étude de recherche ci-dessus réalisée par Lisa Piers de la Faculté d'éducation de l'Université d'Ottawa, sous la supervision du Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

Je vais être muni d'une copie des résultats de l'étude à la demande des chercheurs figurant sur ce formulaire.

Si j'ai des questions au sujet de l'étude, je peux communiquer avec Lisa Piers ou Cheryll Duquette à l'adresse e-mail ou numéro de téléphone de l répertoriés au début de ce formulaire.

Si j'ai des questions au sujet de la conduite éthique de cette étude, je peux communiquer avec le responsable de l'éthique dans la recherche, Université d'Ottawa, Pavillon Tabaret 550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5 Téléphone: (613) 562 -5 387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca) .

Il existe deux copies du formulaire de consentement, dont l'un est le mien à conserver.

Nom du participant (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur nom (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur de la signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix Q**

**Informed Consent : Sibling Participants (French Translation)**

**Consentement formulaire pour les participants frères / sœurs**

**Titre de l'étude:**

Favoriser la résilience chez les élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage: Une approche bio-écologique

**Noms des chercheurs:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Étudiants des cycles supérieurs  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

***Invitation à participer***

Je suis invité à participer au projet susmentionné doctorat étude menée par Lisa Piers et supervisé par Cheryll Duquette.

***But de l'étude***

L'objectif principal de cette étude est d'examiner les expériences des étudiants avec des troubles d'apprentissage et ceux de leurs parents et frères et sœurs. La deuxième objectif est d'explorer les capacités et les ressources que ces élèves et leurs familles identifiées comme ayant aidés dans leur cheminement dans le système éducatif.

***Participation***

Ma participation sera composé de participer à un audio - session d'entrevue enregistrée sur bande durée d'environ 60 minutes pendant lesquelles je vais être invités à réfléchir sur mes expériences personnelles en tant que frères et sœurs d'une personne ayant un trouble d'apprentissage. Je peux demander une copie de mes relevés de notes d'entrevue pour revoir à tout moment.

Si je décide de participer à l'étude, toutes les informations seront gardées strictement confidentielles.

### ***Nombre de participants***

Il est prévu qu'il y aura environ cinq à huit élèves ayant des troubles d'apprentissage et au moins un de leurs parents, frères et sœurs qui participeront à cette étude.

### ***Risques***

Ma participation à cette étude comprendra que je parle de mes expériences, qui peuvent causer à me sentir mal à l'aise. J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que tous les efforts seront faits pour minimiser ces risques, en particulier, si je suis trop mal à l'aise, je suis conscient que je ne peux retirer du projet à tout moment sans aucune conséquence négative. Je vais aussi être en mesure de communiquer avec Services à la famille Ottawa, a ling counse et d'orientation pour les enfants, les jeunes et les adultes dans le région d'Ottawa, si je sens que j'ai besoin de soutien supplémentaire. Ils sont situés au 312, l'avenue Parkdale et le numéro de contact est le (613) 725-3601.

### ***Avantages***

Ma participation à l'étude contribuera à une meilleure compréhension des troubles d'apprentissage, les effets qu'ils ont sur les personnes diagnostiquées avec eux et leurs familles, ainsi que les ressources et les soutiens qui peuvent aider les personnes handicapées mentales et leurs familles à faire face avec plus de succès. L'information produite sera utile pour d'autres familles et pour les enseignants travaillant avec des élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage.

### ***Confidentialité et anonymat***

J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que l'information que je vais partager resteront strictement confidentielles. Je comprends que les informations ne seront utilisées que pour les fins énoncées ci-dessus. Confidentialité sera protégée parce que le chercheur et son superviseur aura accès à l'information. Mon nom ne sera pas associé aux résultats de la recherche de quelque façon et mon identité en tant que participant seront connus seulement pour le chercheur et son superviseur. L'anonymat sera protégé de la manière suivante: rien à identifier les participants seront dévoilés dans toute présentation publique de publication ou les résultats de l'étude. Mes informations personnelles resteront strictement confidentielles, sauf tel que requis ou permis par la loi. Je ne vais pas être identifiés dans toute publication ou présentation de l'étude.

### ***Conservation des données***

Les données recueillies à partir des discussions au cours des entretiens, les cassettes audio et les notes prises au cours de l'entrevue seront conservées de manière sécurisée. Elles seront stockées pendant cinq ans dans le bureau du superviseur dans un classeur verrouillé. Une copie des données sera également conservée dans le bureau du chercheur dans un classeur verrouillé pour une période de cinq ans. Seul le chercheur et son superviseur aura accès aux données. Les données seront détruites à la fin de cette période.

**Participation volontaire**

Je n'ai aucune obligation d'y participer et si je choisis de participer, je peux retirer de l'étude à tout moment et / ou de refuser de répondre à toutes les questions, sans en subir de conséquences négatives. Si je décide de retirer toutes les données recueillies jusqu'à ce que le temps de retrait seront retirés de l'étude et détruits.

**Acceptation**

Je, \_\_\_\_\_, acceptent de participer à l'étude de recherche ci-dessus réalisée par Lisa Piers de la Faculté d'éducation de l'Université d'Ottawa, sous la supervision du Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

Je vais être muni d'une copie des résultats de l'étude à la demande des chercheurs figurant sur ce formulaire.

Si j'ai des questions au sujet de l'étude, je peux communiquer avec Lisa Piers ou Cheryll Duquette à l'adresse e-mail ou numéro de téléphone qui sont répertoriés au début de ce formulaire.

Si j'ai des questions au sujet de la conduite éthique de cette étude, je peux communiquer avec le responsable de l'éthique dans la recherche, Université d'Ottawa, Pavillon Tabaret 550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5 Téléphone: (613) 562 -5 387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca) .

Il existe deux copies du formulaire de consentement, dont l'un est le mien à conserver.

Nom du participant (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur nom (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur de la signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix R**

**Sibling Assent for Underage Sibling Participants (French Translation)**

**Assentiment formulaire pour les participants fratrie âgée de moins de 18 ans**

**Titre de l'étude:**

Favoriser la résilience chez les élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage: Une approche bio-écologique

**Noms des chercheurs:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Étudiants des cycles supérieurs  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

***Invitation***

On me demande de participer à l'étude de recherche réalisé par Lisa Piers et Cheryll Duquette.

***Les motifs de l'étude***

Elles font cette étude est de connaître ce que c'est que d'avoir un trouble d'apprentissage et ce que c'est que de leur familles. Elles veulent aussi savoir quels types de choses ont aider alors qu'ils étaient à l'école.

***Mon rôle***

Je vais être invité à répondre à quelques questions et de discuter avec le chercheur pendant environ 1 heure. Me sera demandé de parler de ce que c'était pour moi avoir un frère ou une sœur avec un trouble d'apprentissage. Notre exposé sera enregistrée sur bande.

Le chercheur ne partageons pas ce que je dis à quelqu'un d'autre.

***Nombre de personnes***

Il y aura environ cinq à huit élèves ayant des troubles d'apprentissage prendre part à l'étude avec au moins un de leurs parents et un de leurs frères ou sœurs.

**Risques**

Quand je parle de ce que c'est comme avoir un frère ou une sœur avec un trouble d'apprentissage, je pourrais me sentir mal à l'aise à la fois. Le chercheur m'a dit que si je ne me sens pas à l'aise, je peux arrêter à tout moment. Elle aura également trouver quelqu'un me parler si je suis en colère.

**Avantages**

Je vais aider le chercheur en savoir plus sur les troubles d'apprentissage et comment ils font les gens se sentent. Je vais aussi aider à en apprendre davantage sur les choses qui peuvent aider les troubles d'apprentissage et leurs familles. Cela aidera d'autres familles et les enseignants travaillant avec des élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage.

**Confidentialité**

Le chercheur m'a dit qu'elle ne partage pas mon nom avec d'autres personnes ou de leur dire ce que j'ai dit. Les choses que je lui dis ne seront utilisées que pour son étude. Mon nom ne sera pas utilisé et que le chercheur et son superviseur ne saura qui je suis. L'ordonnée ne partagera pas mon nom, ni rien de ma vie qui laisserait les gens savent qui je suis.

**Enregistrement des informations**

Les enregistrements de notre conversation et ses notes seront conservées en toute sécurité. Ils seront conservés pendant 5 ans dans le bureau du superviseur dans un classeur verrouillé. Une copie sera également enregistré dans le bureau du chercheur dans un classeur verrouillé pendant 5 ans. Seul le chercheur et son superviseur sera en mesure de l'obtenir et ils vont le détruire après cinq années.

**Mes choix**

Je n'ai pas à parler avec le chercheur. Je peux arrêter à tout moment ou choisir de ne pas répondre à vos questions si je veux. Si je choisis d'arrêter, puis tout ce que j'ai dit ne sera pas utilisé et il sera détruit.

Je, \_\_\_\_\_, conviennent de prendre part à cette étude.

Les chercheurs va me donner une copie des résultats si je veux les voir.  
Si j'ai des questions, mes parents et je peux parler avec Lisa Piers ou Cheryl Duquette.

Il ya deux copies de ce formulaire et l'un est pour moi de garder.

Nom du participant (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur nom (s'il vous plaît moulées): \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur de la signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix S**

**Informed Consent: Parents of Underage Siblings (French Translation)**

**Consentement formulaire pour les participants frères et sœurs  
en vertu de l'âge de 18 ans**

**Titre de l'étude:**

Favoriser la résilience chez les élèves ayant des difficultés  
d'apprentissage: Une approche bio-écologique

**Noms des chercheurs:**

Cheryll Duquette, PhD  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

Lisa Piers  
Étudiants des cycles supérieurs  
Faculté d'éducation, Université d'Ottawa  
145 Jean Jacques Lussier, Ottawa Ontario

***Invitation à participer***

Mon enfant est invité à participer au projet susmentionné doctorat  
étude menée par Lisa Piers et supervisé par Cheryll Duquette.

***But de l'étude***

L'objectif principal de cette étude est d'examiner les expériences  
des étudiants avec des troubles d'apprentissage et ceux de leurs  
parents et frères et sœurs. La deuxième objectif est d'explorer les  
capacités et les ressources que ces élèves et leurs familles  
identifiées comme ayant aidés dans leur cheminement dans le  
système éducatif.

***Participation***

La participation de mon enfant sera composé de participer à un  
audio - session d'entrevue enregistrée sur bande durée d'environ  
60 minutes pendant lesquelles il / elle sera invité à réfléchir sur sa /  
son expériences personnelles en tant que frères et sœurs d'une  
personne ayant un trouble d'apprentissage. Je peux demander une  
copie de mes relevés de notes d'entrevue pour revoir à tout  
moment.

Si mon enfant décide de participer à l'étude, toutes les informations  
seront gardées strictement confidentielles.

### ***Nombre de participants***

Il est prévu qu'il y aura environ cinq à huit élèves ayant des troubles d'apprentissage et au moins un de leurs parents, frères et sœurs qui participeront à cette étude.

### ***Risques***

La participation de mon enfant à cette étude comprendra qu'il / elle discutera de ses / ses expériences, qui peuvent causer lui / elle de se sentir mal à l'aise. J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que tous les efforts seront faits pour minimiser ces risques, en particulier, si il / elle est trop mal à l'aise, il / elle est consciente que il / elle peut se retirer du projet à tout moment sans aucune conséquence négative. Je vais aussi être en mesure de communiquer avec Services à la famille Ottawa, a ling counse et d'orientation pour les enfants, les jeunes et les adultes dans la région d'Ottawa, si je sent-il / elle a besoin d'une aide supplémentaire. Ils sont situés au 312, l'avenue Parkdale et le numéro de contact est le (613) 725-3601.

### ***Avantages***

La participation de mon enfant à l'étude contribuera à une meilleure compréhension des troubles d'apprentissage, les effets qu'ils ont sur les personnes diagnostiquées avec eux et leurs familles, ainsi que les ressources et les soutiens qui peuvent aider les personnes handicapées mentales et leurs familles à faire face avec plus de succès. L'information produite sera utile pour d'autres familles et pour les enseignants travaillant avec des élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage.

### ***Confidentialité et anonymat***

Mon enfant et moi avons reçu l'assurance du chercheur que les informations qu'il / elle partagera resteront strictement confidentielles. Mon enfant et je comprends que les informations ne seront utilisées que pour les fins énoncées ci-dessus. Confidentialité seront protégés car seule la chercheuse et son superviseur aura accès. Le nom de mon enfant ne sera pas associé avec les résultats de la recherche de quelque façon et sa / son identité en tant que participant seront connus seulement pour le chercheur et son superviseur. L'anonymat sera protégé de la manière suivante: rien à identifier les participants seront dévoilés dans toute présentation publique de publication ou les résultats de l'étude. Renseignements personnels de mon enfant seront tenus strictement confidentiels, sauf tel que requis ou permis par la loi. Mon enfant ne seront pas identifiés dans toute publication ou présentation de l'étude.

### ***Conservation des données***

Les données recueillies à partir des discussions au cours des entretiens, les cassettes audio et les notes prises au cours de l'entrevue seront conservées de manière sécurisée. Elles seront stockées pendant cinq ans dans le bureau du superviseur dans un classeur verrouillé. Une copie des données sera également conservée dans le bureau du chercheur dans un classeur verrouillé pour une

période de cinq ans. Seul le chercheur et son superviseur aura accès aux données. Les données seront détruites à la fin de cette période.

***Participation volontaire***

Mon enfant n'est soumis à aucune obligation d'y participer et si il / elle s choisit de participer, il / elle peut retirer de l'étude à tout moment et / ou de refuser de répondre à toutes les questions, sans en subir de conséquences négatives. Si mon enfant à choisit s à retirer toutes les données recueillies jusqu'à ce que le moment du retrait sera retirée de l'étude et détruits.

***Acceptation***

Je, \_\_\_\_\_, j'accepte que mon enfant participe à l'étude de recherche ci-dessus réalisée par Lisa Piers de la Faculté d'éducation de l'Université d'Ottawa, sous la supervision du Dr. Cheryl Duquette.

Mon enfant et moi sera fourni avec une copie des résultats de l'étude à la demande des chercheurs figurant sur ce formulaire.

Si mon enfant ou moi avez des questions au sujet de l'étude, nous pouvons communiquer avec Lisa Piers ou Cheryl Duquette à l'adresse e-mail ou numéro de téléphone de l répertiés au début de ce formulaire.

Si mon enfant ou moi avez des questions concernant l'éthique de cette étude, on peut contacter le responsable de l'éthique dans la recherche, Université d'Ottawa, Pavillon Tabaret 550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5 Téléphone.: (613) 562 -5 387 E-mail: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca) .

Il existe deux copies du formulaire de consentement, dont l'un est le mien à conserver.

Parent Nom du participant (s'il vous plaît imprimer) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature d'un parent de participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur nom (s'il vous plaît moullées): \_\_\_\_\_

Chercheur de la signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_