THE READING AND WRITING EXPERIENCES OF

CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of children with learning disabilities, with a focus on the day-to-day activities of reading and writing at school. Eight children, aged nine to thirteen were interviewed, from three to six sessions each. A phenomenological interviewing and interpretation process was undertaken, and common experiences among the children were extracted from the interview transcripts. Their common experiences included feeling more similar to than different from their peers, success in school subjects and other areas, progress in their literacy skills, enjoying literacy, teachers making a difference, not enough time, frustration, confusion, and computers making a difference. Nine common experiences were combined into two general themes: "OK Experience" and "Impact of Teaching Style and Programme".

In several respects the results echoed previous research concerning children and adolescents with learning disabilities. Familiar themes such as frustration and the importance of the relationship with teachers and peers emerged in this study as they have in the literature. However, unlike previous literature, the current study found that some children with learning disabilities have positive experiences in school, even in areas with which they struggle. Previous literature tends to emphasise the difficulties and the experience of difference and stigma, while the participants in this study seemed to downplay the difficulties and differences between themselves and peers. The "learning disabilities" label did not seem to have as significant an impact as has been found in previous studies, and self-esteem did not appear to be a problem.

Also unlike other studies, the current research found common themes in the experiences of enjoyment of reading and writing, not enough time, confusion, progress and the importance of computer technology.

These findings were considered in light of possible implications for further research and practice. It was suggested that future research might replicate and/or extend this study to further explore the common experiences of children and adolescents with learning disabilities. To the extent that the results would be supported by future research, they might contribute to practice in education and counselling. Something is evidently "working" in the way the participants are being supported, because they appear to be experiencing school as positively as the school system would hope. Perhaps early identification and intervention are effective. Perhaps the implementation of a demystification process is helping the children to feel good about themselves. There appears to be some room for improvement in specific cases, to help reduce confusion, frustration, and concerns about time limits, as well as increased attention to math and computer technology. The role of the counsellor as a proactive partner in the support of children with learning disabilities was discussed. To maintain the positive outcomes observed in this study will involve continued advocacy, support for families, case management, and liaison with other agencies. Counsellors can also provide direct support in the form of demystification and strategies to reduce confusion and frustration.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Children with learning disabilities (LD) have been reported to experience an assortment of difficulties, often including school failures, social and behavioural problems, and emotional difficulties (Bender & Wall, 1994; Bryan & Bryan, 1981; Kronick, 1978). Hundreds of research efforts have explored these problems, and given the general impression that these children are in for a difficult time, not only in the context of their schools, but in their homes and communities, and perhaps throughout their life-span (Gerber, Schnieders, Paradise, Reiff, Ginsberg, & Popp, 1990).

Children with learning disabilities are statistically more likely than their normally achieving peers to have problems with self-esteem and perceptions of academic competence, make external attributions (locus-of-control) for success, experience more depression, anxiety, and loneliness, exhibit low academic motivation, and have lower social competence and be less socially accepted. They tend to have greater deficits in adaptive behaviour, to exhibit more misconduct (acting-out or disruptive behaviours, delinquency, violent crime, negative aggression), and more impulsivity and other symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder than their normally achieving peers (Bender & Wall, 1994; Bryan & Bryan, 1981).

Children with learning disabilities have been found to live in families with poor communication patterns, more conflict, and a variety of dysfunctional dynamics. Many of the social and emotional difficulties of children with learning disabilities are apparent in the pre-school years, and are found to persist into adulthood (Bender & Wall, 1994). It

is unlikely that any given child with LD will experience all or even most of these difficulties, or at least not to the degree they are found in the identified population.

Although some previous researchers have described the characteristics and behaviour of children with LD in general, in terms of pre-defined constructs (e.g., self-concept, motivation) few have sought the perspectives of the children themselves, and a fuller understanding of their actual experience of their situations, from the students' point of view. It is important to explore individual cases, to discover the experiences of children in specific contexts, and provide a direction for interventions to be pursued.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to explore the experiences of children with learning disabilities and to identify common themes within those experiences, with an emphasis on the context of literacy. It allowed the children to speak for themselves, without the filtering of abstract constructs and the melting of individuals into general groups. It is hoped this research contributes to the general literature about children with learning disabilities, by more closely examining and deepening our sensitivity to what it is actually like for children with learning disabilities as they go about their daily activities.

Prior to conducting this research, I felt that if children with learning disabilities indeed experienced some or all of the outcomes described in the literature, then life would be expected to be difficult for them in many ways, in a variety of contexts. Therefore, as practitioners working with children with learning disabilities, we needed to be more aware of these potential outcomes, and develop sensitivity to their situations, as well as strategies and methods to support them. Schools typically offer a range of

support for children identified with a variety of learning and behavioural problems, such as specialised curricula, behavioural programming, individualised attention from teachers and paraprofessionals, resource rooms, and counselling. Children with learning disabilities may benefit from some or all of these interventions, depending upon the difficulties they experience as individuals. While each child presents with a unique "package" of strengths, weaknesses and needs, and has to be supported accordingly, there may be some common experiences among children with learning disabilities that could help guide us in developing the models of support, and what to make available to such students.

I expected that this research would help confirm and "flesh out" previous findings, by allowing the participants to express their personal views of their daily experiences, and distilling the common experiences, and comparing them with those found by previous researchers. I expected that this would yield implications for further research and for counselling practice. Having worked with children with learning disabilities for more than a decade, I had encountered many children who seemed to experience some of the outcomes described in the literature. I wanted to somehow retell their stories, by combining the voices of children currently experiencing life with learning disabilities. Perhaps if I could listen to their perspectives about situations that they encountered every day, I could discover the things that "worked" and those that did not work, and reveal some direction for every day practice.

<u>Conceptual and Operational Definition of LD</u>

Although the field of learning disabilities is a century old (Hinshelwood, 1895; Morgan, 1896), there remains a significant lack of agreement on key definitional issues (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Shaw, Cullen, McGuire & Brinckerhoff, 1995; Siegel, 1989, 1999; Swanson, 1991; Tomlan & Mather, 1996; Wong, 1988). Researchers from various disciplines have studied the difficulties of children with learning problems, including researchers from medical, psychiatric, educational, cognitive, behavioural, and social theory backgrounds. To a large extent, these researchers have been identifying, examining, and describing similar kinds of problems, but have advanced differing conceptual and operational definitions that have affected research in the field (Doris, 1993; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Siegel, 1999).

It is important in the research context that conceptual and operational definitional issues be resolved, to facilitate communication among researchers, and ensure that findings are meaningful (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Siegel, 1999). But, while many educational jurisdictions have agreed on common conceptual definitions of learning disabilities, most have developed local operational definitions and criteria for identifying children with learning disabilities. The result is that children with a broad range of difficulties are included in the LD category, and researchers in different geographical areas, and/or operating from different theoretical orientations, may have conducted their studies on somewhat different populations (Morris et al., 1994). In some cases, the level of severity of difficulties required for identifying a learning disability makes a significant difference in terms of the nature of the group sampled. In some educational jurisdictions, for example, a discrepancy of one standard deviation between achievement and IQ is

considered to be indicative of a learning disability, while in British Columbia, the discrepancy must be at least two standard deviations (B. C. Ministry of Education, 1995). It can be expected that the severity of difficulty could make a difference in the experiences of children, so it is important that some homogeneity of severity be sought in sampling. In other cases, it is the placement itself that determines the inclusion in studies. Many special education programmes or classes have included any combination of children with various problems including ADHD, conduct problems, social skills deficits and emotional problems, in addition to, or in combination with academic difficulties, and some researchers have drawn their samples from these programmes without regard to presenting problem or diagnosis (Bender & Wall, 1994; Morris et al., 1994).

It is important to specify the type of difficulty the participating children have in common, so that readers are able to judge the extent to which the results might be transferred to children in their own experience. Several authors have offered standards for describing subjects of research on learning disabilities (Hammill, Bryant, Brown, Dunn, & Marten, 1989; Rosenberg et al. 1992; Smith, et al. 1984).

For the purposes of this study, I have adopted the conceptual and operational definitions of learning disabilities employed by the Ministry of Education in the Province of British Columbia, where the current study was conducted. The definition was developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1981), and represents what Hammill (1990) calls the "emerging consensus" in the LD field. The NJCLD (1981) definition is as follows:

> Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and

use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities, but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences. (p. 77)

The B. C. Ministry of Education (1995) adds that "for the purposes of this document the term 'learning disability' includes conditions described as dyslexia, dyscalculalia [sic] or dysgraphia, and may include students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD)" (p. 77).

The B. C. Ministry of Education (1995) further operationalised the classification by requiring that:

- severe difficulties in the acquisition of basic academic skills and/or school performance persist after classroom-based remedial interventions, curricular adaptations and learning assistance support.

The severity of these academic difficulties must be such that students demonstrate:

- persistent difficulties in the acquisition of pre-academic skills such as recognition of letters and numbers in the early primary years; **and/or**

- persistent difficulties in the acquisition of reading, writing and/or arithmetic skills in the later primary years; **and/or**

- a discrepancy of 2 standard deviations between estimated learning potential and academic achievement as measured by norm-referenced instruments in Grades 3-12; **and**

- there is a significant weakness in one or more cognitive process (e.g., perception, memory, attention, receptive or expressive language abilities, visual-spatial abilities) relative to overall intellectual functioning, as measured by norm-referenced assessment instruments, which directly impacts learning and school performance. (pp. 77-78)

For operational purposes, the B. C. Ministry of Education has determined that 1% – 2% of children will experience learning disabilities severe enough to require support beyond regular school programming. By contrast to the expected prevalence of learning disabilities in British Columbia, Finlan (1992) published a review of prevalence in the fifty United States. The prevalence of students identified with LD ranged from 2.19% to 8.66% among children aged 7 – 16 years. Forty-one states had prevalences within one standard deviation of the mean of 4.78% (3.69% – 5.87%). The differences in prevalence of identified children were in part attributed to the selection method or criteria used. Those with the lowest percentages tended to adhere to discrepancy formulas (achievement<ability), while those with the highest rates used no method. More recently, Henley, Ramsey, and Algozzine (1999), quoting 1996 U. S. Department of Education data, reported that about 5% of the school population received special education services under the category of specific learning disabilities (p. 147). Even the strictest criteria used in the United States produced higher rates of identification than the 1% – 2% projected by the B. C. Ministry of Education.

Target Population

This study included only children whose learning disability primarily affected their literacy skills. Including only children with severe reading and writing problems provided several research advantages. First, while there are many subtypes of learning disabilities, the most widely encountered and studied involve literacy (Siegel, 1999). Literacy impacts virtually all subject areas, and represents one of the most important and valued skills taught in school. The impact on the child of having poor literacy skills is

likely to be greater than that of any other academic skill deficit. Second, it was expected that there would be ample material from which to elicit the child's experiences as every student is expected to engage in literacy activities many times each school day. Third, with the sample of participants being relatively homogeneous (in terms of type and severity of disability), the children's concrete experiences would be easier to compare, which would facilitate the interpretation of themes and commonalities of experience across cases.

This study included only children whose disabilities were "severe" according to the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria. This limitation was effective for two main reasons. First, it ensured that those children selected for participation fell within a well defined, narrow set of parameters of intellectual ability and academic achievement which is readily communicated to readers, and can facilitate replication (Hammill et al., 1989). Second, it facilitated the location and selection of potential participants. The children who had been identified by their school district and placed in a specialised programme for children with learning disabilities were readily available, and easily located for the study.

Choice of Method for the Study

To understand the common experiences of similar individuals requires a human science approach, and the phenomenological methodology appeared to provide the most appropriate means of approaching the topic. I sought the subjective, personal experiences of individual children with learning disabilities, in order to discover the experiences common to many. This methodology is explained at length in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

This review highlights aspects of the research literature that have addressed the experience of children with learning disabilities and explains how the present study contributes to the wealth of knowledge we already have. The chapter is organised in six sections, moving from the general to the specific, from an outside to an inside perspective. The first section provides an overview of the characteristics and experiences of children with learning disabilities as presented in the research literature. This serves as the context for the study. The second section reviews anecdotal and case reports about adults, adolescents and children with learning disabilities. The experiences of psychologists, social workers, teachers, and parents of these individuals indirectly illuminate the experience of those with a learning disability. The third section examines the literature related to the experience of adults with learning disabilities, including retrospective accounts of their childhood experiences, and their on-going experiences related to their disability. Adult respondents provide important insights that are only found after the completion of an experience, and that also underscore the importance of continued research on the impact of learning disabilities throughout the life-span. The fourth section examines the literature related to the experience of adolescents and young adults who are just leaving their school experience or are still within it. These studies provide insights into the everyday experiences of youth with learning disabilities as they work through Secondary School and the transition to adulthood. The fifth section explores the few studies that have sought the perspectives of children with learning

disabilities. This research is closest to the methodology employed in the current study and provides the point of departure and direction for further research. The sixth and final section of this chapter summarises the gaps in our understanding and outlines the rationale for the current study.

Characteristics and Experiences of Persons with LD

A growing body of research has focused on the behavioural characteristics and social-emotional experiences of children and adolescents with learning disabilities (Bender, 1998; Bender & Wall, 1994; Bryan & Bryan, 1981; Gresham, 1992; Heath & Ross, 2000; Huntington & Bender, 1993). A variety of characteristics and experiences have been isolated, and operationalised within tests and instruments designed to measure and "quantify" them. The literature is replete with studies in which children and adolescents with learning disabilities are found (on average) to differ (statistically) from their normally achieving peers on a variety of characteristics and experiences of interest. Research has moved from including one or two isolated variables to increasingly complex designs, in an effort to create a more complete impression of the ways in which children with learning disabilities differ from and are similar to their normally achieving peers (Huntington & Bender, 1993).

Children and adolescents with learning disabilities have long been believed to have more problems with self-concept, self-esteem, self-perceptions, or self-worth than do their non-disabled peers (Bender & Wall, 1994). However, studies of the global self-esteem of children and adolescents with learning disabilities have not yielded consistent results (Bear & Minke, 1996; Huntington & Bender, 1993). Although some researchers

have found that students with learning disabilities have lower global self-concept (Grolnick & Ryan, 1990; Heyman, 1990; Leondari, 1993; Montgomery, 1995; Rogers & Saklofske, 1985; Rosenthal, 1973; Tomlan, 1985; Winne, Woodlands, & Wong, 1982) than normally achieving peers, others found that this was not always the case (Coleman & Minnett, 1993; Kistner, Haskett, White, & Robbins, 1987).

In order to explore these inconclusive results, most recent research on children with learning disabilities' self-concept and similar constructs has made use of instruments that allow "more refined understanding of self-concept" (Huntington & Bender, 1993, p. 160). It became more evident that children with learning disabilities exhibited lower self-esteem than their non-disabled peers, not in all areas, but more specifically in academic self-concept and self-perceptions of competence (Bear, Juvonen, & McInerney, 1993; Chapman, 1988; Coleman, McHam, & Minnett, 1992; Coleman & Minnett, 1993; Heath, 1995; Short, 1992; Smith & Nagle, 1995; Vaughn, & Haager, 1992).

As Huntington and Bender (1993) pointed out, "while deficits in self-concept may affect school achievement and social/emotional relationships, there is no evidence that this deficit would be life threatening..." (p. 159). However, they cautioned, more incidence of depression, anxiety, and suicide has been found in adolescents with learning disabilities (Bender & Wall, 1994; Cohen, 1986; Faigel, Doak, Howard, & Sigel, 1992; Heath, 1995; Heath & Ross, 2000; Huntington & Bender, 1993; Newcomer & Barenbaum, 1995; Short, 1992) and this should be taken seriously in our treatment of this population.

Attributions for success and/or failure (locus of control) have been explored in the research concerning children and adolescents with learning disabilities almost as much as

self-concept (Bender & Wall, 1994). The general finding has been that children and adolescents with learning disabilities tend to ascribe external causes for their successes and internal causes for their failures more often than do their non-disabled peers (Bender & Wall, 1994; Chapman, 1988; Grolnick & Ryan, 1990; Reeve & Loper, 1983; Rogers & Saklofske, 1985; Short, 1992). Children with LD might attribute their success to powerful others rather than to their effort. However, the child with low self-esteem appears to attribute failures to internal factors. Rogers and Saklofske (1985) suggested that some children with LD might be defending themselves against feelings of inadequacy by blaming external sources for their academic failures, while others, with low self-perceptions, might blame themselves (or lack of ability) for their academic failures (p. 276). This contention was supported by Bear and Minke (1996), who found that when it came to evaluating their own academic competence, children with LD seemed to have a selective focus on favourable criteria, which helped in maintaining high academic self-worth. They reported that the students receiving individualised instruction and more positive feedback held more favourable self-perceptions.

Bender and Wall (1994) suggested that motivation was another social-emotional variable that has been extensively studied. Research has shown that children and adolescents with learning disabilities tend to be less motivated academically than their normally achieving or high achieving peers (Bender & Wall, 1994; Chapman, 1988; Grolnick, & Ryan, 1990; Licht & Kistner, 1986; Reeve & Loper, 1983; Short, 1992). Children and adolescents with LD exhibit more learned helplessness (Kronick, 1987; Rosenthal, 1992) and have lower expectations for academic success (Chapman, 1988).

Several studies have shown that children and adolescents with learning disabilities are lonelier than their non-disabled peers are (Bender & Wall 1994; Kronick, 1978). Some researchers attribute this to poor social skills or lack of social competence and lower peer acceptance (Bruininks, 1978; Bryan & Bryan, 1976, 1981; Coleman, McHam, & Minnett, 1992; Coleman & Minnett, 1993; Haager & Vaughn, 1995; la Greca & Vaughn, 1992; Osman & Blinder, 1982; Smith & Nagle, 1995; Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1994, 1995; Vaughn & Hogan, 1994; Wessel, 1986).

Children with learning disabilities are so often found in the literature to have problems with social competence that there has been considerable debate about whether to include social skills deficits as a category or subtype of learning disability (Gresham & Elliott, 1989; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Swanson & Malone, 1992). This issue has evidently not been fully resolved by research as the debates about definitions and characteristics of children with learning disabilities continue in recent literature (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Siegel, 1999). These studies tend to explore social skills deficits from the perspective of teachers, parents, and/or peers, by way of rating scales, but rarely is the perspective of the child with the learning disability sought (Bryan & Bryan, 1981).

Researchers have observed that many of the characteristics found in children with LD persist into adulthood (Buchanan & Wolf, 1986; Gerber, et al., 1990).

Anecdotal and Case Reports of Persons with LD

Psychologists, social workers, paediatricians, and other professionals have written from accumulated clinical wisdom about individuals with learning disabilities (Dane, 1990; Osman, & Blinder, 1982; Schwarz, 1992; Ungerleider, 1985). Some utilise

informal case studies to illustrate what they have discovered to be general themes. These works tend to echo the results of quantitative research, reporting specific examples of what is generally found to apply to children, adolescents, and adults with LD. Several authors had observed that children and adolescents with learning disabilities appeared to have low self-esteem (Pickar, 1986). Burka (1983) wrote of how the child with learning disabilities "... must come to terms with the continual threat to his or her self-esteem because of the difficulties experienced in school" (p. 291). Burka went on to state:

> A learning-disabled child is faced with an incredibly difficult problem concerning self-concept and self-esteem. Learning is such an important part of one's self-esteem during the school-age years, and yet, this is the very aspect of the child's life where he is having the greatest difficulty. How is this child going to make sense out of who he is as a learner in relation to his peers? ...part of our task in helping learning-disabled children is to provide better ways of understanding and conceptualizing the learning process so that the child can comprehend his or her abilities in a way that provides a foundation for healthier self-esteem. (p. 294)

Other authors described their experiences of the low self-esteem of people with learning disabilities (Byrne & Crawford, 1990; Dinklage, 1991; Rosenthal, 1992), depression and anxiety (Cohen, 1986), feelings of inferiority (Cook, 1979), frustration (Cohen, 1986; Silver & Hagin, 1990), poor social adjustment (Migden, 1983, 1990) and learned helplessness (Dinklage, 1991; Kronick, 1978, 1987). These practitioners who work with children, adolescents, and adults with learning disabilities have seen first-hand these manifestations, and their accumulated wisdom supports the findings from other, empirical research. However, none of these writers provide an in-depth examination of the day-to-day experiences of children within the specific context of working at tasks in school at which they struggle. Similarly, none have directly sought the opinions, perceptions and experiences of the children themselves in a systematic manner.

Several parents have written accounts of the experience of their own child with learning disabilities, and/or their family's experience of raising him/her (Donawa, 1995; Wylie, 1984). These stories, often told in lay language, often with passion and poignancy, provide insights into the everyday experiences of specific individuals. All too often, however, there is scant technical information about the individual which would allow the reader to draw conclusions about the type and severity of the learning disability, or the extent to which the interventions attempted in school would match those of other children. Although their stories are compelling, they too often leave doubt about their applicability or utility in educational practice, or in supporting these individuals in other ways. Also, these accounts do not present the students' point of view. Others are speaking for them, and while they are often insightful and provide perspectives of great value, they nonetheless do not speak with the voice of the child with learning disabilities.

Adult Retrospective Accounts

Some researchers have interviewed adults with learning disabilities, seeking their retrospective accounts of their childhood and current experiences. Several of these studies have explored the factors that have led to success for adults with learning disabilities. These studies help us understand that not only do the problems of individuals with LD persist throughout the life-span (Buchanan & Wolf, 1986; Lichtenstein, 1993; Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1992), but that there are several consistent factors which are related to successful and unsuccessful outcomes. Success seems to be accompanied by self-awareness and acceptance of a learning disability, a reframing of experience, a proactive approach, a sense of control in life, a desire to

succeed, perseverance, resiliency, emotional stability, coping strategies, stress reduction strategies, appropriate goal setting and goal directedness, pursuit of careers which maximise strengths and minimise weaknesses, and presence and use of effective support systems. Unsuccessful adults with LD tend to display a lack of these characteristics (Gerber & Reiff, 1991; Gerber, Reiff, & Ginsberg, 1996; Lichtenstein, 1993; Reiff & Gerber, 1994; Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1993; Reiff, Ginsberg, & Gerber, 1995; Spekman, et al., 1992; Wilczenski, 1992).

Several adults with learning disabilities have written about their own personal experiences, recalling school years, and describing their efforts to overcome their challenges and achieve success (Brown, 1994; Druck, 1994; Fairbanks & Hill, 1989; Weinstein, 1994). These compelling stories provide insight into individual experiences, but may not be representative of the experiences of most of the children with LD, in that all of them were successful enough with literacy skill development and general academics to progress into post-secondary education and were able to write about their experiences. "Glenn", for example, was a first year university student, who, with the help of his LD tutor (Fairbanks), explored the literature about LD, formed opinions based on his own experience and interviews with peers, and presented his case history to an education conference (Fairbanks, 1992; Fairbanks & Hill, 1989). His story was engaging and terrible, because the intervention provided in his schools seemed to imprison and restrict his development.

> Being in LD classes was really embarrassing, and I always tried to hide it.
> It had a very destructive effect on my social life. I had a very difficult
> time making friends and an even harder time trying to accept the fact that I
> was different (Fairbanks, 1992, p. 475).

He and Fairbanks present a passionate story of "emancipation" as Glenn struggled to re-enter the mainstream education programme, and learn the necessary skills he was prevented from learning while in a learning disabilities resource programme. Some of the impact of his story is blunted, however, by the admission that "...he was never considered severely disabled; his profile seemed to place him in a gray area somewhere between learning disabled and 'normal' " (Fairbanks, 1992, p. 485). This leaves the reader wondering to what extent Glenn's story is related to those of students with "severe" learning disabilities.

Adult informants provide some research advantages, in that they are better able to adopt a retrospective attitude, can reflect on their childhood school experiences as a totality (having moved past school) and can articulate their feelings and perceptions more fluently than children. However, there are some disadvantages to using these reports to understand the experiences of children, such as the blurring of memories over time and the loss of immediacy available to children still in the situation. It also seems that the experiences reported by adults took place in the past, sometimes many years prior to their reporting, when they were children or adolescents. This is very important in the current study, as it seems that the experiences of the participants in this study may be considerably different from those of children a generation ago.

The Experience of Adolescents with LD

Several recent qualitative studies have been conducted which have directly sought the perspectives of adolescents with LD about issues concerning their experiences in

school and the transition to adulthood (Bryant, 1989; Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Guterman, 1995; McPhail, 1993; Reid & Button, 1995).

Bryant (1989) conducted in-depth interviews with four minority high school students who were labelled "learning disabled", seeking their experiences of special education placements. Bryant interviewed the participants for two hours, using an informal interview guide in a subject-centred manner. Four themes emerged from the interviews. These were problems related to getting in and out of the special education placement, the informants' anger and embarrassment about being in special education and attempts to conceal their status, coping with the stigma, and the informants' feelings about their teachers.

Bryant's results were echoed in the case study conducted by Freeman and Hutchinson (1994), in which they worked with one youth for 14 sessions in the context of an anger management programme. "Eric" was felt to be at risk for dropping out of school, so Freeman and Hutchinson (1994) sought to understand what factors would influence his decision to remain in school or drop out. Analysis of transcripts revealed three overriding themes in his discussions: the importance of relationships with teachers and their interest in the student, the importance of peer interaction (friends and "enemies"), and the importance of the student's engagement with education. Eric's area of disability affected his achievement in math, and not surprisingly, he failed his Math class. Although he never talked about the experience of doing the math, he reported on the relationship between himself and the teacher. His math teacher apparently "gave no evidence of being concerned" (p. 140) about his lack of attendance or task completion, and "took no interest in Eric's learning needs" (p. 140). On the other hand, Eric was fully

engaged in Science class and in the Resource room, evidently because his teachers made him feel valued and needed. "In both cases where he had a sense of belonging, Eric was successful" (p. 141). The considerable length of time spent by the researchers with Eric allowed them to obtain a deep and thorough understanding of his perspectives and to write with confidence about the alienation and acceptance he felt, and the subtle factors which tipped the scales and kept him in school.

Freeman and Hutchinson provided enough detailed information about Eric's learning profile and situation to allow the reader to confidently transfer their results to similar circumstances. As with other studies of adolescents, the focus was primarily on relationships with both peers and teachers. As a major developmental task of adolescence, it is not surprising that little else was talked about in 14 sessions. However, this focus leaves out the experience of the academic tasks engaged in by the student, which is presumably a large portion of the school day. This, in part, is the focus of the current study, as I attempted to elicit the participant's experiences of reading and writing and other academic tasks. In part, my research attempted to discover what is it like for students to engage in their area of academic weakness. The current study also sought the experiences of younger children, in part to avoid the social focus typical of adolescents.

Guterman (1995) conducted interviews with nine Secondary School students, most of whom had been receiving learning disabilities services since third grade. They were asked a series of questions in order to explore three major questions. These included how they thought LD services affected their acceptance by peers, how their self-concept was affected by receiving LD services, and how they perceived the effectiveness of LD services. The interviewed adolescents reported feelings of being stigmatised by

their special class placement and fears of being socially isolated if general education students were aware of the placement. They evidently "... viewed being defined as 'learning disabled' negatively" (p. 118), despite claiming to have come to terms with it. In terms of efficacy of the special education placement, the respondents provided ambivalent reports. While suggesting that the curriculum was "low-level, irrelevant, and repetitive" (p. 119), and that they had yet to master the basic skills, they nonetheless felt that the placement was wise, noting that it allowed for more individualised attention than would be available in general education classes. They preferred the separate class to receiving help in the general education class, where attention would be drawn to their difficulties. Guterman observed that most of her respondents found non-academic areas for success (e.g., athletics, automotive, 4-H, photography).

Guterman's (1995) study provides some glimpses into the experience of adolescents with learning disabilities in special class placements. In the excerpts quoted from the interviews, poignant images and feelings are evoked. Guterman asked the students about their social status, their general self-perceptions, and whether being in the programme had helped them. However, like Freeman and Hutchinson (1994), she did not explore the experiences of day-to-day activities involving their specific learning disability (e.g., literacy).

McPhail (1993) conducted a "life-stream" study comparing adolescents with LD with low-achieving and average-achieving peers. She provided the students with "beepers", and had them write their subjective experiences for a week, every time they were beeped. They were to respond to three pages of questions each time, that focused on their affect, activation (current level of mental activity), cognitive efficiency,

motivation, challenges of the activity, positive or negative feedback from others, and self-esteem. Significant differences were found between school hours and after-school hours. Unlike their low-achieving and average-achieving peers, students with LD were more positive in their affective responses during school than after, but the three groups were indistinguishable in affect after school. This relatively positive response from the adolescents with LD toward school may be due to the early detection and remediation of their learning problems. McPhail observed that early detection of their learning disabilities led to years of "individualized attention, small classes, increased parental involvement, and levels of expectations commensurate with their abilities..." (p. 626) that may account for their higher level of satisfaction with school. The suggestion that adolescents with learning disabilities feel better about themselves during school than after school poses some interesting challenges to conventional thinking about their experiences. McPhail did not detail the types of activities the students were engaged in when "beeped" at school, about which they evidently felt good. Further research is needed to explore in detail their actual experiences of day-to-day activities, especially in areas of challenge for them.

Reid and Button (1995) had six adolescents with learning disabilities work together to write an essay describing their experience. The essay is brief, and shows signs of having been written by six adolescents with language and learning disabilities, but it conveys the essential raw feelings of the general experience. Reid and Button focused on the story of one 13-year-old girl, "Anna" who was open about describing her experiences. They generated narrative analyses of interview transcripts. Themes of isolation, victimisation, and betrayal emerged from the stories of Anna and the other

adolescents with LD. The adolescents described feeling isolated and lonely (e.g., " I only have one friend 'cause I've got a disability," (p. 609)). They felt victimised by peers, teachers, parents, and siblings. They felt misunderstood and unappreciated. They did not like peers calling them "retarded", but at the same time, wanted others to recognise that they did have particular areas of weakness.

Reid and Button (1995) observed that there was a positive side as well. The students enjoyed learning, felt that their parents and teachers were caring and concerned, and knew that they were labelled in an effort to help them. In their conclusion, Reid and Button paraphrase the stories of their participants:

> I am a person who is sometimes and in some ways unacceptable as a friend and classmate, as a brother or sister, and as a son or daughter. I am not retarded, but neither am I as able as most of my peers. I am not clear, however, about what my problems are. I am a person who, because of difficulties in school, has little control over my life. I have few choices and little voice in the decisions that affect me. I find life rather hard and people rather intimidating, but I get along with it as best I can. (p. 612)

As in other research described in this section (e.g., Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Guterman, 1995), the adolescents with learning disabilities seemed to talk more about relationships with peers, teachers, and family members than about their experiences with actual school work. Reid and Button focused on the relationship issues in their discussion, but did provide a few brief examples of the experience of performing tasks that are most difficult. For example, when asked to "think of a time that was not fun" Anna responded with two general "times":

> When I have science, I sometimes need help. ...we had to read out of the dictionary to see what it was to put the names down. And I had trouble with that. I couldn't do it like everybody else. One thing that's hard for me is when I'm in regular class and we're supposed to read this piece of paper (two pages or a story or something), I'm halfway on the first page

and they're done. And it makes me pretty mad, because I can't do the reading as fast. (p. 610)

Reid and Button left the interpretation of this story to the reader. It is my opinion that further exploration of the experiences of children with LD working in their areas of weaknesses is needed.

What is missing from these studies of adolescents is detailed attention to the experience of doing the tasks that are alleged to be hardest for the individual. Most concentrate on social interaction, which is understandable since most adolescents seem to talk more about those situations than about schoolwork. The knowledge we have gained from this focus and analysis of social experiences is invaluable in our overall understanding of the experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities. More attention must now be turned toward their experiences of the schoolwork itself, and their struggles in specific areas affected by their learning disability. This is important to help fine-tune the day-to-day programming in schools. To the extent that previous research has accurately portrayed the experience of children with learning disabilities as one of struggle, it is important that we as educators address these struggles directly. Understanding the impact of our programming choices on the students we serve should assist us in making appropriate adjustments for the better.

It has been well documented in the literature on motivation and learning disabilities, that the most successful students are those who feel successful, and who experience positive experiences in their daily activities (Grolnick & Ryan, 1990; Licht, 1983; Morvitz & Motta, 1992; Short, 1992). Failures breed avoidance, which decreases the likelihood of further success (Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992).

The Experience of Children with LD

Few qualitative studies have explored the experiences of children with learning disabilities by seeking the perspectives and feelings of the children themselves (Albinger, 1995). An exception was the study done by Albinger (1995) who investigated "the microissues formed by children's perceptions and their feelings about being labelled learning disabled" (p. 615). She interviewed and observed a number of children with whom she worked, and studied their school records. Several common themes emerged from Albinger's interviews. Many of these were consistent with findings from studies with adolescent participants (Bryant, 1989; Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Guterman, 1995; McPhail, 1993; Reid & Button, 1995).

Albinger's participants all recognised that they went to resource room for extra help, and yet fabricated stories to cover up their attendance in special education class "... to protect themselves from the rejection they feared by their peers" (p. 617). Like many of the adolescents from the studies above, most of the younger children had ambivalent feelings about the resource room: they liked the extra help and attention, but would prefer to have the teacher come to their classes instead. They were concerned about leaving the class for extra help, because the work they missed would have to be made up later.

Most of the children perceived their abilities to be weaker than those of their peers, and felt that their peers thought them "stupid". All had experienced name-calling. However, only three were aware they had learning disabilities, with the older children being better able to understand their disabilities than younger children were. Most were able to identify their learning disability in terms of what they could not do. The younger ones tended to make sense of it by imagining that it was their fault, that they did not work

hard enough, or that there was something wrong with them. The children felt sad, mad, frustrated, and/or "it's not fair" about their learning problems. All of the children revealed low self-esteem through negative statements about themselves. However, each of them could find something that they were good at, generally referring to overt acts (baseball, Nintendo), and areas other than in traditional academic skills. The older children also felt that "Labelling is bad because it says what we can't do" (p. 619).

Thus Albinger's study contributed an overview of the children's perceptions about their learning disabilities and their school programme. However, she did not specifically examine children's experiences of specific tasks which were challenging (such as reading and writing).

Vespi and Yewchuk (1992) conducted a phenomenological study of the social and emotional characteristics of four "gifted-learning disabled" boys. They found that most of the boys "expressed generally positive feelings of self-image and self-confidence" (p. 64). They believed in their own abilities and this led to personal motivation for success. All four children expressed frustration at being bright, but underachieving. These boys had unrealistic expectations for achievement, feeling that they should be able to easily learn new skills. These high expectations promoted fear of failure. They tended to avoid academic tasks in which they anticipated failure, or to rush through them as quickly as possible. Stress led to self-doubt for two boys. Two boys also experienced other "negative" emotions, including anger, sadness, and anxiety as a result of academic problems.

Vespi and Yewchuk's study was similar in focus to the present study, except that they included students with the combined diagnosis of gifted-LD. They included fewer

students and interviewed them for shorter periods than the present study, and sought a broader base of social and emotional experience than the focus on areas of academic challenge presented here. Nonetheless, their results point to some needed areas for further study. It is important to explore in detail those "negative emotions" which result from academic problems (especially in activities that pose challenges because of specific learning disabilities).

Rationale for the Study

It is evident from a review of the literature that children with learning disabilities are more likely than their normally achieving peers to have a hard time in school. It is important that this experience be better understood, in order that policy makers, as well as front line professionals be able to provide the best circumstances for children with LD to receive their education. While much is known about characteristics of the "average" child with LD as the result of broad quantitative studies, less is understood about the day-to-day experiences of individual children as they encounter the school system and tackle the tasks that require proficiency in their weakest skill areas. Numerous case studies by professionals and parents have alerted us to individual experiences, and fill in some of the gaps left by the broad generalisations. To the extent that the individuals presented in these cases are similar to those in our experience, we can transfer the observations and come to a better understanding of the children with whom we work. Unfortunately, some of these cases concern individuals who might not be considered severely learning disabled in many jurisdictions, who had complex multiple handicaps, and/or who lived in environments which might have contributed to the difficulties observed.

Some researchers have attempted to bridge the gap between generalised quantitative methodologies and idiosyncratic case studies by conducting qualitative research with small groups of individuals with LD. Such studies involving adults have shed light on the post-school experiences of people with learning disabilities, their continuing struggles, their triumphs, and the factors facilitating their success. Much of the attention in these studies focuses on the present, and what little recall there was of childhood/school experiences was limited by the passage of time.

In an effort to move closer to school experiences while they are being lived, some researchers explored the world of adolescents with learning disabilities while they were still in school. These accounts provide compelling stories of struggle that enrich the literature. They tend to focus, as is common among adolescents, upon the relationships and social experiences in school, but attend little to the actual schoolwork faced by these youth. They suggest that the efforts of teachers, parents, and peers to engage them in education pay off in self-esteem and in keeping them in school. They suggest that adolescents with LD feel alienated, misunderstood, frustrated, depressed, humiliated, and angry about being labelled, placed in special education classes, victimised by peers, teachers, and family, and having to endure too much schoolwork which is too difficult, too boring, or completely irrelevant in their world.

These studies involving adolescents provide some excellent points of departure for further research, but adolescents tend to face different challenges than children. Their school programmes are structured differently than those in the early grades (usually with multiple classrooms, teachers, schedules, and options for non-academic work). They are assumed to have achieved sufficient basic skills to function in academically oriented

courses. Often students with LD have been identified long before reaching Secondary School, and have experienced several years of interventions to prepare them for independent learning. The social life of the adolescent tends to take priority over all other activities and motivations in school and out. In other words, the adolescent with learning disabilities experiences school in considerably different ways than does the child with LD in Elementary grades.

Very little research has been done with younger children with learning disabilities acting as participants, contributing their thoughts and perceptions on their experiences. The two such studies discussed above (Albinger, 1995; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992) have contributed significantly to our understanding of their world. To some extent, the reader can observe that the experiences of adults and adolescents, studied in more detail, have their analogues in childhood. Very young children appear to be less aware of their learning disabilities as such, but can articulate clearly their feelings about going to resource rooms for help, about being called "retard", and about being a poor reader. In their explorations of the broad experiences of having learning disabilities, previous researchers have touched upon the experiences involved with the academic tasks that present challenges and those that provide successes, but none have made it their direct focus.

There is clearly more room for research to explore these experiences in detail. The children themselves can put voice to their experiences like no outside observer can. While there are some pitfalls and problems associated with engaging children as participants in phenomenological studies, the benefits of accessing their experiences more directly outweigh the possible difficulties. Choice of participants and the

associated issues are discussed further in Chapter 3. It was the purpose of the present study to offer children with learning disabilities the opportunity to express their experiences in these specific contexts, and to extract themes and commonalities to generate a more comprehensive picture of their experiences. This should be helpful to people who work with children with learning disabilities, who could gain a deeper understanding of the day-to-day experiences, and perhaps adjust the programming they offer in schools accordingly. The following chapter provides details of the methodology that was employed to achieve this purpose.

Chapter 3

Method of Investigation

The goal of this research was to explore the experiences of children with learning disabilities in the specific context of their area of academic challenge. In particular, I was interested in learning what it was like for children who had struggled to learn literacy skills, during their day to day school activities where literacy was important. In order to understand those experiences from the children's perspectives, a phenomenological philosophical approach and human science research methodology was employed to facilitate discovery of the lived experience of the participants (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1970a, 1970b, 1975, 1985; Karlsson, 1993; Kvale, 1983; McPhail, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1989, 1992; van Manen, 1990).

The general methodology for this study involved selecting participants, interviewing each participant several times, recording, transcribing, interpreting and analysing the interviews, describing the experiences of individuals, and extracting themes common to the participants.

This chapter describes the methodology employed. It includes sections about the research question, the role of the researcher, the theory of the phenomenological method, selection of and access to the participants, confidentiality and other ethical considerations, types and methods of data collection, data analysis and interpretation, validity, delimitations, and anticipated outcomes.

Research Question

This study was designed to help answer the research question: What are the common experiences among children with learning disabilities in literacy during situations of reading and writing in school?

Researcher's Involvement

The stance of the researcher in phenomenological research is not of an objective, distant scientist observing interactions among variables in the "real world" (Colaizzi, 1978). Rather, the researcher becomes the instrument of observation and measurement as she/he immerses herself/himself in the experience of the participants. She/he makes an effort to maintain a professional relationship with the participants, but views the process of data gathering as a reflexive, intersubjective enterprise, in which the participants are considered to be experts in their own experience, and where "reality" is socially constructed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1989). The researcher, then, assumes a posture of openness to possibilities, attempts to "level the playing field" with the participants to reduce power differences, and strives toward recording the participants' constructions of experience, with as few as possible of the researcher's own biases influencing the interpretation (Giorgi, 1975). The researcher is respectful of the participants' perspectives, and honours their interpretations by reflecting them as accurately as possible (van Manen, 1990)

As the researcher in this study, I needed to carefully explore and express my own biases and assumptions regarding the phenomena being studied. The practice known as bracketing (Giorgi, 1975) in qualitative research involves making overt those

assumptions and biases; not ignoring or suppressing them, but acknowledging them, and allowing readers to understand where the researcher is "coming from". As Kvale (1983) suggests, the researcher should be presuppositionless, but as Hammersley and Atkinson (1992) remind us, the researcher should be informed and aware of theories about the phenomenon to be studied.

Fontana and Frey (1994), in their discussion of the interview, suggested one way of minimising the interviewer's influence includes making her/his assumptions and premises as clear as possible. In my case, I came equipped with several biases and assumptions. This is due to several major formative processes that are on going.

First, and probably most profound among these is my own childhood. I experienced many of the same processing and developmental difficulties as children with learning disabilities. Although I would certainly not have met the current B. C. Ministry of Education criteria for "severe learning disabilities", I nonetheless recall struggling with early literacy skills as a child. I continue to read very slowly and must re-read several times. I recall the anxiety and humiliation I experienced when called upon to read orally to the class, and how those feelings overwhelmed me and exacerbated my reading difficulty. I recall being anxious about "spelling bees", where I would be close to panic as my name was called.

In addition to mild literacy difficulties, I have auditory processing and short-term memory difficulties, which result in me "missing" a fair amount of what is said to me when I am not giving my undivided attention. My general intelligence is adequate, but I recall many small failures in school, and my overall education has been quite variable, with some failing grades and some exceptionally strong grades, and it has taken

considerably longer than expected. I was sometimes a disappointment and frustration to my teachers and I was often in trouble for not "paying attention" at school and home. My uneven ability to meet expectations has left a lasting sense of insecurity and inadequacy regarding my competence, as I continue to disappoint others and myself. Much of the impetus behind the present inquiry rests in my own experience.

The second formative process has been my formal education as a graduate student in educational psychology in the mid to late 1980's. My Master of Education programme taught me skills in counselling and psycho-educational assessment, and I learned a great deal about learning, and learning difficulties. The theories and research considered "state of the art" in 1986 are no longer as current as when I was in my master's programme, and while I have continued to read journals and attend conferences, those formative experiences tended to shape my thinking and act as filters for subsequent learning.

A third, related, process has been my career in educational psychology from the late 1980's to the present. I have worked for over ten years as an educational psychologist assessing the abilities of children with learning difficulties and providing support for teachers, parents, and children. I have been professionally connected with the population known as LD since 1988, and this immersion has provided me with considerable experience. It has also been extremely formative in my conceptualisation of the LD phenomenon as well as of the problems in the research literature. My professional colleagues and the regulations imposed by the school systems and B. C. Ministry of Education (1995) guidelines have influenced my thinking in both positive and negative ways. The emphasis on testing, statistics, and cognitive features of children has led me away from the experience as lived by the actual humans involved. My instincts

have always told me that there was more, and I never let go of my compassion for the children and families, so as I explore the other dimensions of the problem, I find myself with a better feeling about the future of the field.

So much of what has been written about children with learning disabilities "rang true" for me, as I felt that I "knew" what these children had been through. And yet, I felt that we had not heard enough from the children themselves. I wanted to let the voices of children experiencing similar fates speak now to help future generations of children with LD to be understood. My own experiences tend to colour my interpretations of the participants' stories, and sometimes affected the questions I asked them, and my responses to their statements. I had to be extremely vigilant and look critically at the interview material to ensure that I reduced the effects of these biases. A bias that I observed in myself as the interviews progressed, for example, was that I felt surprised by many of the positive comments many of the participants made about their reading and writing. Having read a great deal, and met many children with learning disabilities, I expected a more negative outlook. However, as I started to appreciate that these children were in fact positive, I began to realise that their experiences were probably different from those of the children in previous research, and from the children that I had worked with. One apparent difference between most of the participants in this study, and the children I generally encounter in my work, is the fact that these children had been diagnosed with learning disabilities several years earlier, and had been receiving support for several years. Most of the children I see in my work have never been tested or diagnosed, and have therefore never been provided the programming that makes things easier in school. They tend to be more like the literature describes, with apparently lower

self-esteem, negative attitudes toward school, and so forth. As McPhail (1993) reported, early detection and support seems to positively affect their self-esteem, and this appeared to be the case. I had to overcome my bias, as I was not expecting so many positive comments and feelings from the participants, and needed to be more open to the possibility.

Some of my more basic assumptions involve my conceptualisation of the problem. In general I have sought a balance among perspectives. I believe that there is such as thing as a learning disability. Some have challenged this concept from the outset, by suggesting that it does not exist except as a mismatch between learning style and teaching style (Finlan, 1994) or a social construction (Sleeter, 1986). Others have attributed all learning problems to neurological deficits or dysfunctions within the child (Hammill, 1990). I hold the more balanced view that suggests that an interaction between neurodevelopmental factors and environmental factors is responsible for what is considered a learning disability (Coles, 1987; Kronick, 1988; Levine, 1987, 1994). I agree with Levine (1987) that the child is disabled to the extent to which she or he fails to meet expectations of her or his environment. Change the expectations, and the disability is diminished.

I accept the results of previous research on characteristics and experiences of children with learning disabilities. While I find some of the generalisations somewhat inaccessible at the individual level, from my own personal and professional experiences with children with LD, I have found that there are common features that are characteristic of the population. My understanding of these issues is ungrounded to the extent that I have never before formally researched the experiences of these children, but have

informally observed them while conducting my assessment work. I expected to be surprised by my investigation, to learn new things, and to discover elements of the experience of learning disabilities that had never occurred to me.

Theory of Phenomenological Method

To answer the research questions I had posed, I employed a methodology based on the guidelines set forth by several authors in phenomenology. These guidelines provided a frame of reference for me as I collected and analysed the data, and wrote about the experiences of children with learning disabilities.

Phenomenological philosophy

Throughout the research, I endeavoured to maintain a phenomenological stance during the interviews and the analysis of them (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1970a, 1970b, 1975, 1985; Karlsson, 1993; Kvale, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1989; van Manen, 1990). "The phenomenologist affirms the life-world experience and proceeds by critically examining it, in order to describe its essence, structure and character" (Karlsson, 1993, p. 43). van Manen (1990) has helpfully reduced his human science research (hermeneutical phenomenology) to a methodological structure, from which I adapted my method. Following van Manen, I turned to a phenomenon which seriously interested me, investigated the experience as it is lived, reflected on essential themes, described the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting, maintained a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon, and balanced the research context by considering parts and whole (van Manen, 1990, pp. 30-31).

Phenomenological data collection

The central source of data in my research emerged from interviews with the participants. Kvale's (1983) twelve aspects of phenomenological interviewing provided a helpful framework for collecting the interview data. Kvale notes that the qualitative research interview is centred on the interviewee's life world, seeks to understand the meaning of the phenomenon in his [or her] life world, is qualitative, descriptive, specific, presuppositionless, focused on certain themes, open to ambiguities and changes, depends on the sensitivity of the interviewer, takes place in an interpersonal interaction, and may be a positive experience (p. 174). Although I developed protocols to guide the interviews, they were semi-structured (Kvale, 1983; van Manen, 1990) and were subject to revision as the data collection and analysis revealed potentially important directions for query.

Following Hammersley and Atkinson (1992), I attempted to study the phenomena in a "natural" state. I therefore interviewed the participants in settings that were comfortable and convenient. I attempted to remain flexible and to adapt to the evolving nature of the interview relationship, and gather data as it emerged. Unplanned events, such as some participants volunteering to read or write for me, were "taken in stride", and formed part of the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992). Also an important feature of the ethnographic approach seems to be attention to "... the reflexive character of social research: that is, to recognize that we are part of the social world we study" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992, p. 14). From this, I was always reminded to consider the influence I might have on the participant as I interviewed him or her, and to be careful with my choice of words and my non-verbal responses throughout. It was so important to me to

keep from being directive and leading that I responded in an encouraging manner to almost every direction the participant might take in the interviews. This resulted in a great deal of time spent discussing topics other than literacy and school. However, it was important for me to be open to the child's interest, and this led to some interesting data being collected that might otherwise never have surfaced. In time, most of the children eventually told me about their experiences of literacy in school, with some prompting and direct questioning. The other topics discussed, however, allowed me to understand the participants in a larger context, where I began to appreciate the relative importance of literacy for the children. Despite the importance that I placed on literacy, for the purpose of this study, and the importance that schools tend to place on it, these participants seemed to have a broader view of themselves and put literacy into this larger context. This became a significant theme in the data, and forms the core of several common themes in the experiences of the participants. This is discussed at length in the following two chapters.

Selection of Participants

The participants in this study all met the following inclusion criteria. They all met the British Columbia Ministry of Education (1995) definition of a child with severe learning disabilities affecting their literacy skills. They were all between the ages of nine and thirteen years. They all "possessed adequate communication skills" for reasonable oral interaction (Albinger, 1995). They all lived within accessible distance of the researcher, were willing to participate, and their parent(s) consented to their participation in the study.

<u>Met criteria for severe learning disabilities</u>

The participants were all considered by the school district to qualify for support as students with severe learning disabilities. The school district previously conducted psycho-educational assessments on each of these children, including intelligence and academic achievement testing, and ruled out the exclusion criteria set forth by the B.C. Ministry of Education (1995). These criteria are discussed in the introductory chapter and will not be repeated here.

Brief biographical and histories documenting their school progress and diagnoses for each participant are contained in Chapter 4.

<u>Aged nine to thirteen years</u>

I chose to involve children in Elementary and Middle School, mostly in the intermediate grades. One reason for this was availability. Diagnosing learning disabilities in children under seven or eight years of age is less common, in part because the early years show considerable variation in performance, and problems are not as apparent. Often it is only after several years of difficulties that a child is referred for assessment and diagnosed.

The other major factor involved the child's metacognitive capacity and language abilities. In agreement with Licht and Kistner (1986), I felt that children below nine years of age would make less favourable informants for such a study. Older children tend to be better able to take a retrospective and/or "third person" perspective, and make better informants (Polkinghorne, 1989). It was very important that the children be able to self-report to some extent, and to be able to participate in evaluating the tentative

interpretations of their interviews by the researcher, as an additional check on accuracy (Albinger, 1995). On the other hand, I wanted to include only pre-teen students, because the experiences of teenagers in Secondary Schools appeared to be different from those of children in Elementary and Middle Schools. I might have made a different choice, in retrospect, since there was valuable information missed by excluding adolescents. My experience working with children at all age levels, including adolescents, has left me with the feeling that there are substantial and important differences in experiences of adolescents, compared with those of Elementary age students. However, I feel that the current study has produced some valuable results, and the extension of the study to include adolescents will be left to future research.

Adequate communication skills

Albinger (1995) purposefully selected participants who "possessed adequate communication skills" to contribute to the study during interviews. She discontinued interviews with five children who gave only yes/no responses or shrugs to interview questions. I also attempted to select only students who appeared to be sufficiently verbal to participate in the interviews and express their experiences orally. This proved more difficult to achieve than I had anticipated. Although most of the participants selected were orally capable, several showed some language difficulties, and proved to be difficult to understand and interpret. This forced me to be more direct, concrete and directive in my interviewing, but nonetheless provided valuable interview data. This is discussed further in the later section describing the selected participants.

Accessible participants

The participants were selected from schools in the geographical area in which I was living during the research. There are about 5300 students in the district, ensuring that there is a wide range of children with special needs, and sufficient programming available for children with learning disabilities. The school district administration and board of school trustees offered their permission and assistance in locating potential participants from their files. It is recognised that children who attend school in this school district may have different experiences than those from other areas in B. C., Canada, and/or the rest of the world. The identification and placement process, the types of interventions and support provided, and other elements of the programme experienced by each participant have been explained with sufficient detail for readers to determine the extent to which circumstances can be transferred from these cases to their own.

Confidentiality and Consent

I asked for help from the special education staff in the school district, who nominated potential participants, and facilitated contacting them. I had the special education staff send an introductory letter (Appendix A) to 40-50 parents of potential participants (currently or previously identified with severe learning disabilities in reading or writing), requesting their participation on my behalf. The introductory letter explained the nature of the study, and the expected involvement of the various participants. If parents had concerns about any part of the process, they were welcome to not participate, or to withdraw later if they so chose. They were assured that no questions would be

asked, and no pressure would be applied to participants to remain involved or to explain their reasons for withdrawing.

I ensured that I was not aware of the identities of the potential participants who were sent the introductory letter, to help maintain their privacy and the confidentiality of their relationship with the school and/or special education department. Parents of potential participants were asked in the introductory letter to respond by telephone or letter to the researcher directly if they wished their child to participate, and those who did not respond remained anonymous, and were not contacted further. I was never aware of the identities of individuals who chose not to respond to the letter.

The initial mail-out resulted in telephone responses from parents of six potential participants. I arranged initial interviews with all of these parents and children, to determine whether the children might be suitable (have adequate communication skills, as well as show willingness to talk about the subject), and to help the parents and potential participants to become familiar with myself as the interviewer. Of these, five proved suitable, as one of the six children opted to withdraw before any interviews took place. A second mail-out was undertaken, and letters were sent to approximately 30 additional parents of potential participants on my behalf, through the special education department. A further six children's parents responded to this second mail-out. Of these, only four were interviewed, largely due to the arrival of summer holidays, and the unavailability of the children and parents. The resulting participant pool included nine children, who completed between three and six interview sessions each. Later, the interviews from one of the nine children were eliminated from the data pool, leaving eight, which made up the final participant group. The child whose interviews were not

included in the analysis had initially given the impression of wanting to participate, but after the first session, seemed disinterested, annoyed that he had to meet with me during the summer, and felt that he had said as much as he could, and wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. Although the information obtained in the first two interviews appeared to be informative to the study, it was felt that it was incomplete and did not represent the child's "whole story", and was therefore not analysed with the other interviews. This child's interviews were also helpful in the on-going interpretation of the remaining eight participants, because the emerging information seemed to be supporting tentative interpretations I was making concerning the other protocols.

Ethical Considerations

The American Psychological Association (APA, 1992), Canadian Psychological Association (CPA, 1991) and more locally, the College of Psychologists of British Columbia (CPBC, 1985) have written ethical standards for psychologists and the University of British Columbia has written guidelines for ethical practices in conducting research with human participants. These standards were met in the present investigation as follows.

The participants were selected through the process outlined above, in which potential participants were sent letters, without my knowledge of their identities, to protect their privacy. Only those who chose to respond were known. I only had access to written material about a child with the parent's "informed" written consent.

Every effort was made to ensure that the participants understood the process, the interpretations being made about their situations and responses, and the product, which is

a written description of their experience, the themes interpreted from it, and how the themes fit with those from other participants. This process of keeping participants informed, detailed in the data analysis section, is part of the informed consent that helps empower participants, and honours their feelings, wishes and humanity. If I have done an adequate job of interpreting their experience, then they could recognise themselves in my written description, and endorse its publication.

The participants' identities have been deliberately obscured to help maintain confidentiality. The nature and scope of the data collected may have resulted in such complete descriptions of persons that they may be recognisable to informed readers, but it was my intention that this was to be avoided. Therefore, when writing the descriptions, I assigned pseudonyms for the participants, and changed or omitted some details that might be identifying, to the extent that this did not affect the essence of the description.

Participants were informed that every effort would be made to ensure confidentiality, in part through obscuring identities, but also through protecting the storage of data collected (using coding systems for identifying data, locking files in cabinets, passwords on computer files). Participants were assured that data would be used only for the purposes for which it was collected; that it would not be shared with anyone for other purposes, and that it would be kept safely until the study was complete and then disposed of. Confidentiality would have to be compromised, however, under three conditions, and participants were made aware of these conditions prior to their participation. First, the investigator must report suspected child abuse to the B. C. Ministry for Children and Families. Second, if a participant appears to pose imminent danger to him/herself or to others, the investigator must report the danger. Third, if any

written or taped records kept by the investigator concerning any participant were subpoenaed by the courts they would be surrendered. During the course of this study, none of these conditions pertained, so confidentiality was maintained throughout.

Protecting participants from harm is always the primary ethical concern in psychological research with humans. In practice, however, there are subtle forms of harm that are difficult to detect or prevent. It can be argued, for example, that asking people to tell about possibly painful experiences rekindles the pain and therefore inflicts harm. Every effort was made during the interviews and throughout the entire data collection and analysis process to be sensitive to the feelings of the participants, and to keep their pain to a minimum. Although it was important to obtain from them the depth and breadth of their thoughts and feelings about specific experiences, it was more important that this process did them no harm. If the interviews provoked distress, the interviewer took reasonable steps to reduce the distress, discontinued the interview, and assisted the participants to compose themselves and recover from the distress. If a participant wished to discontinue the interviews for any reason, he/she was helped to feel comfortable with that decision, and allowed to discontinue without any penalty. In one case, the participant reported to his mother that he felt uncomfortable because he had "said too much" and felt that he was "going to confession". His mother reported this in turn to me, and it was re-iterated to the participant that he was not required to continue or to say anything that he did not feel comfortable with. It was decided that we would discontinue the interviews after three sessions, but that the material already obtained in the interviews would be included in the study.

Another potential for harm lay in the representation, or possible misrepresentation of the thoughts and feelings of the participants. A major purpose in this research was to provide accurate accounts of the thoughts and feelings of the children, so that readers might better understand, and subsequently help such persons in their practice. To misrepresent their experience would be a disservice to the participants, to potential readers, and to other children with learning disabilities whom practitioners might misunderstand. It was important to continually return to the data, and to the sources of the data (including the participants) to ensure that accuracy was maintained.

The Participants

The eight participants included in the study were selected as described above. They were all students of the local school district who had been provided with special education programming as students with severe learning disabilities. The programme for children with learning disabilities in Elementary Schools is called Learning Skills. This is typically run as a pull out resource room, where a small group attends for 90 to 120 minutes daily and receives focused support for Language Arts (literacy skills) from a specialist teacher and an assistant. The remainder of their day, the children with LD are with their general education class, doing their math, social studies, physical education, and so forth. When they enter grade 6, they move to Middle Schools, where the intervention model changes. They are offered drop in support at a resource room (known as BOOST), with a specialist teacher and an assistant. Students with LD are included in general education classes for the most part, with a homeroom teacher teaching the core courses (English, Social Studies, Math, and Science), and several other teachers teaching electives, much like a Secondary School. Students considered to have behavioural

difficulties are often assigned to the BOOST room, along with children with learning disabilities, but this is evidently not made clear to the students.

The youngest participants were nine years of age, and the oldest were thirteen. They included six boys and two girls. This gender imbalance is reasonably close to that experienced in the schools and in the research literature, where it is often estimated that boys are identified with learning disabilities several times more frequently as are girls. Bender (1998) reported that in the U. S., boys outnumber girls in the LD category three or four to one.

Three of the participants (one girl and two boys) attended Middle Schools (in this district, grades 6, 7 and 8). The other five participants (one girl and four boys) attended Elementary Schools. They were spread throughout the district, in six different schools, and would probably not have known one another. Occasionally, a participant would ask about the other participants, or name specific children in their programmes, wondering if they too were involved. Following strict confidentiality guidelines, I kept such information from the children, so that none would be aware of the other participants.

The children were all from Caucasian families, which is typical of the district, where the proportion of Caucasians in the population is high. The children's families represented a middle socio-economic status, with a range from upper middle to lower middle income. Five lived with both parents, and three lived only with their mothers.

Several of the children seemed to have considerable difficulty with spoken language. It had been a goal of mine to include only children whose communication skills were sufficient to make for good interviews. However, it became apparent that some of these children, despite their misunderstandings and miscommunications, were

telling stories which needed to be told. It was important to keep them in the study, even though the communication problems made interpretations difficult. For example, one boy reported that he was placed in an "excelled" programme of math, because he could not cope with the regular programme. After some discussion, it became more clear that he meant "adjusted, and simplified", rather than "accelerated". Other children would explain the complexities of a video or card game they enjoyed, in such a confused and inarticulate manner that I was left baffled. These moments offered insight into the participant's experiences in unanticipated ways. I was left imagining what teachers, peers, and families would make of such an explanation, and what this might lead to in the classroom, on the playground, or at home.

This problem was compounded by receptive language difficulties as well as expressive weaknesses. Occasionally, one of the participants would answer a question in such a confusing way, that it appeared he or she had heard a completely different question. I sometimes found myself simplifying, repeating, or clarifying, what I had asked, or asking the child for repetition and clarification. On other occasions, the information gained from the misunderstanding was as valuable or more so than if the child had answered what I asked. These elements are explored further in the discussions of individual cases below.

Three of the eight participants were either currently, or formerly enrolled in the school district French Immersion programme. This seemed unusual, since children with learning disabilities are often encouraged to move to a general education English programme in the public school system. It is unclear the extent to which their French

placement might have affected their experience in school. Two of the participants felt that their problems with reading were related to the French placement.

Data Collection

The data collection and data analysis processes were not altogether separate activities, but are discussed here separately for clarity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992). Most of the data were obtained through interviews, tape-recorded and transcribed. It is the thoughts and feelings of the participants that were of most importance, not the so-called "facts" contained in documentation about their lives. However, it was important to establish whether the participating children met the criteria for inclusion, so there are additional sources of data in the present study. Each participant's situation was unique, and the information contained in their school files was not uniform or comprehensive, so not all of the individual write-ups included all of the following sources of data, but an effort was made to obtain as many as possible.

General descriptive demographic information

Age, grade, years in school, family system information (who lives with the child), ethnic background, socio-economic information, parent education, and other general information was sought, and integrated into the write up. This information was requested of the parents of the participating children in a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). Parents were informed of the need for this information, and of their option to not provide it, from the initial consent form. Only five of eight participant's parents completed the demographic questionnaires. No explanation was asked of the other three parents, who

signed consent forms but did not return the questionnaires. In all cases, I made use of the records at school to complete the biographical portions of the write-ups.

The need for demographic information describing the participants is as pressing for qualitative research as it is for experimental/quantitative research. Whereas in the latter it is important to describe the subjects accurately for purposes of generalisability, and replicability (Hammill, et al., 1989; Smith, et al., 1984), in the former, the participants must be described with sufficient detail to enable readers to transfer the findings to other cases (Firestone, 1993). The gaps in the data from the three participants whose parents chose not to complete the forms cannot be obtained. However, some information from the school files, which the parents did allow access to, enabled a general description of the participants, and their history as far as the school was aware.

Interviews

The participating children were interviewed individually in comfortable, "natural" environments (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992), including the child's home (inside, or out in the yard during the summer), my home, (with my family absent), and on two occasions in public areas (a meeting room in a local church and a park bench). These locations were chosen by the parents and the participants as the most comfortable and convenient for them. The interviews took place between February and July 1999. Interviews were conducted when the children were not in school, during times that were convenient for the families.

<u>Duration and number of interviews</u>

Each interview session lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, depending on the natural flow of the topics, and the interest level of the participant. There always seemed to be a moment in the later stage of each session when the participant's non-verbally communicated that they wanted to end the session, or when some other natural break seemed to occur.

Each participant was interviewed for between three and six sessions. For three participants, three sessions were "enough", for different reasons. In one case, the participant chose to discontinue because he felt he had revealed too much. Two other participants for whom three sessions were sufficient were "bored", and said that they had said all they could think of about school.

With the remaining five participants, the number of interviews completed was more dependent upon the content in them. Some of the children seemed to be more focused on the topic I was most interested in, and told everything that they could about their experiences of reading and writing in a more thorough and efficient manner. Others seemed to be unfocused and told stories about school, talked about movies and games, and seemingly almost anything but about what I was asking. For these participants, it took as many as six interviews to reach a "saturation point", where it seemed to me that we had discussed the experiences of reading and writing "enough". The following table represents the number of interviews for each participant, as well as their age and grade.

Amelia	3 interviews	9½ years old	Repeating grade 3
Benjamin	3 interviews	10 years old	Finishing grade 4
Charles .	5 interviews	10 years old	Finishing grade 4
Dexter	5 interviews	10 years old	Finishing grade 5
Ernie	6 interviews	11 years old	Finishing grade 5
Frederick	3 interviews	11½ years old	Finishing grade 6
George	4 interviews	13 years old	Finishing grade 7
Hannah	5 interviews	13 years old	Gr. 7 (rptd 3)

Interview questions

The interviews were conducted from a phenomenological posture on the part of

the interviewer (Kvale, 1983; van Manen, 1990). The children were informed of the

purpose and nature of the interviews, and given a general overview of the types of

questions they would be asked. I made an effort to reduce the structure initially, and to

follow the lead of the participants. I introduced the series of interviews to each

participant with an unscripted preamble, explaining that I was interested in finding out

what school was like for selected children who had some difficulties with reading and/or

writing.

From this initial framing, the participants expressed a wide range of general

thoughts about school, from peer relationships to a simple summary: "boring." Wanting

to build rapport and encourage the participants to take the interview to areas they thought

were important to talk about, I followed their lead, and probed for more clarification of

their experiences in whatever topics they raised.

When those topics faded, I would pose slightly less general questions, attempting

to open the topic of the academic parts of school, particularly reading and writing.

Several of the younger children seemed "distractible" (three had been diagnosed with

ADHD and prescribed Ritalin in the past) and did not stay on topic for very long. I found

myself reminding them of what I had asked, or asking a similar question after periodic lengthy detours into topics such as Pokémon, sports, Star Wars, James Bond, conflicts with peers, problems with teachers, and difficulties with other subjects in school such as math.

At some point during these relatively unstructured interviews, I sensed that the participants were wondering what direction I would like to take the discussion. I would then introduce some questions of a more direct nature, in an effort to guide the participant toward an expression of experiences of literacy. I had no set of predetermined questions to work from, but experimented to see what each participant would respond to. I might ask what things the child was good at in school, to give them some courage to tackle what I thought would be a tough question. I might then ask what things were hard for them. I had initially expected this would be specific enough, without directly asking about reading and writing, but this proved to be anything but clear. They did not always feel that reading and writing were hard, as was my assumption. As I discussed in the earlier section on the researcher's involvement, much of my experience with children with learning disabilities has led me to expect them to feel that reading and writing were difficult, and that this would be foremost in their minds when I asked them what was hard. I found that I needed to ask very specific questions about their spelling, or writing on the computer, or what types of books they read. This usually prompted some stories and descriptions of the types of experiences I was seeking in order to answer my research questions.

Sometimes the participants appeared confused by my questions, which alerted me to the possibility the language and vocabulary I used was too difficult. I attempted to

adjust my language until I felt that the participant understood my meaning. Similarly, some of the participants' vague responses suggested that either they misunderstood but wanted to give some sort of response, or that the question was not specific enough.

Thus, I evolved a semi-structured interview, as I posed a few questions when the opportunity arose, trying to keep the participants talking about their experiences without guiding them too much, or cutting off discussion of the topics they chose. The wording of some questions I posed during the interviews appears in Appendix D.

Audiotapes and transcripts

All interviews were audiotaped for transcription and analysis. The tape recorder was a rather flashy little unit, which was a source of distraction for most participants, who had never seen anything like it. Once they became accustomed to the recorder, they were able to ignore its presence.

I contracted a typist to immediately transcribe the tapes verbatim into a personal computer to facilitate further organisation and interpretation. I listened to each taped session prior to the next session, to help me recall what had been said and not said, to guide my interviewing for the subsequent session. I proofed and edited the transcripts, listening several times to each tape, supplementing the audio with descriptions of non-verbal communication to clarify ambiguous sections of text. I made as many notes as possible as soon as possible after completing each interview to increase the likelihood of remembering details. Once the transcripts were corrected to reflect what was actually said, the interpretation phase (described below) began. Once the initial data

analysis/interpretation was complete, the participants were invited to examine the interpretations made (see interpretation and validity sections below).

School file review

Report cards, letters home, learning assistance and/or resource room reports, psycho-educational and other assessment reports, Individual Education Plans (IEP), and other written material detailing the child's progress through school were helpful in establishing whether the participating children met the criteria for inclusion in the category of severe learning disabilities. Parents gave permission for this material to be examined for the purposes of the study. Parents were informed of the uses to which it would be put, and the extent of confidentiality involved before being asked to provide these documents. Summaries of this information appear in each individual write-up in Chapter 4.

Field notes

The investigator in qualitative research often takes considerable notes during the process of data collection and data analysis (Polkinghorne, 1989). These might include observations about new discoveries, the "side-effects" of certain questions asked, the growing awareness of unusual or unexpected themes, or reminders to return to specific items or thoughts. These notes can amount to a personal journal of the process and may constitute important data for the end product of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992). As the analysis process unfolded, I kept an open document on my notebook computer, jotting thoughts as they occurred to me. These became the basis for questions

to be asked during subsequent sessions, and several of the common themes of the study. The field notes are contained in Appendix E.

Observations

An additional source of data concerning participants was observation. As in any verbal interaction, the non-verbal behaviour of the participants was often as important in the communication as the words. I remained observant during the interviews and made on-going interpretations of non-verbal behaviour that helped guide the direction of the interview. Tone of voice, inflection, irony and sarcasm, emotional content and other non-verbal elements, not obvious in a transcript, were described and interpreted to the best of my ability. I made notes to facilitate recall of the non-verbal material and later supplemented the transcripts to ensure that these important elements of the interview were not lost in translation to text.

Use of computer for analysis

There are a variety of ways to organise the data in order to make it manageable and available to interpretation. Personal computers and commercially available software that facilitate data storage, retrieval, and display, as well as transcript analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards & Richards, 1994) can assist most of these. I chose to use two of the most popular and powerful qualitative analysis software packages available: QSR NUD*IST Vivo (Richards & Richards, 1999) and ATLAS/ti (Muhr, 2000). These provided some structure to the way I examined the transcripts, and assisted in coding and retrieving sections of text, however, the bulk of the interpretation

work was done with a traditional cut and paste process with sections of the transcripts highlighted and manually coded for interpretation.

Data Analysis and Verification

Data analysis "... is not a distinct stage of the research. It begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems, and continues into the process of writing up" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992). The data collected is analysed as it is obtained and in turn affects the methodology as the researcher revises the data collection strategies to obtain more, better or fuller information.

Some data were more concrete and "easier to handle" than others. Some general demographic, school, and assessment information was collected for each participant and the compiled background information assisted interpretation of the interviews, observations, and helped to ground the write-ups. As for the interview data, they could not be understood without interpretation (Denzin, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Schwandt, 1994) and phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 1990).

Principles of Interpretation

The data collected in the phenomenological interviews has been interpreted. That is to say, the process of making sense of the interviews has been an interpretive action on my part, as the investigator, undertaken throughout the course of the interviews and the "data analysis" phase (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Bos & Richardson, 1994; Denzin, 1971, 1994; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992a, 1992b; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Karlsson, 1993; Schwandt, 1994).

Participants told stories about their experiences, expressed their feelings, and responded to direct questions, but it was my role as the researcher to sift through their words and to interpret their meaning in relation to their experiences of reading and writing. Every effort was made during each phase of the investigation to remain true to the constructions of the participants. It was *their* experience that I was interested in, not a psychological theoretical model developed outside of their experience and imposed on them, nor the version of their experience related by outside observers (van Manen, 1990). It was important to my method and theoretical stance that I reduced my preconceived notions and expectations, and really listened to the meanings, perceptions and feelings being presented by the participants (Giorgi, 1975; Howard, 1986; Kvale, 1983)

Following Karlsson (1993) and van Manen (1990), I have engaged in the interpretation of the protocols from the interviews. This has involved a hybrid of their methods, including the concrete activities of transcribing, typing into a manageable format on the computer, and moving toward more abstract processes of reading, seeking and extracting meanings, interpreting themes, and engaging in phenomenological reflection on general themes. All the while, I was engaged in returning to the original protocols to remain true to the participants' words and meanings (van Manen, 1990).

I generally followed Karlsson's (1993) five steps. First, I read the transcript for each participant, "...until one has a 'good grasp' of it" (p. 96). Second, I explored the transcripts for "meaning units...where the researcher discerns a shift in meaning" (p. 96). During this second phase, I made extensive use of the powers of my computer. Using software designed to facilitate the management of qualitative interview data, as well as

basic word processing features, I created schematic models of the transcripts and tagged

meaning units with preliminary descriptors.

In Karlsson's third step, "... the subject's every-day language is transformed into

the researcher's language" (p. 98). During this phase, I began to summarise what I felt

the participant was "saying" in each portion of the transcript, and to interpret the meaning

of the literal words into a more psychological understanding. Because some participants

were interviewed as many as six times, there was considerable overlap as topics were re-

introduced and explored, and many redundancies and extraneous material.

The fourth step "...entails a synthesizing of the transformed meaning units into a

so-called 'situated structure,' presented in the form of a synopsis" (p. 106). During this

stage, I collapsed the various themes within the interviews into broader, general themes

for each participant, and wrote lengthy descriptions of each child's experience in school.

The fifth (final) step "... is to move from the situated structure to a so-called

'general structure' (many protocols of the same phenomenon), which incorporates those

eidetic constituents of a phenomenon which run across all situated structures" (p. 108).

During the fifth stage, I explored the descriptions of each of the participants, comparing

themes that arose in each with the others, until I was able to discover themes that

occurred within the experiences of a number of participants. This process generated a

large number of themes, some of which applied to the experiences of a few participants,

and some of which were universal. Throughout these five steps, I read and reread the raw

transcript data to ensure that all information that might impact the formation of themes

was included. Once satisfied that I had extracted as many meaningful themes from the

transcripts as I could, I wrote and re-wrote them, condensing and combining them until only those applying to all or most of the participants' experiences remained.

Karlsson (1993) notes that during the final stage, the researcher "may liberate him/herself from the empirical data (protocols) in order to reflect on a more abstract (higher) level. ...yielding results on an ontological level, the level of phenomenological psychology in Husserl's sense" (p. 108).

Validity

Validity in qualitative studies is often represented differently than in studies from the quantitative tradition (Firestone, 1993; Maxwell, 1992). As Altheide and Johnson (1994) noted, "validity will be quite different for different audiences" (p. 488), and there are a variety of ways in which validity is understood and sought. Validity was supported in the present study through respondent validation, prolonged engagement and persistent observation with participants, peer debriefing and triangulation, progressive subjectivity, transferability and dependability. These various sources of validity are elaborated below.

Respondent validation

Respondent validation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992), or the correspondence between the researcher's description/interpretation and participants' views, can be established through having respondents review the written product of the researcher, and provide feedback. The draft description can be revised to a version that is endorsed by the participant, which contributes to the credibility of the product. There are drawbacks, however, to respondent validation. There is no guarantee that their endorsement means

that the account is the truth. The participant may even be motivated to endorse a description that is inaccurate (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992, p. 196). It is important to establish rapport with the participants: a good working relationship in which they recognise that it is their subjective experiences that are most important, and that their version would be honoured. To the extent that they feel understood, accepted and appreciated, they are increasingly likely to provide honest and complete information about their experiences. The onus is on the researcher to transcribe faithfully, keep interpretation as close as possible to the language and meaning presented by the participants, and to share with them the process by which interpretations are made. This should reduce the chances of having respondents endorse inaccurate accounts or interpretations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992).

I attempted to secure respondent validation for this study by asking the participants to review draft accounts of their experience, as I interpreted and wrote them up. This included moment by moment interpretation, as in when I asked if the child meant a particular thing when she or he said something. For example, I might say, "you said something last time, about ____, I wondered if you meant ____". The accounts were written with a balance of interpretive, psychological language, and quotations and samples of the language used by the participants. When interpretations were made, links were made between what was said (including non-verbal communication) and what meaning I made of what was said. I tried to use language that was communicative to both academic and lay readers.

Preliminary drafts were discussed with participants during follow-up sessions. It was not possible to have them read the drafts themselves, given that their reading skills

were generally weak. Their feedback was used to re-work the write-ups, to make them as acceptable as possible to the participants.

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation

Another means of improving credibility is through evidence of prolonged engagement and persistent observation with the participants and the data. Lengthy interviews, repeated contacts with participants, and extended periods of analysis of transcripts and other sources of evidence lend credibility to the researcher's interpretations and descriptions. In other words, the researcher becomes immersed in the data by connecting intimately with the participants and their material and is able to portray their experience in a credible manner.

I became immersed in the current research, beginning with several hours of direct contact with the participants (three to six 40-60 minute interview sessions), and several hours with each child's "material" (school records and assessment reports), and hundreds of hours with the interview transcripts.

Peer debriefing and other forms of triangulation

Peer debriefing can also help establish credibility. If knowledgeable peers are exposed to the data, and to the researcher's interpretations, they can provide feedback which can further strengthen the product. My dissertation supervisors have provided feedback and guidance as I wrote and rewrote several drafts of my interpretations. Without breaching confidentiality, I also shared elements of the data with colleagues in my work as a school psychologist, soliciting their interpretations of what the participants

were saying. This addition of other perspectives both confirmed and extended my own interpretations. This is a form of "triangulation" that helped guard against researcher bias (Bos & Richardson, 1994).

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1992), in qualitative studies,

> ...triangulation involves the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork, different points in the temporal cycles occurring in the setting, or, as in respondent validation, the accounts of different participants (including the ethnographer) involved in the setting. (p. 198)

The present study triangulated several sources of data to come to a fuller understanding of the experiences of children with learning disabilities in specific contexts. The first source of data was the interviews. The words spoken by the participants were transcribed and then other sources of data with "triangulated" with the interpretations. My observations of non-verbal and other behaviours of participants made during the interviews have been interpreted and shared with the participants for their responses. For example, participants often used figures of speech, irony, sarcasm, and other indirect means of communicating, rendering the literal meaning of their words less accurate. This was recorded, interpreted, and clarified with the participant, leaving nothing to be "taken for granted". Similarly, when non-verbal behaviour suggested different feelings or meanings than what was said in words, this incongruity was sometimes interpreted and clarified with the participant, in empathic and sensitive ways, in order to respect their dignity and integrity.

Progressive subjectivity

The notion of progressive subjectivity, which involves documenting the development of the interpretations throughout the data analysis process (an audit trail), contributes to validity. If others can follow the chain of evidence (Yin, 1989) to the same interpretations and conclusions, then the study becomes more creditable. In this study, careful field notes and a journal of subjective experience were kept throughout the data collection and analysis process. These sources allowed for continued reflection on the interpretations, decisions and conclusions as the study progressed, and provide an audit trail for interested readers. Appendix E contains my field notes, edited for confidentiality, to illustrate this process.

Sample size

The number of participants in a study is an important consideration in terms of validity (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Polkinghorne 1989). In quantitative designs, where the sample is meant to be representative of a larger population, the number of subjects is crucial in determining statistical validity. However, in phenomenological designs, validity is less a function of number of participants than of the depth and richness of the data collected. Polkinghorne cited examples of phenomenologically based studies using between 3 and 325 written descriptions from participants. "Some studies require extensive interviewing with only a few people; others need a greater variety of descriptions, and so a large number of people are interviewed" (Polkinghorne, 1989, pp. 48-49).

Saturation, in the context of number of participants involved in a study, refers to reaching a point where the addition of more participants would not appreciably extend the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Other studies of this nature included four (Lichtenstein, 1993; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992) and six (Albinger, 1995, Bryant, 1989; Reid & Button, 1995) participants.

Eight participants were sufficient to express the core themes, and each successive participant interviewed helped confirm and establish the themes, but no substantially new themes emerged. There was some overlap in the sequence of interviews, with the first participants starting in February and ending in May, and the last starting and finishing in July. During any given week, I was interviewing two or three of the participants, and preparing for the next. I had begun to explore transcripts, interpret meanings, and extract preliminary themes before starting some of the new interviews. This allowed me to estimate the development of emerging themes, and determine the number of interviews that might be needed for each participant, as well as the extent to which the new participants were extending the results.

Transferability

Another element of validity in qualitative research is transferability (a form of external validation). This is not the same as generalisation in the quantitative-experimental tradition, where the representativeness of the sample is demonstrated, and evidence is given of the application of the results to a broader population. In qualitative research, the transferability of the findings rests with the reader, who engages with the

"rich description" provided by the researcher/author, and determines the extent to which the description fits the reader's experience of the phenomenon studied (Firestone, 1993).

In the written product of my research, I attempted to illuminate the children's experiences of specific contexts, without imposing my biases, and remain sensitive to the subtleties of the data. The description that emerged during the writing phase of the research is rich and offers readers the opportunity to enter the life-world of the participants and make their own understandings. Readers are able to judge the "external validity" or transferability of the description based on the internal consistency, the nature and scope of the evidence provided, and the fidelity to the participants' own words and interpretations. Evidence was provided at each interpretive stage to ensure that any movement away from the participants' own words was explained. This is part of the "audit trail" that allows others to follow the progression from raw data to finished product.

Dependability

A final element of validity in qualitative research is dependability (as compared with reliability in the quantitative-experimental tradition). Dependability is related to the trustworthiness of the outcome. Evidence of dependability can come from the "audit trail" left by the researcher (Yin, 1989). Documentation of the process, including field notes, journal of personal understanding, and rationale for interpretations of the transcripts helps others to "follow" the development of the results from the evidence. Documentation of the researcher's working with the material; the interplay among elements of the data, provides evidence of the fidelity to the participant's experience and

stories. Interpretations must be shown to be reasonable from the "raw" data and the entire process must be available to scrutiny.

My audit trail includes Appendix E containing my edited field notes, case study data, and comments throughout the text of the results and discussion chapters, linking original transcript data with interpretation, to help build confidence that my interpretations were trustworthy.

Delimitations

All studies are limited to what they set out to study, and this investigation was limited by the methodology and participants involved. Phenomenological studies do not attempt to generalise to populations, and therefore do not seek representative samples or random assignment to conditions. What the present study sought to accomplish was the exploration, with children with learning disabilities, of their experiences in situations or contexts that highlight their area of weakness. I was interested in their experience from their perspective, and my intent was to describe and illuminate that experience. It is up to the reader to judge the application of the findings to situations or cases beyond the present sample, based on the reader's estimate of the comparability of cases.

The sample was purposefully limited to include children who met the strict inclusion criteria explained in a previous section. This limited the population referred to, but allows readers to determine the extent to which the resulting discussions apply to specific children in their experience. One important result of the sampling is that all but one of the participants were identified with learning disabilities early in their schooling, and had received several years of support. This is important because research seems to

be showing that there is a substantial difference in the experiences of children who have received support, compared with those who have not.

The recording of interviews ensured accuracy in documenting what was said, but the understanding of what was said is always an interpretive action and can lead to inaccuracies. The investigation is only as good as the investigator, who is the principal interpreter. It was expected that, although efforts were made to the contrary, meanings and subtleties may have been lost in this interpretive process.

Anticipated Outcomes

The outcomes of the study could not be known in advance. As Howard (1986) says, "...In real science there are no right answers in the back of the book" (p. 109). The literature on learning disabilities is replete with articles describing characteristics of children with learning disabilities. I feel that the accumulated wisdom of these theorists gives them a reasonable frame of reference, and that their writing is from a solid grounding. I expected that many of my discoveries in this process would echo previous research. However, I did not presume to think I could write the final product without actually becoming immersed in the data, interviewing the participants, struggling to interpret the material over several months, and writing and rewriting until I could present the results with confidence.

My goal was to accumulate data concerning the experiences of the participants, and to write individual case descriptions integrating that data, to accurately reflect what the children think and feel about certain contexts and situations (involving reading and writing). From the case transcripts, common experiences would be extracted to the

extent that they presented themselves, without compromising the integrity of the individual profiles. It was not possible to predict the exact nature or number of the themes, typological or general structures (Karlsson, 1993, p. 108), and being faithful to the nature of the phenomenon requires openness to the emerging structure.

I hoped that my accounts of the experiences expressed by the individuals would ring true for my participants, who would feel that I had understood them. I hoped also that my accounts would feel right to readers; colleagues who have entered the lives of children with learning disabilities, and caught a glimpse of how they think and feel.

Chapter 4

Results

This study was designed to help answer the research question: What are the common experiences among children with learning disabilities in literacy during situations of reading and writing in school? In other words, the purpose of the study was to explore the day-to-day experiences of the participants, to better understand the nature of their experience. Phenomenological interviews were undertaken, data collected and interpreted, and the following results emerged.

This chapter presents the results of the study in two main sections. The first section provides a brief description of each participant beginning with their context (brief home and school history, material from special education files), settings and tone of the interviews, and their typical school activities. The second section includes the nine common themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants.

The Participants

The eight participants are arbitrarily presented in order from youngest to oldest. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Amelia

Amelia was born in December 1989, so she was nine and one half years of age at the time of the interviews, and repeating grade 3. She lived with both parents and her three-year-old sister in a rural area. Her mother reported that neither parent had any learning problems, and that Amelia had no physical, medical, or sensory problems.

Her school records indicate that Amelia began kindergarten in the French Immersion programme, and made reasonable progress in learning the French language. However, it was noted that she experienced considerable difficulties with reading and writing. In grade 2, she was described as just beginning to make associations between alphabet symbols and sounds, and was relying on sight vocabulary for reading. She was also described as very "young", not knowing her address, getting confused counting, and just beginning to identify initial sounds.

In grade 2, the school speech-language pathologist reported that Amelia had uneven language development, with some scores in the average range, and others below average, although some delays were expected due to her placement in French.

At the end of grade 2 she was administered the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Third Edition (WISC-III). Her scores were as follows: Verbal IQ = 93, Performance IQ = 94 and Full Scale IQ = 93. There was a pattern of significant unevenness among subtest scores, with some well above average and some well below average. She was administered several achievement tests, at the beginning of grade 3. She scored at the grade 1.2 level on the Slossen Oral Reading Test (representing a two-year delay). On the Classroom Reading Inventory (Silvaroli), she scored at the Primer level, more than three years delayed. On the Kottmeyer Diagnostic Spelling Test, she scored at the early grade 1 level, which was two years behind. On the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised: Tests of Achievement (WJ-R), she scored at the late grade 1 level in calculation, and at the grade 3 level (age appropriate) for applied math problems.

Her cognitive subtest scatter, along with severe delays in literacy skills, was felt to be due to severe learning disabilities, and she was placed in the Learning Skills Programme for grade 3 for work on basic literacy skills. She met the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria for children in the later primary years with severe learning disabilities.

At the end of grade 3 she was transferred to another school, closer to her home, and out of French Immersion. She repeated grade 3 and continued in the Learning Skills programme.

Interviews with Amelia

Amelia was interviewed for a total of three sessions, in her home. Amelia seemed to be anxious to get them over with, as the third session, in July, seemed to interfere with her enjoyment of the summer break. Amelia stated that she had said pretty much everything that she could think of in relation to school and literacy, so the sessions were discontinued after three.

Amelia was an attractive girl who seemed more "grown up" than her age. She had many characteristics of posture and attitude that reminded me of a teenager, rather than a pre-adolescent girl. Amelia was generally highly animated and extremely distractible, commenting on everything that came into her view. She talked nearly non-stop, and needed very few prompts to initiate the discussion. Amelia often illustrated what she was talking about by showing me her schoolwork. She had a large scrapbook filled with art, notebooks, and other material that she paged through to show me what she had done, and what her teacher had written about it.

<u>School settings/activities</u>

When I asked her what school was like, Amelia said, "dumb", which she clarified to mean that she felt the teacher was mean. Amelia seemed to think the teacher hated her. She felt that she was a well-behaved student, who tried her best, but her teacher did not always notice.

Amelia talked more about her feelings than about specific activities, so it was difficult for me to obtain a clear picture of what her typical school day might look like. She evidently attended general education grade 3 classes for most of the day, but went to the Learning Skills class every morning at 9:00.

<u>Benjamin</u>

Benjamin turned 10 years of age in April 1999, just prior to the beginning of the interviews, and was completing grade 4. He was the oldest of three children living with both parents. His family recently moved out of town to a rural area, but he continued to attend the same school he has attended since kindergarten. He had been in the French Immersion programme throughout his schooling.

He was referred to the school speech-language pathologist for speech assessment in grade 1. He was found to have average receptive vocabulary, but he made a number of sound production errors which made him difficult to understand. He received support from the speech-language pathologist for several years.

He struggled with the basic reading skills from the beginning of school, received learning assistance support in the French Immersion programme, and participated in the Early Reading Intervention (French) Programme.

In grade 2, he was administered the WISC-III. He scored as follows: Verbal IQ = 88, Performance IQ = 139, Full Scale IQ = 112. Around the same time, his scores on the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals – Third Edition indicated stronger Receptive Language (standard score = 102) than Expressive Language (standard score = 80), with his Total Language in the average range (standard score = 90). His scores on the Test of Language Development – Primary included Oral Vocabulary (standard score = 8; 25th percentile), Grammatic Completion (standard score = 6; 9th percentile) and Word Discrimination (standard score = 7; 16th percentile). On the OISE Diagnostic Reading Test (October 1997, beginning grade 2), he scored at the Pre-Primer level. He met the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria for severe learning disabilities for children in later primary grades and was placed in Learning Skills Programme. He continued in French Immersion, with supervision from the Learning Skills teacher in a consultative role. His 1997-1998 (grade 3) Individual Education Plan showed that he was working on basic sight vocabulary and word attack skills. In 1998-1999 (grade 4), he received multi-sensory (Orton-Gillingham) remedial work. He was again described as making good progress, but continued to be delayed by about three years in reading. His spelling was described as "very unconventional" by the teacher for the Learning Skills Programme, who noted in March 1999 that his "attitude is definitely more positive and upbeat" than it had been.

<u>Interviews with Benjamin</u>

Benjamin was interviewed on three occasions at his home. He seemed somewhat "shy" initially, speaking quietly. Once he "warmed up" he talked very quickly, and his volume was adequate for normal conversation.

Once we were talking, I asked a general question: "So, what's school like?" to which he replied "Boring, except gym". This started a process whereby I felt the need to clarify and ask more specific questions. Benjamin was relatively easily distracted from the topic at hand. He seemed very interested in topics such as James Bond movies/video games, Pokémon, and the recent Star Wars movie. Our interviews quickly drifted to those topics and stayed there for many minutes, until I re-focused the interview with a question about school, or reading and writing. Benjamin did not seem to be avoiding the topic of his experiences of literacy so much as he was pre-occupied by the other topics of interest. At times, he gave the impression of being uninterested in school, or unimpressed.

<u>School settings/activities</u>

It seemed to Benjamin that he was "always at people", meaning that his school life was filled with trips to various helpers in the school, away from his general education class. He mentioned that he was usually at the Learning Skills class every morning, but reported that he did not like it, it was boring, they had to work on the computer all the time. He also went to speech therapy every week, and also went with a teacher's assistant to work on skills.

Benjamin could not really think of any part of school he liked. When pressed, he admitted that he liked some elements, such as gym class and the hands-on projects "a tiny bit". He reported being bored with, and/or not liking science, social studies, and other areas in school.

Charles

Charles was born in April 1989, so he turned 10 years old during our series of interviews. He had just completed grade 4, and was going into grade 5. He lived with both of his natural parents, and one sister, a year older than him. Charles had ear surgery as a baby, and continued to have some mild hearing problems. He is otherwise felt to have normal health.

His mother felt that this had been Charles's best year in school. His early schooling was characterised by bullying, and he also had academic problems from very early. He was supported through the Early Reading Intervention in grade 1, and received learning assistance in a small group for three years. In grade 2 (April 1997) he was administered the WISC-III. His scores were as follows: Verbal IQ = 92, Performance IQ = 102, Full Scale IQ = 96. Academic achievement testing at the same time suggested significant delays relative to his grade. In 1997, on the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised: Tests of Achievement (WJ-R) he scored as follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 70 (2nd percentile), Passage Comprehension standard score = 58 (0.3 percentile), Calculation standard score = 92 (30th percentile), and Applied Problems standard score = 79 (8th percentile). In 1999, on the WJ-R he scored as

follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 66 (1st percentile), Passage

Comprehension standard score = 88 (21st percentile).

He met the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria as a student with severe learning

disabilities, and was placed in the Learning Skills Programme beginning in grade 3,

where he had been placed since. His mother and teachers agree that this has been a

successful placement.

Interviews with Charles

Charles and I met at his home on five occasions. The first session included his

mother for most of the time, and she had as much to say about his schooling as Charles

did. I did not discourage or encourage her input, but she did not attend further sessions.

There were numerous distractions in the home, including a variety of pets. For the last

two sessions, we moved to a playhouse in the back yard, where it was quieter and more

private.

School settings/activities

For the school year in which the interviews took place, Charles attended a general

education class for much of the time, and went four days a week for about two hours per

day to the Learning Skills programme. His individualised programme in the Learning

Skills class focused on development of all literacy areas, as well as self-esteem and

responsibility for his own learning.

There he worked on a routine programme of phonics, Cloze activities, and "Tom

and Ricky's" (a series of books about the adventures of two boys). The students read and

then answered comprehension questions that the Learning Skills teacher made up about the stories. The teacher sometimes read from *All Kinds of Minds* (Levine, 1993), a book about children with a variety of learning and behaviour problems.

Dexter

Dexter was in born in September 1988, so he was ten years old at the time of the interviews, finishing grade 5. He lived with both natural parents, and four siblings. The family runs a business in a rural area, and Dexter attended the local rural school.

Dexter was reported by his mother to be generally healthy and developmentally normal. His speech was somewhat delayed, but his motor development was fine. He was reported to have experienced conductive hearing loss, and tubes were inserted in his ears at one point. He received speech therapy from his pre-school years.

Learning problems were identified early, and Dexter received learning assistance support in grade 1, to work on basic literacy – letter names, sounds, and how to print them. His grade 1 teacher noted that he tried hard to make his work perfect.

His early report cards described him as very sensitive and reportedly tearful over clashes with peers. He was otherwise "sunny" and friendly. He was also described as coming to school ready to work. He set up his workspace efficiently and was helpful in cleaning up. He had an excellent, optimistic attitude, which his teacher felt was being lost due to his failure to achieve to his potential.

At the beginning of grade 2 (1995) he was administered the WISC-III. His scores were as follows: Verbal IQ = 90, Performance IQ = 125, Full Scale IQ (invalid due to discrepancy) = 106. His cognitive profile showed significant scatter and this pattern of

scores was felt to represent severe learning disabilities. His result on the Gates-McGinitie in 1995 was "Too low to score". On the Test of Written Spelling (1997) he scored at the 24th percentile for Predictable Words and at the 4th percentile for Unpredictable Words. One year later, he scored at the 10th percentile for Predictable Words and at the 2nd percentile for Unpredictable Words. In 1997, on the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised: Tests of Achievement (WJ-R) he scored as follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 84 (13th percentile), Passage Comprehension standard score = 86 (18th percentile). In 1998, on the WJ-R he scored as follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 89 (22nd percentile), Passage Comprehension standard score = 96 (40th percentile), Dictation standard score = 84 (13th percentile), Calculation standard score = 102 (55th percentile), and Applied Problems standard score = 119 (89th percentile).

Dexter met the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria as a student with severe learning disabilities, and was placed in the Learning Skills Programme beginning in grade 3. His most recent Individual Education Plan (IEP) included several goals focusing on decoding and encoding strategies, writing with correct mechanics and time on task/productivity.

Interviews with Dexter

I met with Dexter at his home on five occasions, beginning in April and concluding in July 1999. His home was very busy, with multiple distractions, but it was a comfortable setting for him, and he was able to explore his experiences well there.

Dexter was friendly and social. He was fairly animated throughout our sessions, and he would change voices and characters frequently, giving the impression of avoiding being known too easily. However, his words seemed to contradict this approach, because he seemed to share his thoughts and feelings openly. He talked about his most painful experiences, and highlighted his strengths and interests.

I was able to observe Dexter's skills directly during a few incidents. For example, on one occasion, he was proudly showing me his Pokémon poster, complete with 150 characters with complex names. He had a hard time decoding them, and often guessed from the initial consonant, and from looking at the picture. He evidently knew the characters from memory, including their abilities and powers and what they could evolve into, and how they interacted with the other characters, but it was clear that he could not read their names. He seemed aware of this, but made the attempt to mask his weakness by moving quickly through the poster, skipping over difficult ones, and seeming to hope that I was not following along too closely.

School settings/activities

Dexter attended a general education class most of the time, and went to the Learning Skills room about two hours every day. He was not expected to catch up on everything that was taught while he was away, just some of the social studies assignments. He said that he never had to do the spelling that his class did, because he worked on spelling at the Learning Skills room. He would receive extra help for the material that he missed if necessary. Other kids, and the teacher would usually help him get it. Dexter felt that his teacher actually liked him and that she knew he was working

really hard. He liked the structure that his teacher provided, and it upset him when there were changes to the routine.

Dexter generally did not want to talk about school with me. He would respond to the questions, but often shifted topics to other things that interested him. In a session during the summer, I remarked that the summer was half over, and that some stores already had school supplies, to which Dexter responded with a mock scream of horror and dismay. He was not keen, evidently, on returning to school in the fall. He would be attending grade 6, which meant a move to middle school, a new bus, and other big changes. He would rather have a longer summer.

Ernie

Ernie turned eleven years of age in April 1999, and finished grade 5 during our interview period. He lived with his mother and older sister. His father committed suicide four years ago, according to his mother's responses to the demographic questionnaire. His father was reported to have had dyslexia. His mother had her own reported vision and hearing problems, but no learning problems.

Ernie's school history is complex. Before his schooling even began, he was assessed at a Child Development Centre, where it was observed that he had significant speech and language problems. He wore braces on his legs before he could walk, and showed some general developmental delays, including some autistic-like features such as poor eye contact, inattentiveness, and poor communication. He was immediately placed on the caseload of the teacher for children with special needs (mentally handicapped) when he entered kindergarten. He also received several years of speech-language

support. His hearing was thought to be adequate, but his auditory processing and receptive language skills were apparently quite weak. His standard score on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary – Revised was 84 (18th percentile). His standard score on the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test was 90 (25th percentile).

In grade 1, Ernie received support from the school counsellor after his father committed suicide.

When Ernie was eight years old (grade 2), a local psychiatrist diagnosed him with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Expressive Language Disorder, in part based on the speech-language reports. Around the same time (1996), he was administered the WISC-III. His scores were as follows: Verbal IQ = 80, Performance IQ = 102, Full Scale IQ = 89. An informal reading inventory administered by the learning assistance teacher showed grade 1 level decoding and an informal spelling assessment placed him at the pre-grade 1 level. He met the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria for support as a student with severe learning disabilities in the later primary grades.

Recent academic achievement testing showed a range of skills. In 1997, on the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised: Tests of Achievement (WJ-R) he scored as follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 88 (21st percentile), Passage Comprehension standard score = 95 (37th percentile), Dictation standard score = 83 (13th percentile), Calculation standard score = 129 (97th percentile), and Applied Problems standard score = 98 (45th percentile). In 1999, on the WJ-R he scored as follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 88 (21st percentile), Passage Comprehension standard score = 88 (21st percentile), Dictation standard score = 81 (10th

percentile), Calculation standard score = 92 (29th percentile), and Applied Problems standard score = 100 (50th percentile).

His individualised programme detailed work on basic skills, including reading and writing, as well as behaviours. He had trouble with social behaviour, apparently in part due to his poor communication skills. Adaptations and allowances have been made for a couple of years, to ensure success. Helpers in the class would scribe for him, read him the texts, give him the spelling of words rather than let him struggle. It was recognised that he had better ideas in his head than he was able to put on paper.

His teachers have expressed their amazement at the progress this boy has made since entering school.

Interviews with Ernie

Ernie and I met for a total of six sessions, between February and July 1999. We met at his home, which was difficult, because his family has many pets, several of which were present during the interviews. It was a busy environment, but it seemed that Ernie was comfortable there.

Ernie was a friendly, playful, cheerful boy, with a smile on his face about everything, who seemed to take his struggles in stride. Whenever I asked Ernie how something felt he almost reflexively said "good". After a moment, he seemed to re-consider his initial response, and admit that he felt something other than "good". He was pleasant, co-operative, and genuinely wanted to do what he could for my study.

He had considerable trouble with oral communication. He frequently seemed to mishear, or not comprehend what was asked, and frequently answered a different

question than what I felt I had asked. He committed many malapropisms, substituting related, or similar but inappropriate words. He often confused tense and gender, and made other basic usage errors. In context, he was understandable, but if the transcripts were read literally, he could easily be misunderstood.

School settings/activities

Ernie attended a general education class for most of his day, and went to the Learning Skills Programme for a portion of each day. The rest of his class usually did Language Arts tasks while he was away, so he did not miss any regular work. He worked on reading and writing and computers when there. A regular activity of the Learning Skills class was reading out of *All Kinds of Minds*.

Frederick

Frederick was born in December 1987, so he was eleven years of age and had just completed grade 6 when the interviews were conducted.

Frederick lived with his parents and one younger sister who had Down Syndrome. His mother ran a day care programme in the home, and often Frederick was involved, helping look after the children, or his little sister. He felt that at times he had little free time for himself. Frederick's mother described his development as normal.

Local school district records start in grade 3, since he attended school in Alberta until then. He was reported to have extreme difficulties with spelling, and some problems with reading fluency and comprehension. He has received support in class, as

well as through the Learning Assistance teacher, since grade 3. The extra support was provided for 90 minutes, three days per week.

In grade 4 (1997) he was administered the WISC-III. His scores were as follows: Verbal IQ = 105, Performance IQ = 119, Full Scale IQ = 112. Although there were concerns about his spelling, no achievement testing was completed at that time, and he was not deemed to have learning disabilities.

After his move to the middle school for grade 6, Frederick apparently began to experience considerable stress about his spelling. His report cards suggested that his spelling and written mechanics were "unsatisfactory", and that he should continue working on them. His mother reported that he became so distressed by this that he made suicidal gestures and was seen by the psychologist at Mental Health for a risk assessment. The psychologist apparently felt that he was not in serious danger, but recommended that some changes should occur to make things easier for him at school.

In early 1999, on the Canada Quick Individual Education Test his standard score for Spelling was <68 (1st percentile), his standard score for Word Identification was 104 (58th percentile) and his standard score for Passage Comprehension was 98 (43rd percentile). His spelling errors were extreme. For example, he wrote "ilidns" for "islands"; "viggle" for "village". He was also administered the Test of Written Language. His standard scores were as follows: Thematic Maturity = 9 (37th percentile), Content Vocabulary = 8 (25th percentile), Syntax Maturity = 13 (84th percentile), Content Spelling = 12 (75th percentile), and Content Style = 8 (25th percentile).

He was still not considered to meet criteria for additional support as a student with learning disabilities. His mother sought additional psychology assessment outside of the

school system, fearing for his emotional health. In May 1999 (at the end of grade 6), he was administered the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. His scores were as follows: Verbal Reasoning = 113 (79th percentile), Abstract/Visual Reasoning = 114 (81st percentile), Quantitative Reasoning = 136 (99th percentile), and Short-Term Memory = 106 (65th percentile). His overall Test Composite was 120 (89th percentile).

In May 1999, on the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised: Tests of Achievement (WJ-R), his Letter-Word Identification standard score was 106 (65th percentile), his Passage Comprehension standard score was 94 (34th percentile), his Dictation standard score was 80 (9th percentile), Punctuation and Capitalization standard score was 77 (6th percentile), and his Spelling standard score was 84 (14th percentile).

At that time, he was finally diagnosed with severe learning disabilities, according to the criteria set forth by the Ministry of Education, with at least two standard deviations discrepancy between estimated learning potential and achievement in spelling, and placed with the BOOST programme for the remainder of the year.

Interviews with Fredrick

Each of our three sessions took place in different setting: first at my home, next at a local church where his mother had a meeting, and then on a bench in a park. Initially, Frederick spoke freely and articulately about his experiences, and shared his feelings. Frederick was a polite, quiet boy of eleven. He was very co-operative and seemed genuinely interested in helping me with my study. Apparently he said more than he wanted to at our second session, and became less willing to talk during our third. The interviews were discontinued at that time.

<u>School settings/activities</u>

Frederick reported spending most of his time in general education classrooms, with a homeroom teacher for core subjects, and different teachers for electives and speciality subjects. During a reading block, he went to the BOOST room, where he mostly worked on spelling on the <u>Success Maker</u> computer programme. The software sets the reading and spelling levels based on errors and successes, and works students through slowly as they master the levels.

<u>George</u>

George was born in July 1986, and turned 13 during the weeks that I was interviewing him, and had just finished grade 7. He lived with both parents and an older brother. His mother reported that he had developed normally, and was healthy.

He was enrolled in the Programme Cadre (French) from kindergarten until grade 5, when his parents and teachers decided that he would be better off in English only. He reported being much happier in English, as he was better able to read the material and function generally.

He had been struggling since the beginning of school, and his skills were below average in spelling, math, sight-reading, and reading comprehension. He received learning assistance in the French programme for grades 1 through 4. He had attended school in another community and some test results and other records of his weak skills have been lost. In 1996 (grade 4), he was administered the WISC-III. His scores were as follows: Verbal IQ = 83, Performance IQ = 100, Full Scale IQ = 90. In 1997, he was administered the Test of Written Language. His scores were as follows: Vocabulary =

50th percentile, Thematic Maturity = 63rd percentile, Word Usage = 25th percentile, Style = 27th percentile. In 1999, on the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised: Tests of Achievement (WJ-R), his scores were as follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 90 (26th percentile), Passage Comprehension standard score = 91 (28th percentile), Calculation standard score = 59 (0.3 percentile), Applied Problems standard score = 80 (9th percentile), Dictation standard score = 65 (1st percentile), and Writing Samples standard score = 79 (8th percentile).

George met the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria as a student with severe learning disabilities and he was placed in the Learning Skills programme, entering grade 5. He also continued in the French programme for that year. He continued with the Learning Skills Programme for his grade 5 year, getting intensive help for spelling and writing skills. He entered Middle School for grade 6, and exited the French programme. He was placed part time in the BOOST programme largely to help manage his misbehaviour. That programme also provided support for his learning disabilities. His general education class teachers made allowances and adaptations to ensure that his problems with spelling and written mechanics did not hold him back. He received additional support for his math at the Learning Assistance Centre. The biggest challenge at middle school seemed to be his "attitude", which was mentioned in his report cards.

Interviews with George

George attended four sessions at my house. During the initial session, he seemed a little nervous, wondering what this would be like, but this soon faded. George was a good-looking young man, with confidence and pleasant manners. He tended to talk a

great deal about topics other than literacy, which may be attributable to distractibility and/or the ease of the topics. He was an active athlete, and often the subject would turn to sports.

School settings/activities

George reported that he used to have trouble with reading, so he had attended the Learning Skills Programme for two years in the Elementary School and one year in the Middle School, (grades 5, 6 and 7). He enjoyed the programme and the teacher. They did reading and projects there, as well as some writing and handwriting practice. He thought that he had made progress, but he would still get some help for reading. At the time of the interviews, he felt he was doing OK in reading, but had trouble remembering what he read.

George explained that he would get reading help elsewhere, but would still go to the BOOST room when he needed quiet. George felt that the BOOST programme was for "...kids that have been bad and getting better". He went on to clarify: "...but I'm not one of those kids that are bad; I just need help, like if I feel like it's too loud in the class then I have like a place to go". He said that it was easier to work in the BOOST room because there were only a few students at a time and extra help available there. He felt that it was easier to concentrate there. He explained that he did not miss anything from the general education programme when he went to the BOOST room for Language Arts; he was just doing different Language Arts. Other than Language Arts, George did the same work as the rest of the class, with no adjustments.

<u>Hannah</u>

Hannah was born in April 1986, and was the oldest participant in the study at 13. She completed grade 7 just prior to our interviews. She talked quite a bit about her family. She had no siblings, lived with her mother, and visited her father in a distant community periodically. Her family moved many times when she was young, so her schooling was spread over seven different schools in six years.

Her school files reported severe academic delays and history of learning assistance support received. She repeated grade 3. She was administered the WISC-R at the beginning of her second grade 3 year (1993). Her scores were as follows: Verbal IQ = 97, Performance IQ = 114, Full Scale IQ = 105. In 1994, she was administered the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery – Revised: Tests of Achievement (WJ-R). Her scores were as follows: Letter-Word Identification = 15th percentile, Passage Comprehension = 19th percentile, Calculation = 92nd percentile, Applied Problems = 63rd percentile), Dictation 3rd percentile), and Writing Samples 36th percentile). Hannah met the B. C. Ministry of Education criteria as a student with severe learning disabilities, and she was placed in the Learning Skills Programme in 1994.

She was again administered the WJ-R reading subtests in 1997, with Letter-Word Identification = 9th percentile and Passage Comprehension = 68[h] percentile. She was administered a follow-up test (WJ-R) in 1999. Her scores were as follows: Letter-Word Identification standard score = 88 (22nd percentile), Passage Comprehension standard score = 111 (76th percentile), Calculation standard score = 94 (34th percentile), Applied Problems standard score = 93 (33rd percentile), and Dictation standard score = 63 (1st percentile).

In grade 7, she attended the BOOST programme during French exempt blocks, and on a drop-in basis when needing academic support. She was reported to have a positive attitude, and came ready to work the whole block.

Hannah reported having fallen off of a horse a year previous to the interviews. She apparently sustained some head injuries, was unconscious for a few minutes, and when she woke up, she could not remember much. She described symptoms similar to that of concussion. She was in hospital for some time, and underwent CT scans.

Interviews with Hannah

I interviewed Hannah on five occasions at her home. She was a tall, attractive girl, who was somewhat shy at first, but once confident, was able to talk freely. I noticed that she was very distractible, with wandering attention and topic maintenance problems. Hannah moved from topic to topic quickly. She felt that it was not hard for her to concentrate, except when some teachers talk too long about one question and go for the whole block just on one math item.

School settings/activities

Hannah spent most of her time in the general education class, but went to the BOOST room for support instead of French. Hannah liked getting out of French class, which was difficult for her, and also appreciated the opportunity to get the extra help. She also sometimes went there when she needed extra help with Language Arts. She mentioned that her friend was also supposed to go there but was reluctant, afraid to get teased.

<u>Common Experiences</u>

This section discusses the commonalities of experience found among the participating children with learning disabilities in relation to literacy activities in school. Although the primary focus of my interviewing was to access their experiences of literacy, the participants nonetheless talked about a variety of topics. This section also discusses some of the common themes that were not directly related to literacy experiences, but emerged from interpretation of the interviews, and seemed significant in the participant's experiences of school.

Only those themes that emerged in the experiences of at least seven of eight participants would be included as common themes. They are presented below in a sequence representing their relation to more general themes. The first four themes can be clustered into a more general theme of "OK Experience" and the other five appear related to the "Impact of Teaching Style and Programme".

<u>OK Experience</u>

The first four common themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants with learning disabilities appeared to be generally indicative of OK experiences in school. "OK" is more accurate than "positive" or "good", because while there were some positive elements, the general tone was more neutral or non-negative. These themes overlap and do not lend themselves to isolated discussion. Nor do they readily match themes observed in previous research. These include the experience of being more similar than different, the experience of success, the experience of progress, and the experience of enjoying literacy.

Experience of Being More Similar Than Different

The participants all appeared to experience themselves as more similar to than different from others. Although some were aware that they had learning disabilities, some were not aware. Some felt that peers were aware of their problems, and others seemed to think their problems were not well known. None seemed to feel that it mattered very much. Most saw their difficulties as part of a larger picture, where they were not much different from everyone else. Everyone had strengths and weaknesses. They appeared to have a healthy, balanced, multidimensional view of themselves, and did not draw distinct lines between themselves and others.

Awareness of learning disabilities

Two of the participants felt that they never had learning disabilities, while the other six indicated that the term had been applied to them. None seemed to feel that the term had much meaning in their lives.

George did not think he had a learning disability, just some trouble remembering what he read. He felt that he was placed in the Learning Skills programme due to his attitude and behaviour, but that it seemed to have helped his reading anyway. George felt that the BOOST programme was

> ...just a quiet place where like if you need help you can go down there but
> it's not like [Learning Skills], where you get like a whole hours of work
> you go down there and for fifteen minutes and see what you can get done
> and then you go back up your classroom.

Amelia said that she had been so far behind in reading that "they thought I had learning disabilities." However, she felt that her delays were entirely due to French

Immersion, and that once she was placed in English (at the same time as Learning Skills), she made significant gains and more-or-less caught up. It did not bother her that people thought she had learning disabilities, because she knew she did not. Although Amelia did not think she had learning disabilities she thought that it meant:

> ...when you don't know how to learn, like, even if the teachers explain it really easy and good. Kids don't understand them.... It's just because your mind isn't focused. Like probably because the person stayed up too late, or something. Fooling around sometimes can give a learning disability. I think. And ... staying up too late.... If you stay up like every night, one o'clock, then you will have a learning disability.

Benjamin's mother had informed him that he had dyslexia. She even had a book of famous people with dyslexia. Benjamin explained that dyslexia meant, "I can't read properly. It's harder". He said that "a guy" had come and tested him when he was little. Benjamin did not like having dyslexia "... it's frustrating, it's hard, boring, and all that". He did not like many subjects in school simply because the reading and writing parts were hard. The reading part in particular, because with writing, he felt, once he had a rough copy, it was easy to just copy out the good copy. Benjamin felt that his reading was getting "a tiny bit" better. He felt that he would always have dyslexia, but that he would eventually learn to read properly. He was unable to say when that might be, but then he could read "really really really big words, with 25 letters."

Hannah's learning disabilities had been identified several years earlier. She could recall some testing, and that "...I know that they say that I [have a learning disability] and that I can get help and stuff at, I get help at school".

Charles was aware that he had been considered to have learning disabilities, but felt he had made so much gain in his reading and spelling that it was hardly a disability

any more. "It's no prob ... no not really. This will probably be my last year in the learning assistance programme."

Dexter did not use the term learning disability, but described problems with reading and spelling. He realised that he needed extra help in those areas, and that was why he went to "...Mrs. _____'s class ... my assistant, the teacher that helps me, I go to her class in the morning".

Frederick was recently diagnosed with learning disabilities, and did not know much about it. He had spent most of his schooling in general education, except the last few months, where he went to BOOST for work on spelling. Frederick seemed somewhat relieved and somewhat vindicated that he had been recently diagnosed with a learning disability. Prior to that had received messages from his teachers that he had to work harder:

> The teachers were always telling me that I could do better and I knew I
> couldn't, like, they said it's just, like, teacher told my mom it's just
> copying, I shouldn't have no troubles with it but I do. I always get my d's
> and b's mixed up, and in French I mix, I mixed two letters up, I get, I lose
> one mark off an assignment.

Generally, the participants appeared to have little connection to the "label" which the school district and others had applied to them. Although they all recognised that they had had trouble with literacy skills, at least early in their schooling, it seemed to matter very little to them that they were labelled.

What do peers think?

Several participants commented about what peers said or thought about the participants' learning difficulties. They seemed to be ambivalent generally, with some

feeling that it did not matter what peers thought, and others feeling that peers did not even know, and it was better that way. Hannah had mixed feelings "It doesn't make a big difference [to have a learning disability]. I still, I don't really care what other kids think 'cause what they think is not what I think". On the other hand, Hannah felt that asking for help "... is just embarrassing. Sometimes they make fun of you. But they're not as smart as they think they are, but they aren't very smart... they don't do their work so they're stuck." Hannah felt that other students were probably stuck on the same question, but were afraid to ask, "Yeah and then they make fun of you". She said this in a tone of voice implying that they did not have much room to be making fun of her.

Dexter was uncertain if others knew, and what they thought, "Well it just makes them so you pretty much laugh at me" he said. However, "but most of my friends don't [laugh]. Some of the grade fives don't even know ... Like [my friend] probably doesn't tell anybody that I'm a slow reader ... and I pretty much don't tell anybody that either". Dexter felt that it was better if people did not know.

Frederick talked about trying to hide his spelling problem when he moved to a new school where few students knew him.

> At the beginning of the year I found it really hard 'cause I didn't have any friends and I didn't want anyone else knowing that I was having trouble with my spelling...so I was trying work at with almost twice as hard as I would normally.

Charles said, "... pretty much all the people in my class know. They don't really care 'cause they have problems with everything. Everybody in the class has problems with at least four things".

Bullying, making fun, teasing

All of the participants had something to say about teasing, bullying, or other children making fun of them. For some, bullying and teasing was significant in their current experience, while for most, it was minimal and/or in the past.

Charles's first few years of school seemed to be characterised by bullying, with older children bugging him to the point where his parents accompanied him to school before it stopped. Dexter's bullying experience was more recent and present in his life. He talked of children harassing him, trying to beat him up, teasing him about his name. Dexter said, "I've had problems just because my name's Dexter. They call me [mean names]". This seemed to be happening frequently around the time of the interviews.

Ernie was able to recall one incident of bullying.

> ...in grade 2, I started to learn to read this small printing. ...the teacher would say I was allowed to read Charlotte's Web. ...and [a boy in my class], he says 'You can't read that, you still don't know how to read small printing.' And I'm like 'Yeah, I'm allowed, I could read small printing now'. And ... then he knocks the book out of my hand. And I'm going 'What did you do... that for?' [He said], 'cause you can't read ... small printing yet'.

The memory of this incident was clear four years later, suggesting that it carried with it the weight of significant emotion. It was the only incident of bullying related to his learning problems that he recalled. Ernie reported some on-going teasing and name-calling, but it was not different from what others experienced. "They think I'm a dweeb, because I make friends with girls. ...Mmmm, stupid, uh, kind of call me names, mmm. Sometimes they call me girly boy."

Hannah talked about how she received no respect from the older students at the middle school, although this seemed to her to be more of a "normal" situation, where all

younger students were treated this way, not just those with learning problems. Hannah said, "... because I'll be in grade 8 and they'll be in grade 7. It feels good to be the oldest grade 'cause then you have more power over the little kids, but they still don't have any respect for you". Hannah said that even some students with learning problems themselves called her names and said that she could not spell properly. She felt she was able to protect herself emotionally from these comments: "I don't care if someone says something about my learning disability, because ... they just want you to get mad."

Frederick described how an old friend of his from Elementary School "... started bugging me and other things like that... he would just make fun of [my spelling]". But then Frederick met some other students with poor spelling, and this helped him feel OK.

George did not allow the kids to bug him, and suggested how this happened by clenching his fist. He felt that he was tough enough, and had a reputation for fighting, which prevented other kids from teasing.

Dexter experienced considerable pain when teased. He cried while telling about how they laughed at him: "I look like a joke to other grade fives". On the other hand, his friends would not laugh at him, and in fact, he thought later, few of the grade fives even knew about his problems in reading and spelling.

Benjamin said that it "hardly ever happens" that other kids teased him or made fun of his reading. Amelia said, "No one teases me or anything. I'm starting to become popular for some reason. I don't know why".

The others could not describe a significant incident of being teased about it. They often attributed this to the fact that everybody had some things they were better at and some things they were worse at.

Generally, the participants seemed to have only a few experiences with bullying, teasing, or other kids making fun of their learning problems. While two talked about being picked on physically, only one seemed to be experiencing this currently. This bullying was apparently unrelated to their learning problems, but more typical playground material such as name-calling, in-group/out-group posturing, and intimidation. Those participants who experienced teasing seemed to have developed strategies for dealing with it, so that it did not seriously affect their self-worth.

<u>More similar than different</u>

Most of the participants felt that their problems with reading and writing were not of great significance overall, and that they were more like their peers than different.

Benjamin seemed to feel that having dyslexia did not make him very different from other children. "I don't know. Most of the stuff we're the same, like sports, we go, all my friends are good at it like me, but when there's reading I'm not". He felt that reading, and a little bit of writing, were his only real problem areas, the only difference between him and others. Benjamin also talked about a friend who recently moved away, "He was like me: Dyslexia". His mother also had a book about famous people with dyslexia, which seemed to help him feel normal.

After a rough start to the year, Frederick said, "I had a whole bunch of friends and one of my friends was worse at spelling than me, I found, and that helped relax me quite a bit helped me know I had someone else in the class that was like had problems like me". Frederick told how he would have to stand in line at the French teacher's desk after

class, because there were a number of people who could not understand her instructions and needed clarification. He was confident that he was not the only one having trouble.

George seemed to feel that his problems were not all that bad anyway, but there were others who had skills "...as bad as mine. Some aren't that bad." He gave an example of how he was not the only one "Mr. _____ gives questions, and talks too fast, and he gives a great big assignment that had to be done in three days, that I couldn't get done ... nobody could get it done...".

Dexter said that pretty much everyone was faster than he was at reading, writing and math, except one boy, his friend. His friend was slower at reading, but pretty good in math and drawing. He does not get words as easily as Dexter does.

Amelia did not feel alone or unique in her problems. She was well aware that she was in the "yellow group" for spelling tests (with the easiest words), which meant that there were others with similar levels of spelling skill. She was also not the only one who worked slowly in math, and made the teacher wait to get her lunch. "We're, like, we're like the only slow ones in her class".

Four of the participants described listening to and/or reading from the book *All Kinds of Minds*, which is a series of stories about various children with learning and behaviour difficulties. A number of the Learning Skills teachers made it part of the daily routine to read passages from the book. The participants who heard the book felt it was good to listen to, because it helped them to understand that everybody had problems of some sort, and everybody brought something positive to the group. Charles felt the book was "...good to listen to.... Mrs. _____ tries to read it every morning.... It's just about like their problems and stuff, like, how not to do stuff, what not to do, and what to do."

As Ernie put it "...we get understanding our minds... it's all about these kids who has problems with their mind... and [we learn] that we should all of us should accept our minds and how we live, because everybody, at least has *a* problem".

Summary of more similar than different

The participants expressed different degrees of awareness that they had a label of "learning disabilities", and what it meant in terms of schooling. They generally recognised a learning problem, although some felt it was not as big a problem now as it had been originally. They did not appear to identify with the label very much. The participants were aware that some of their peers knew about their learning difficulties, but most did not appear to be particularly concerned one way or the other. The participants generally seemed to feel that they were considerably more like their peers than different from them. The learning disability did not seem to define them and separate them from the other children; it merely represented a part of their overall experience in school and life.

Experience of Success

The participants had been prepared for the interviews by brief descriptions of the study, with the general understanding that I was interested in their experiences at school, particularly in the areas of reading and writing. This frame seemed to focus some of the children's comments, but almost all were drawn "off topic" in many directions, and we spent a great deal of time talking about almost everything that might happen in school. I initially felt that this might be avoidance of the topics of reading and writing, since I

imagined that those topics might be "painful" to discuss. However, as time passed, I began to appreciate that these children were perhaps simply more balanced than I expected. They were all able to name some things they felt they were good at including school subjects, and activities such as sports, Nintendo, and Pokémon.

The participants felt that there were some school subjects they were good at, usually not directly related to literacy, such as art and gym. However, there were also some who felt that some of their reading or writing skills were fine.

Charles's teacher had given him a good final report card. He was pleased that he had mostly "Meets Needs" and "Exceeds" on the report. He said he received grades of "Meets Needs" in reading and "Exceeds" in spelling. Charles was quite positive about his literacy skills. "It's no prob ... no, not really. This will probably be my last year in the learning assistance program". Charles felt

> I'm getting good at computers because you had to like go into the
> computer, find all this stuff, and then you had to get back out and write it
> all out. So it took me quite a while to finish so...and I wasn't that good at
> it. I was slow on computers. But now I'm pretty good on computers.

Charles received a grade of "Not Yet" on his report card for gym. Not Yet means "It's like, you're not very good at it. Like gym I'm not very good at but I still like it. Because like, um, it's usually because when I run, I'm not really good at it, 'cause my ankles, I got weak ankles so, it's not really easy for me to play gym".

Ernie felt that "...Science is easy to learn" because it was interesting. Math is also an area of success. "I practice very hard on math" and "I get A in math". Ernie felt that it was helpful to go slowly at math, rather than work too quickly. Ernie was also quite

confident about his Pokémon skill and knowledge, and explained in great detail the various characters and their powers.

Amelia was very proud of her spelling. She showed me a whole spelling book, where virtually every week's test had high scores. She contradicted herself, however, saying "I'm not good at spelling". Amelia remarked that "...I was like the best handwriter in the class". Amelia felt that she was good at art, but the teacher never seemed to like it. She showed me her art portfolio, with a number of comments written by the teacher such as "Amelia, picture needs more effort. Stay in at lunch to fix it up". She was somewhat discouraged by the teacher always expecting more from her art. On the other hand, she showed me one piece that the teacher apparently showed to the whole class and complimented her on. Amelia also noted that "I'm good at computer". Amelia also said she was reasonably good in figure skating, and enjoyed gym and other physical activities such as Jet-skiing.

Benjamin felt that he was reasonably competent at a number of things, and had no difficulty imagining various career options. He might want to be a "world athlete for money", running the 100 metres. He felt that he was very fast, and described his prowess in track and field events. Benjamin said "I'm like the fastest grade 4, and so, now, probably when I get to grade 5, I get those two gold ribbons—I'll be the fastest kid at school". Benjamin also might be a "Nintendo Pro", a person who plays video games, or designs them. He imagined he would be good at this, because he had good ideas for the games and scenery, and he said he was "awesome" at breaking the game codes, getting the bonuses, and the like.

Dexter made the circular, but insightful observation: "Yeah. Unless it's something you're good at, you're not very good at it". He felt he was good at remembering the Pokémon cards, and other such card games, and computer/video games. Dexter observed that it was very important socially to be knowledgeable, as popularity in school was closely related to Pokémon skill. "...because since he knows everything about Pokémon everybody else hangs around them that has the game Pokémon". Dexter said that he learned really well from just using his hands, on the joystick and controllers. He enjoyed computer games, and felt competent with them. He felt that he was good at art and took it more seriously than his classmates did. Dexter said that physical education was strong "... last year [on my] report card, the best thing I had done, then—the best thing I did there was PE. Dexter also felt that "the easier stuff about school is probably math so far", although he acknowledged that he had trouble remembering his facts.

George worked hard in school and was proud of his report card grades. He said that they were always C+'s and B's and A's. He said that he was a good reader, could understand reading, but had trouble remembering what he read. He did not think he had much of a learning problem, and did not think he had ever been diagnosed with learning disabilities, although he was not sure what was meant by the term. George was good at hockey and other sports, and seemed to have healthy self-esteem concerning his athletic prowess. He received only a B grade in physical education, he said, because he forgot his strip one time. George also felt good about his art skills "...I was in [art] for like two months and ... I did really good, I was like the best drawer in our class...".

Hannah felt that she drew pretty well, and liked copying all of the Pokémon characters. At one time she rode horses competitively, prior to her accident. She also

thought she had a knack for collecting and might like to run a comic/card-collecting store. She enjoyed drama class, and felt she did well at it. She was also a reasonably good athlete and enjoyed much of physical education. Hannah felt content with who she was. When confronted with criticism, she was able to put it in perspective. She remembered an incident when "My friend, one time, she got really mad at me for some reason, I have no idea why, and she said that I couldn't spell or draw, and I can draw pretty good". It did not bother her that the friend had also put down her spelling, largely because Hannah accepted this as true.

Frederick was initially reluctant to talk about his strengths, and seemed to have a generally negative self-concept. He was inclined to downplay his strengths, he explained, so that he did not appear to be bragging or conceited. Frederick wasn't sure how to think about his abilities and weaknesses:

> Well, my mom's says I have a low self-esteem and I'm always thinking I'm never gonna get a good mark. Like she's telling me, like I get confused 'cause she says, 'expect the lowest but then think higher than low is ... a bonus.' Do your best but expect the lowest, but anything higher than that is a bonus. But what really confuses me is 'cause then I say 'I'm not going to do I'm not the best at this' and then she goes 'oh yes you are' and then she drags it on that you said this and she goes 'I didn't say that' and the very next day she says that again.

As he talked, however, Frederick could not deny being good at some things, and later revised his explanation of his self-esteem.

> ...it's the spelling that mostly puts down my self-esteem and it's the projects that I normally hand in that gets low marks, it helps keep push it down and keep it down but with this new [speech recognition] software I'm pretty sure I can try to help get it back up".

In other words, he thought that the adaptation to help with spelling would lead to greater success, and improve his self-esteem. Frederick felt his reading was an area of strength. He said he had no trouble with novel studies, except the written component:

> In the beginning of the year ... we had to do novel studies, then we had to take all the important points of the book and figure out, and then just say this is happened today this happened there and then you'd have to say things about certain characters.

Frederick also felt that he was reasonably good at math, science, and band. He sometimes transposes classical music from one instrument to another.

Summary of experience of success

Despite the framing of the interviews as being about their literacy experiences, the participants tended to talk about many topics other than reading and writing. The topics that they tended to drift toward were those of general interest, as well as their areas of strength and success. I initially interpreted this as avoidance of a potentially painful topic, but later realised that it was more indicative of well-balanced sense of self, as the participants seemed to place reading and writing at a lower priority level than I was seeking for the purposes of this study.

The participants talked about some school subjects in which they took a keen interest or felt successful, such as PE, art, music, science, social studies and math. They also talked about popular movies and games, and some felt that their skill and knowledge in these areas contributed to their social success.

<u>Experience of Progress</u>

The participants experienced themselves as doing fine in school for the most part. Most felt that there were still some weaknesses and that they were continuing to make progress. They hinted at having had more difficulties in the past, and some in the present, but seemed to feel that in the future they would not have many. All reported that their literacy skills had improved, to varying degrees. They experienced progress in reading, writing, and spelling.

<u>It was hard in the beginning</u>

Few participants recalled much of their first few years of school, and most tended to focus on more recent experiences in our interviews. Most seemed to be unaware that they were not doing as well as others in the early grades. Those who did comment about their early experiences remembered it being very hard.

Dexter made the insightful observation that it was other people who first noticed his reading problem. He said that he had been able to tell that his spelling was poor and that his printing was hard to read, but felt he had no real basis on which to judge his reading skill. Hannah talked about how hard it was at first, when the words seemed so difficult. "...it was pretty hard to read and stuff ... Well, the words were really big in the book ...and stuff". Ernie remembered that "... when I was in grade one it was hard to read, like this small". Dexter implied that reading used to be harder "Reading is getting easier.... It's still kind of hard. I still can't get some words...". Frederick said "l remember grade 3, we were doing Inuit study and I could not spell any of the words with the Inuit test".

George recalled that his learning problems began in grade 4. Prior to that time, the teacher would provide books with large print, few words, and plenty of time to read them. In grade 4, however, George could never seem to read all of them in the time allowed. Also, some of the longer words would be too hard, "... so I just pass and then the sentence wouldn't make sense...". He said that sometimes he would guess correctly, but it was hard to be sure.

Several said they started in the Learning Skills programme several years earlier, but prior to that, were not really aware of having learning problems.

Progress in reading

George felt that his reading was the main problem originally, but his time with the Learning Skills programme helped his reading skills, and he exited the programme. He felt that he still had a little trouble with "... reading and remembering the things I read ... I understand, it's just then they go ask me questions and it's like I pull a blank and then I don't think I read that part".

Amelia reported that she could barely read when she came to the new school in grade 3. "...it almost looks like I missed a grade, like when I was reading...". She had been so far behind that "they thought I had a learning disability". She felt that she caught up 2½ years in reading after moving out of French Immersion and into English and the Learning Skills programme for the past year. She was quite happy with her progress, and did not really think she had a reading problem at present, perhaps still "a tiny bit" behind.

Charles said that he had made so much progress that he was ready to move out of the Learning Skills Programme after next year. "I think so, 'cause usually when I've read all the books, they set me on a harder book. And that's what I've been doing".

Dexter said that reading was getting easier, but was still hard. He felt that he had made the difference in his own progress: "Yeah, it changed because the work got easier ... it's pretty much the same stuff but it happened to get easier. That's because I was practicing".

Hannah felt that her reading was improving: "Yeah, [reading's] better now... it's more of a problem with spelling right now. I can understand reading if I read it in my head, I can understand it better, but if I read it out loud, it's harder to read". She felt that repeating grade 3 had helped to get her caught up.

Benjamin felt that his reading skills were a "tiny bit better", but he wasn't specific about what he thought they used to be like.

Progress in writing

The participants had experienced considerable progress in writing. Although they tended to focus on the mechanics (spelling, punctuation and even penmanship) when describing writing, some saw the process of writing as getting easier. Some had noticed that the expectations for writing were increasing as well. Amelia was afraid of the expectations for grade 4 "My friends tell me it's so hard because you do these big assignments and all that".

Some were seeing their written output increase, and expressed amazement at what could be done with the right motivation and conditions. George was amused to tell a

story about typing "500 words in one hour" and shocking even his teacher. Charles talked about writing one journal entry "more than 200 words", with a tone of voice suggesting awe. Frederick was very proud of having written a long story "... me and my buddy we ... had to write stories for Language Arts in grade 6 and he and I had the two longest stories in the class. I had nine pages and he had twelve pages." Ernie felt his writing was progressing, "I think it got coming along pretty good it's just ah, just mostly of the long words".

Progress in spelling

The participants felt that they were doing much better in spelling. Weekly spelling tests offered graphic evidence of their progress.

Ernie summed it up neatly: "Yep. I'm improving." He said, "First I did lousy and then I did good ... I'd get like five when I started and then ... I got better I got ten out of ten, nine out of ten...." He said it felt "good" to be getting ten out of ten now, and when asked how it had felt when he "did lousy", he said "... it's like, well, at least I got five" in a chipper, positive tone. When asked why he thought he was getting better at spelling, he felt it was simple: "... because I'm learning more spelling" even though the words just get harder and harder.

Amelia was thrilled to have A+ on most of her spelling tests (14 or 15 out of 15 correct). She had made significant progress from the years before, when her spelling was not very good. Spelling was a lot easier, she said, because she was in the "yellow group" and therefore given the easiest words for her spelling tests.

Charles said that the Learning Skills teacher gave easy words "she gave us like 'the', 'it', and stuff. She's too soft on us". He nonetheless made progress and felt that he did not have much of a spelling problem now.

Dexter practiced a great deal, and was pleased with his spelling results. "...our mom would say, like, do the dishes or something, and she'd, like, call out the words and I would spell it. Sometimes I do really good when I don't even practice".

There was one problem with making progress in spelling, as several of the participants pointed out. Every time they mastered one list of words, the teacher would assign a new, harder set. There never seemed to be an end to challenging spelling words. As Ernie put it "Yep, they get harder and harder". Benjamin said his spelling drills were always the same, but the actual spelling words change "Yeah, harder".

Summary of experiences of progress

The general sense among the participants was that they were works in progress. They did not have the advantage of adult retrospect to appreciate where they were in the process of developing skills, but they all seemed to have some insight, and a sense that they were not done yet, and that was OK.

They did not all recall having problems in learning, as it was not always pointed out to them that they were behind their peers. However, they began to experience problems after some time in school. They were provided help, at some stage, and this both drew their attention to the problem, but also made it easier. Most of the participants had experienced considerable progress in reading, writing and spelling, and were generally pleased with their current skill levels.

<u>Experience of Enjoying Literacy</u>

The participants were able to express their enjoyment of various aspects of literacy, sometimes even the parts that they had struggled with. Some enjoyed reading and listening to stories and others liked writing stories and journals. Some even liked the weekly spelling tests.

Charles's feelings about reading seemed to vary from session to session. Initially, he said, "language arts is my favourite thing to do"; it was fun with his classroom teacher. Later, he expressed more negative feelings about reading. He said that his classroom teacher kept them reading all the time, and that he got used to reading a "Tom and Ricky" book in about five days, at a chapter or two every day. At another time, he said that he enjoyed reading, especially the "Tom and Ricky" adventure books. He even enjoyed the part where he had to answer questions designed by the Learning Skills Programme teacher. He usually did reading in a group where they all read the story together, to each other, and then worked together to answer questions. This limited audience for his reading was not threatening to Charles because he was used to them hearing him read.

Charles enjoyed writing to foreign pen-pals with e-mail. He said "It's stories and stuff. We like, we writed a story and they had to finish it". They also write letters "They make up these things, like what's your favourite food and what's your favourite pizza and stuff like that". Charles found journals particularly enjoyable, "I find that easy actually 'cause I get to write whatever you want and, Mrs. ____ said if you make a spelling mistake, plus you do tell them if you don't want them to look at it they don't have to." Charles and his sister even made a competition of writing stories during the summer.

> "Yep. Um, me and my sister we made up this game ... she makes up a
> story and I make up a story, and every word in the story if you get wrong

or right, it each counts for two points, if you get it right, if you get it
wrong you take away two. So, it's sort of getting me going on reading, so,
I don't have to read actually pretty much. I just read, like I could keep up
reading in the summer Mrs. _____ says, so me and my sister made up that
game so we wouldn't have to ... we made it up so it's a game and it's fun".

Ernie said he enjoyed reading. He described recently winning a poster in the Hook a Book programme. He read a number of books, and wrote something about them, and received the poster as a prize. He was not all that proud, however, because he only had to read a few books to win. "I don't know, two, three. Hardly anybody got in, like, one only had one and.... Yeah, I think I only had two or three in". Ernie talked about a recent mystery novel he had read, and how he enjoyed that type of story. Ernie also enjoyed writing. "...well, we have this Writers Workshop, we write stories...and, and one of them is call called "My Dad". He said he received an A for his story about the things that he and his father did together before his suicide.

Amelia acknowledged that she had been very far behind in her reading, but after receiving help she had more-or-less caught up, and was enjoying her skills. She gave examples of reading and writing stories that she had no trouble with, and had fun doing. She showed me a bound book that she had written and illustrated. She appeared to be quite proud of it. She said several times that she enjoyed spelling, because she did so well on the tests each week.

Benjamin initially claimed that he hated everything about school, including reading and writing. Reading was hard "I still don't know how to read, I still don't read books. It's boring, books". He thought that some books, like James Bond and Stephen King books might be OK to read if he were able. Benjamin later talked about his teacher giving him some books "Scary Stories for Sleepovers" that were fun to read and listen to.

"My mom read one ... I was reading one but I finished it." He had a birthday sleepover, and they read the scary stories, but his friends "... are sort of, like, chicken, they don't like being frightened. But, we stayed up 'til 4 o'clock in the morning. That was fun".

Benjamin was enthusiastic about writing stories with a buddy. He came up with the ideas, and "I always get my friend to try to write it down". He gave descriptions of some detailed stories he had created, but had not been able to get on paper himself, because he was frequently pulled out for extra help during writing period at school.

Hannah enjoyed having stories read to her, as well as reading on her own, if the books were interesting.

> Well, I don't remember ... my dad reading. When my mom used to live with her roommate ...um...we used to share a room, and she used to ... I always asked her to read from her books, 'cause they were big thick books that were complicated, ... [and] my grandma used to read me little...my books and stuff.

On her own, Hannah would read easier books "I read, like ... Wishbone. One book that I really like is Juliet and Romeo or whatever". Hannah also enjoyed making up stories, but not necessarily writing them down.

> Well, I always think about stories and stuff that I like but I never write them but I sometimes write um stories or, uh, I have adventures with Pokémons or something. Just something imaginative ... just sort of adventurous and mystical sort of, like, I guess. I like unicorns and dragons and stuff.

George did not talk much about his feelings concerning reading and writing. He explained that he read well enough, but had trouble remembering. He did not spend any more time reading than he had to apparently. For the summer, he said "no, that's my rule

[laughs]. No school work". However, he did acknowledge that he enjoyed writing and making up stories in school.

Summary of enjoying literacy

All but one of the participants experienced enjoyment of some aspects of reading, writing or spelling. Several made comments that led me to believe that their enjoyment of literacy was directly related to their competence. One hated school and hated books largely because he had trouble reading, but admitted that he enjoyed the contents of books, and would probably like reading if he could read the stories he liked most. Others enjoyed the success they received on spelling tests, getting high scores each week. Interestingly, one boy, who said that reading was no longer a problem, was adamant that he would not touch a book all summer.

Summary of OK Experience

The first four themes above, when taken as a whole, describe a generally OK experience. The participants made negative comments, and in subsequent sections, there are some less positive experiences described. However, the general tone in much of the discussions about literacy was positive. The students seemed to feel that despite being considered to have learning disabilities, they did not seem to struggle very much, and felt that they were more similar to their peers than different. They experienced occasional social difficulties, but generally felt that they were popular and fit in. The participants also talked about other positive experiences at school, including successes in numerous subjects other than Language Arts, and their interests in activities such as sports and

Pokémon. They had early difficulties, but had made significant progress, and were now doing reasonably well in most aspects of reading, writing, and spelling. They enjoyed aspects of literacy, especially those in which they experienced success and rewards. They clearly gave the impression of being very normal children, and having suffered very little of the dire consequences predicted for children with learning disabilities in the extensive literature on the subject.

Impact of Teaching Style and Programme

The next five common themes all appear related to the impact of the choices and style of teachers and the programme structure. The participants talked about teachers who were nice or mean, and gave numerous explanations of what types of teacher-student relationships and teacher behaviours would place them in those categories. The participants also talked about some of their experiences that seemed to be the result of programming decisions made by teachers. These included the experience of having too little time to do what they needed to do, the experience of frustration with the work, with themselves, with the teacher, the experience of confusion in a variety of contexts, and the experience of computers making a difference.

Experience of Teacher Style Making a Difference

The participants made numerous comments about their teachers and helpers at school. Their experiences at school were very much affected by their teachers, whether they were "Nice" or "Mean". All could find something positive to say about some of

their teachers. Five of the eight participants said negative things about some teachers, while three made no negative comments.

Nice teachers

Most of the participants were able to recall teachers and other school staff who they thought were "nice", which involved a variety of teacher behaviours, including being understanding and sensitive, giving encouragement, praise and rewards, providing structure and discipline, being fair, giving appropriate level and amount of work and enough time to finish it, helping when the student felt the need for help, and making learning fun.

Understanding and sensitive

Hannah appreciated teachers who did not make her read aloud in class:

... 'cause whenever we were doing [Language Arts] in grade 6, I never got picked to stand up and read in front of the class 'cause ... I was working on other stuff, 'cause things they were working on were harder and ... the teacher gave me easier things to do. They usually avoid asking me 'cause they know I have a learning disability and it's embarrassing to read out loud and get stuff wrong.

If Hannah stumbled on a word while reading aloud, the teacher would usually just correct her, rather than let her struggle.

Encouragement, praise and rewards

Teachers who were encouraging, gave praise for work, and gave rewards and treats, were also generally nice. George appreciated the "pat on the back" he received

from his favourite teacher, referring to praise and recognition of effort. Charles liked the reward system at the Learning Skills class: "At Mrs. _____'s when you get your little book that she has for reading, you then check, check, and whoever has the most checks gets to pick a prize every week...." Ernie received a poster as a prize for his hard work reading a number of books, and although he downplayed the significance, he was nonetheless fairly proud of his accomplishment and the teacher's recognition of it.

Structure and discipline

Three participants viewed themselves as quiet, hard working, and well behaved and they appreciated the strictness of the teachers' routines, structures and behavioural expectations. They did not appreciate the noise and disruption of students who did not want to work. Dexter was one of the "good" students, and he would earn his group some rewards with his behaviour. Dexter said:

> ...we had to be good ... when we got in from lunch and my teacher says ... hand in our books, put your heads down, and working quietly. You got points for all those things and some other things, for being extra helpful and stuff.... Our group was [good at getting points], then... most of our group moved and now we got some kids that really don't listen at all.

Charles's group was similar:

> ... we got the most high points ... because when the teacher's talking we don't talk, so we, so we get treats every two weeks. And when you get planners signed for reading, you get two points and then if no one gets their ... someone in your group, not signed, you take away one, it's like you got four points and then they take away one because one person didn't have it.

Amelia said: "I never mess around. Like, I'm always trying to listen but then when someone's talking to me, she blames me". She reluctantly admitted that there was some advantage to a strict teaching style:

> ... she can, she gives you lots to learn about but she's so strict ... I think [it's good for some of the kids, such as] the ones that are fooling around ... but I don't think she should be that strict. Like, [she] gets mad if you do one mistake. She doesn't get mad at me because um, I don't know ... because I'm in Mrs. [Learning Skills teacher]'s thing, and she knows that I try.

Familiarity and security

Charles loved his teachers, he said, and was quite distressed that he was forced to move to the new school built in his neighbourhood. He had had a hard time getting comfortable with the current school children and staff, but now had become quite attached to his teachers and said he would particularly miss his Learning Skills teacher, as she had done so much for him. Charles seemed to really value the predictability of what he had become accustomed to.

> ... just like you get used to one teacher 'cause um, Mrs. A____ was a grade five teacher for half a year at this school, and then Mrs. B____ took half a year of vacation, on a cruise or something like that, and um, sort of kids got use to her and then, now she's back ... our class got used to Mrs. A___ and then Mrs. B___ is back, 'cause we don't know her that much anymore.

George had mixed feelings that his favourite teacher was switching to a new position in the school, and would not be available as a homeroom teacher next year, but might be available to help him in the BOOST room.

> Yeah, Mr. ____, my homeroom teacher, my good homeroom teacher, I went up to him and says 'are you teaching grade eight year?' because he said he was, but what he's gonna do he's gonna take over for Ms. [BOOST teacher], so, that's cool.

Once students found teachers whom they liked, they wanted to stick with them.

Being fair

Teachers were thought to be nice if they were perceived to be fair. Frederick, for example, liked it when his favourite teacher took the time to read his work "fairly" without being distracted by spelling. Frederick said,

> Well, she knew that I did have troubles, but she would, like, let me have, like, ... she wouldn't try to read my work, like, other teachers, they just go 'this is too messy, I can't read it' and then they would go to the next one, ...but she actually sat and read it and marked it fairly, like, other teachers just went by it and just didn't really mark it.

Appropriate level, amount, and time to do work

The participants all seemed to have experienced work that was too difficult, too easy, and just right. The Learning Skills teachers were universally appreciated because they always seemed to provide work at the correct level. Amelia liked the Learning Skills teacher, because she seemed to give just the right work.

> Well, I'm actually excited when I go to see her, because I don't like [being with] my teacher, so when I go there to see [the Learning Skills teacher], I get excited and then I do some work that is about my grade, like, it's really good, 'cause it's really, how should I say it? ...it's not too hard and it's not too easy....

By contrast, Amelia felt that her classroom teacher did not always provide appropriate materials, which she explained with an annoyed tone of voice:

> ... the books that I read in our class are too hard for me. I can't find any that are [easy enough for me to read]; not any are not even easy. Like, I have to go to my [Learning Skills teacher] to ask if I can use one of, some of, her books.

Amelia explained that she did not always do the same work as her classmates:

It depends what kind of work it is. Like if it's, like, um, kind of easy, like
my rate, then Mrs. [classroom teacher] would let, like, if it was, like,
match the clock that tells the right time, then she would let me match the
clocks with, like, a pencil, or something ... because everyone did that one.
But like, sometimes, she'll give me um, an easy version, like, in spelling,
me and this other girl are 'Yellow', that's the lowest list, like the easiest.
Next is Orange, and the one that's really hard is White.

Amelia did not mind being on the Yellow spelling list "I'm just glad I'm getting

A pluses".

Ernie noted that he never had to ask the teacher to adjust the level of work,

because she always gave him work that he could do successfully. "Pretty average at my

age".

Charles enjoyed getting work that was too easy, and did not want to say anything.

...most of the work with Mrs. ____ will give me ... she's like our little
helper, she thinks that it's pretty hard for me and I, it's not, it's not that
hard ... so most of the stuff which she gives me is easy because there is,
like, little pictures and ... and it's easy to guess, it's the easy part ... it's
kind of easy for me because, [laughs] I think it's good because then I get
spare time [laughs].

Charles also seemed pleased with the work provided in the Learning Skills room,

such as the book series: "Tom and Ricky, they're pretty easy".

George initially struggled to keep up with all the reading to be covered in middle

school. However, his teacher did not like the regular social studies texts and had made up

his own little booklets. The regular texts were "really old, from 1986, not at all up-to-

date". George found the teacher's versions were a lot easier to read.

Nice teachers allow students time to finish their work, and do not make them stay

in and finish. Charles explained that his nicest teachers would allow as much time as

necessary to complete the work, and not make students "...stay in and finish it and sometimes it's really hard work...". Charles seemed particularly concerned about time, and commented frequently about how much time the teacher allowed for various activities.

George talked about a teacher who the class complained about "... all of our class just didn't like him, just how he taught, and how he didn't give us enough time for work, and all that, and yells and all that, so we got a nicer teacher".

The concern about time to complete work is discussed further in another section of this chapter.

Helpful, but not too much

Being helpful was another important element. All of the participants talked about how helpful some of their teachers were. It was harder for them to explain exactly what type of help these nice teachers would provide.

Hannah and George provided examples of how some teachers, being nice, gave too much help. The teacher might launch into an elaborate explanation that would use up the remainder of the class time, in response to a simple question. Hannah explained:

> ... if somebody doesn't understand it and all the other kids understand it she'll go on and on and on about this one question. She does that in math when we were correcting a page in math, ... we only get through one page of math in one block, in 45 minutes or whatever and then we have to go on to the next.... We're lucky if we get down to business that we're doing for homework, so she doesn't understand how it works and then she'll go on and on about that. So it's just like a never-ending story.

George's experience was similar:

I only like it when they tell me what it is, 'cause Mr. ____, he's, like 'OK, what it means is this, and it's about this, and this, and this, and then you do this, and that, and this", aaah [noise of exasperation].

George's teacher would use up a great deal of time explaining too much:

... if I ask them at the end of the class, I know they will take up my time.... Like, I ask him and he's, like, [motions indicating talking too much] 'aaaah', going on, I look at the clock 'tick tick tick tick tick' ... 'hurry up!' Like, I can't, it would be rude to just 'OK, I understand, now go away' so I just listen to him and then say 'thank you' and all that.

This level of support could be more than enough and actually interfere with learning. George tried to keep from being overloaded: "what I do is I just listen to the meaning and then write it down and then all the rest of what he's saying I don't care about (laughs)."

Make school fun

Teachers who made school fun and/or had a good sense of humour appealed to the children. Hannah told of a teacher who climbed up on the desk and spoke with a funny voice to get everyone's attention. "Well, I can't remember her name but she was really funny". George described a favourite teacher: "Mr. ____, he's like almost perfect like he's mad when you make him mad and he's nice when he's in a nice a mood...." That teacher would make it interesting by talking in different foreign accents, and being fun. Charles enjoyed the teachers who were fun, and funny "... when she's, like talking, teaching us stuff, she makes it sort of a funny joke". Amelia would have preferred a different teacher: "...I like my other teacher better 'cause she would always do games with you.... Mrs. ___ does games but they're not fun.... The other teacher could've

taught me just as well but she added fun in learning. Like she'd go on field trips and let us know about stuff". Benjamin concurred that nice teachers "... do more fun stuff ... go on field trips and play".

Mean teachers

Most of the participants had also experienced teachers who were not "nice". They tended to refer to them as "mean" or "not good". Teachers that the participants did not like were usually those who yelled and said mean things to the students, made school too boring with tedious routines, were perceived as being unfair, gave inappropriate levels of work or had unreasonable expectations for quantity of work and time allotted, or moved too quickly through topics, were not helpful when it was needed, or were not fun.

Yelling and saying mean things

"Yelling" seemed to be a common behaviour among teachers who were not liked. These teachers were always raising their voices, saying mean things. As Hannah said "sometimes the teachers are in a grumpy mood and take it out on the classroom and then everyone's grouchy." Amelia reported that her classroom teacher was mean: "She always puts kids down, like, she gives them put downs." Her teacher is "ill-tempered", always yells, and is grumpy. Amelia observed that her mean teacher could seem nice, and that most of the students in her class thought she was nice, but Amelia was not fooled by appearances.

George explained what mean teachers were like.

> ... they just, like, yell at you, telling you to go to the office, like, when this
> teacher, he's one of the oldest there, right?, he teaches grade..., I don't

remember his name, he just goes around telling people 'you do that one
more time and you're going to the office' and I was standing on the wall,
like you're supposed to go out on lunch hour, so I was standing on the
wall by my classroom, he's like 'go out right now' it's like 'why?' he's
like 'OK, go to the office'...

Benjamin remarked that the not-so-good teachers were critical of his work "... and
then they scream or something like, they don't really scream but they can get mad...".

Too much routine

Several of the students felt the routines were boring. It was particularly tedious
for several participants to go to the Learning Skills class. They found the activities
repetitious and dull. Even Charles, who liked stability, observed that they had the same
routine of reading development activities every day "...every time we always go into our
phonics, then we go into Cloze and then we go onto our Tom and Ricky books...."
Benjamin did not like his Learning Skills class:

... 'cause I've been there forever, and it's boring now... we do the same
thing, well, like, Wednesday and Thursday, I'm always on this computer,
I, we, one day we have to do reading ... and one day I have to do spelling.
It's the same every week now.

Even Dexter, who was generally fond of the structure of school, felt that the
routine was getting on his nerves: "play, sleep, school, play, sleep, school".

Being unfair

Amelia told of an incident involving ice cream treats for the class, but not for the
one girl who had not submitted her science project. Amelia said the girl had wanted to
get the project in, but "maybe she forgot". While everyone ate their treats, "she just

cried". Meanwhile, the teacher "... didn't say anything she just went [turns face away to demonstrate], she was ignoring her and then she said, 'Everyone that got a Dilly Bar worked on their science project'...". Amelia was upset by this, and felt that it was unfair.

Inappropriate levels of work or unreasonable expectations

Some teachers provided work that was too difficult or too easy for the students, or their expectations were too high. Frederick had some bad experiences with levels of work. He talked about a meeting with his teacher and parents, where it was decided to make his work easier. This helped for a while, he said, but soon "she said 'he's doing quite well, let's boost him up a level again' so then I went up to this part were I was starting handing in assignments late, 'cause I was still trying to finish them...". Frederick had another bad experience with selection of work by the computer, not the teacher:

> I felt like I had a grade 1 IQ 'cause the words were like 'cat', 'dog', ... like I could spell that in grade 1 ... it's too easy, and then if got one wrong, like, it would always appear....

Frederick and his class also had a problem with the new French teacher:

> The second teacher got kinda annoyed and then she realised that we weren't at the French level that we were supposed to be at 'cause she's supposed to be a [grade] seven teacher, so she's used to teaching at a higher grade and she was trying to get us to.... I think there was a lot of things she was saying that we didn't even know, and then when she found out what level of French we were at she went back to English.

George had difficulties with the reading material of grade 4 "... 'cause there was, like, the teacher had you, had to get, like, a novel, like, with words, like, that big and you had time, like, to read and you couldn't read all of it. I couldn't read all of it in such a time".

Benjamin had an Art teacher who had very high expectations who would say "Like: 'You can do ten times better' and like that, that's what they say or something...." Frederick's teacher seemed to expect him to work all summer on spelling. Hannah felt overwhelmed and frustrated by the number of assignments the teachers expected the class to do. Several students complained about the lack of time, and this is discussed further in a separate section of this chapter.

Not helpful

Frederick had a teacher who he found was not very helpful, even when he approached the teacher's desk for help. The teacher would send him back to look it up on his own, or tell him to consult another student.

George talked about how important it was for the teacher to listen to the students. He gave examples of how hard it was to keep up, and then when he asked the teacher to slow down, the teacher did not, saying that the student should try harder to keep up. "Well, if, if, like, to listen to people, like, if you're going too fast, tell them to go slow, go slow, like, *'listen to us!'*"

Hannah described one teacher's way of responding to requests for help. She said she hated it when the teacher would either wait a long time, leaving Hannah with her hand in the air, until she forgot the question, or else stayed at his desk, and asked what she wanted. Hannah would prefer to have the teacher come over and help her discretely, but she would end up having to "say it out loud in front of the whole class" which was embarrassing and frustrating.

Amelia did not find her teacher very helpful "Like when we get back from Mrs. ____'s, I have to have a kid explain it for me, like, because Mrs. ____ doesn't have time, and I don't get it".

Charles and Dexter did not have negative things to say about any teachers, and spoke only positively about them all.

Not fun

Hannah thought that the mean teachers were those with no sense of humour. She felt that one of her teachers was very old, and should probably retire. "Seriously, [laughs] well, she's been here for a long while. If I were her, I'd have flown back to her home planet by now".

Amelia said "I was going to get our teacher a 'Stress Apple' but then when I came to get it, on the day you're supposed to give a teacher a present, it was gone so ... we're trying to look for another one". Amelia thought the teacher might not think she needed it "No, I think she would just say—'Oh, well I don't think I'll ever need that again'."

Summary of experiences of teachers

The participants shared experiences of some teachers who were nice, and some who were not so nice. The participants liked teachers who were understanding and sensitive, gave encouragement, praise and rewards, provided structure and discipline, were fair, gave an appropriate level and amount of work and enough time to finish it, helped when the student felt the need for help, and made learning fun. The participants did not like teachers who yelled and said mean things, had boring routines, were unfair,

gave inappropriate work or had unreasonable expectations, were not helpful when it was needed, or were not fun.

Experience of Not Having Enough Time

Another universal experience of the participants was a lack of time. There never seemed to be enough time to do what they had to do. This took several different forms, but each of the participants expressed one or more of the sub-themes. Some felt rushed in school, and wanted teachers to slow down. Some felt there was not enough time to complete assignments, study for exams, read their material, write stories or journals, or do math. Never having enough time seemed to be very frustrating and discouraging, and provoked considerable anxiety for some of the participants.

Not enough time for completing work

Projects and large assignments were generally not given enough time. Several participants spoke of assignments that were too large and complicated for the time limit allowed. Frederick found it hard to get work done during class time:

> ... like, I was doing an assignment, ... and I handed it late 'cause I was still finishing it, I handed it in a week late because I was still trying to finish it, and I couldn't write everything down ... and they'd like, give us time to work on it, like, before our assignments had to be ... I had to do a poster in one, half a week maybe five days like this one school week to work on it and we only had one, two French classes in that time.

This was frustrating and discouraging, because he would lose marks for late assignments.

Hannah sometimes felt overwhelmed by the work:

... when you've got so many projects they want you to get done or like we
had five projects due, well at least I did, and other people since they were
in French had six projects due and they had to get all those done.

Hannah felt there was not enough study time: "... our final test for Rome, we
didn't have very much time to study on Rome, so I didn't, not very many people passed
that test, not including, including me".

Frederick was frustrated with the time pressures of school. "In grade 3 it felt like
everyone was rushing me and then I learned how to first hand write...". He was
exasperated with the teacher's concept of how much he should be able to accomplish. "...
and she just sent me home a work package like of twelve spelling units and I said even if
I do them it will take me the entire summer even if by the time I got them finished".

Amelia felt similar time pressures and that her teacher resented her because she
was slow. Her teacher evidently waited for the students to complete math before going
for her lunch, and Amelia felt it was her fault. "... she gets mad if you're like uh, you're
kind of slow at math ... and she, like, blames you, 'cause she needs, wants to go to get a
lunch".

Dexter said his life was made more difficult when time was limited. His teacher
sometimes doesn't get started on math as early in the day as usual because:

There's probably some kids that would keep on talking or fooling around,
then that would take some time and then we would get down to ... then we
could do math ... and I usually get homework which is math, 'cause I'm
not so quick. Some other kids are quick, are good and quick, but not me.

Not enough time for reading and writing

George said "... you had to get, like, a novel, like, with words, like, that big and you had [limited] time, like, to read, and you couldn't read all of it. I couldn't read all of it in such a time".

Charles said that the teacher kept reducing the time allowed for writing, "... our class in grade 4 loved writing, and were fast at it. Every time we got it done in less than seven minutes she would make it down a little bit more ... it used to be 10 and went down to nine, then went down six...". Those who could not complete it in that period were welcome to complete their journal entry the next day, but this would cut into the next day's time. He would like to have "... more time for journal because we only get um, 10 or we only get 7 minutes ... and you have to write two hundred words ... I wrote almost a thousand words, four pages long".

Benjamin felt that he could not get his stories written because he was always being pulled out of writing class for extra help:

> I've hardly got any far with it. I won't, like, get really, really, really far, 'cause I'm always at people. We write like, two times a week and, can get, like, half a chance, or maybe not, because I'm always at people. We have English two times a week.

Hannah and George said they could not take adequate notes during lessons or copy material from the board or overhead projector quickly enough, and would have little to study from when the time came for tests. George said "... like, mine's way too messy if I have to go too fast, like, what's that word?"

Hannah observed, "It's slower to write notes 'cause the teacher's talk really fast ... the teachers usually put them on the board so it's easier ... [but] they keep talking while they're um writing it down".

George experienced something similar:

Oh yeah I do that, that was like when I was in grade 5, I like, the teacher was going, like, normal speed and everybody could go faster than me, I'm only on two and you're on five. I'm going the same speed, I'm like, speedwriting and they're just going like this [demonstrates them working at a normal pace].

George said that he approached the teacher about this:

I went up to him one day, like, 'Hey maybe you should slow down', and then he said to me, 'Well, I don't feel the need to slow down, I just feel, I just think that you're just a little bit slow, like, all you wrote on that essay was three lines'.

George reported being ejected from class for just sitting and thinking of what he wanted to write for a story. George said "Yeah, like I'm like thinking of a word and he thinks I'm just sitting there doing nothing so he sends me out in the hallways. Why can't I think? He does that to everybody...." He seemed exasperated with this teacher's unwillingness to allow enough thinking time.

Not enough time for math

For some, there was never enough time to complete Mad Minute math drills. Several participants talked of how Mad Minutes were problematic. These involved timed worksheets, where the student was to complete as many basic math fact questions as possible in a set time. They were unable to complete these before the time limit, and

would be upset because they were getting them all correct, and would have a perfect

score if allowed time to do them all.

Charles explained it this way:

> ... we do [Mad Minutes] every morning too, and then, sorta like, her tests,
> when we have small tests, we sometimes get sheets, like, that long, that
> wide, and they're more like five times and divided by long divisions, only
> do them, like, four minutes, because some of our classes are really fast at
> it.... I'm fast at it, just that I usually don't get them all done. I get like
> five not done.

Charles found this activity very stressful, as he would get mixed up if the

operation changed (some items would be addition, some multiplication, etc.).

Dexter felt he was slower at math because he had to work out each multiplication

fact and this took him longer:

> Well, most of the kids in my class know the times tables and ... most kids
> just know the answer like 12 X 12 is 144. Instead of doing, um, 2 X 2 = 4,
> 2 X 1 is 2, they ... know it's 144 but they never add it up ... they put 144
> but the teacher always was having it done separate ... show your work.
> But they didn't put down the answer. Get it done a lot faster.

Charles had a similar problem, trying to write out the questions:

> If it was written out for me, I could get it really fast ... Like 252 + 280, if it
> was written out like that, I could get it fast, I wouldn't need that much
> time, but we need to write it out.

Ernie said he took his time doing math. He felt he got more correct in math when

he worked slowly: "...I usually take slow run like this, I'm a slow kid at working ...

'cause I say it's better telling kids to do it slow."

Summary of not enough time

All participants had some problems with time, and felt that there was not enough time to do what they needed to do. There was often a sense of urgency and futility, trying to meet expectations, but realising that it was not likely. Although they did not always state it, it was implied that the teacher was responsible for setting the unreasonable time limits.

Experience of Frustration

The participants experienced frustration in school, in situations of reading, spelling, writing, or math. Their frustration was directed at themselves, at the work, at the teacher, or at all of the above. The most common frustrations seemed to centre on the academic work, either the difficulty it created for them, the amount required, or the time limits. It seemed that it was frustrating for some participants to be unable to actualise their estimated potential or meet expectations. Several were frustrated with their teachers, for either not helping enough, or helping too much, or for unfair grading or unreasonable expectations.

Frustration with inability to do things

Most of the participants identified situations in which they felt frustrated, but did not always seem aware of what exactly was causing their frustration. Generally, these situations seemed to be frustrating because the participants were not able to do what they thought they should be able to do. They were unable to actualise their estimated potential or meet their own expectations.

Several expressed frustration at not being able to finish their work in the allotted time. This is discussed in detail in another section of this chapter concerning the experience of not having enough time. Some directed this frustration at the teachers, who seemed to be mean in making unreasonable timelines for work. Others seemed more frustrated with themselves for being unable to work more quickly.

George was frequently frustrated while trying to read:

> I have troubles when ... you're trying to sound out a word, and then as you continue, you don't remember the rest of the words there was, like, you skip that paragraph, you go on to a new sentence, so I always do that, it's like, then I have to read the page again.

Frederick was often frustrated by situations where he worked very hard to keep up with the expectations of the teacher, only to have her increase the level of work as soon as he became comfortable with where he was.

Benjamin expressed his frustration at trying to complete a lengthy, complex story that he said he was writing with a buddy. He was unable to get much done on it because he was pulled out of writing class too often for extra help. Benjamin also experienced a range of feelings when trying to figure out how to write or spell something: "It's frustrating, it's hard, boring, and all that".

Dexter was similarly thwarted in his creative endeavours, unable to get much done on his story about Good and Evil armies, but he did not attribute his delay to anything in particular.

Amelia and Ernie both appeared to experience frustration during interviews with me, while trying to read and/or spell and demonstrate their skills. Amelia was trying to show me some writing that she and two others had written, but she struggled with the

handwriting. She frequently stumbled on the words, guessed, growled in frustration, and made comments like "...I can't read her writing" and "I'm not really good at...", but did not finish her statement. She also asked frequently for my assistance in trying to make out the words. She did not label the experience as frustrating, but it obviously was, and may be similar to what happens for her at school.

Ernie talked about this type of frustration, and also demonstrated it when he tried to show me his spelling skills. In another section of this chapter, the incident where he tried to spell "bird" is repeated in detail. I asked Ernie what it felt like to make such mistakes, as he was inclined to dramatic gestures of banging his head and rebuking himself verbally. He did not label the feeling as frustration, but told me that he thinks in his head "Oh dang it, oh dang it, oh dang it", which he later clarified as meaning that he should not make those kinds of mistakes. It feels "weird, because I get it mixed up and—and I ... get frustrated, because I should have got at least a extra word or got a different letter in there."

Frustration with teachers

Some of the participants expressed frustration with their teachers. Frederick found his teacher frustrating at times:

> She's ... I find her very annoying when I asked a question and she said 'why are you asking [me] and not your friend?', and I said, 'he's my partner and he's busy looking at a book'. Oh. When we were doing a project together, me and my partner, so we decided that I'd go and ask the teacher a question and he'd start looking for a book and she said 'why doesn't he look faster' and I said 'he's busy right now'.

Frederick was also frustrated when he lost marks for his work despite putting in a great deal of effort "...well, it's like I get a report home and it's like, it's one day late, that's, like, maybe two marks off... and then there's additional twenty-five marks off...[because of] spelling and everything else".

George was almost furious with frustration when his teacher would not help the way he wanted,

> No, I won't ask for [help] ... I'd have to, I'd have to figure it out for myself because, like, most of the time he ... if he's reading the sentence to you and then he says 'The bear went to the ___' and then you're stuck, so where he stopped, like, the word next will be it, so he'd just be giving out the answers.

The teacher would then ask him to sound it out, but this did no good, because George did not know the word even after sounding it out. The teacher would then suggest looking it up in a dictionary. This infuriated George, who by then had lost track of where he was in the book.

George's clearest expression of frustration concerned the story he had extensive help from the teacher writing. The teacher had helped with written mechanics, which were fine, but then gave him a poor grade because the story itself was missing so many elements. George was also frustrated at having lost marks for being away. "I got like a C- just because I wasn't there most of the time 'cause I was absent ... I was sick three times in Art and that lowers my grade".

Handling frustration

The participants described different approaches to handling their frustrations. Dexter explained that he kept at his work despite the frustrations in the early part of the

school year "I get frustrated, keep on trying, frustrated, cry. Try over again. That's what I do". Hannah dealt with her frustration and anger through physical activity. "I just, um, well sometimes if there's kids that are always bugging me and make me mad sometimes I just take a bike ride walk my dog and just calm down ... or drawing, I like to draw a lot". Frederick would become frustrated at school "... and then I, I want to take it out, I get mad and then I take it out on my mom and dad and [sister]". He said that he does not get physical, but does yell at his family. He said he never yells at the teacher. Benjamin said that he would never have tantrums, nor take it out on himself when making mistakes: "I just think a little bit, and erase it, ...I might do that." George felt that he had a significant problem with anger. He felt that he "always" had an anger problem, and made a punching gesture. He said that he did not usually hit anyone anymore, he just felt like it, but he probably would not want to hurt anyone. Sometimes he became angry when people called him "weird" or other names.

George said it was frustrating not being able to understand what he was supposed to do on some assignments. He found himself getting angry in class, and in order to prevent himself from snapping, he would stop working, shove the work away, fold his arms and say, "I'm not going to do this...!" He sometimes became "mouthy" and this resulted in him being sent out of class. He said that he did not get violent and damage things, but sometimes felt like it. George said he could no longer see the point in having an angry reaction when things were difficult. That had been his pattern last year, as he used to have a problem with asking for help. The teachers would encourage him to just ask, but he avoided it. He said it was not so much that he was embarrassed, "I just thought I could do it ... didn't need to ask the teacher and then when I did and I got like a

good percent of it wrong so I started asking". He has accepted not being very good at some things, and this has diffused his frustration and angry outbursts.

Summary of frustration experience

Most participants had experienced frustration, and two demonstrated it while showing me their skills. Frustrations were generally about inability to do what they wanted to do, or with the teachers who did not behave as the children wanted.

Experience of Confusion

Many of the participants experienced confusion fairly frequently. They did not always label it as such, but made it clear in other ways. Confusion happened within specific reading and writing activities, where the participants were unclear about the meaning of words, the instructions on their work, or the nature of questions on tests. Some were confused by the complicated explanations given by teachers. Some were confused when they had too much information delivered at once, and were confused by the different methods different teachers used for the same tasks. Some were confused by the grades they obtained for their work.

Confused about reading words and meanings

Some participants mentioned having difficulty understanding the vocabulary in their reading material, and trying to use context to make sense of it. Dexter explained it this way:

> Sometimes I have to go over the word three times or read the whole
> sentence then pretty much get the word. I can hardly get the word. Yeah,

after a while like, I think it was this whole this other word, keep from going on and then eventually I find out that it's this different word than the word I thought it was.

George was confused reading "words like that big" in novels, "... so I just pass and then the sentence wouldn't make sense so if the teacher asked you what the story was about you would get like half of it and the teacher, you'd get a bad grade on it". Hannah felt that some of the reading vocabulary was too difficult, and that "... if it's a really complicated book it's easier if the teacher reads it out and so that they can understand, can tell you what the words mean and stuff".

Confused by task expectations

Some of the participants found the instructions and task expectations confusing. Charles was trying to explain a test that the teacher made them do:

> It's like you read a sentence like—Julie is in the box—and then you have to find a picture of her in a box. And then it gets harder. You got to read questions. Says like, ah, it says like—How, how's Spain last night? — and I'm confused. It says — Water or colour or you buy it? or—and then you have to fill all the words right which I didn't know what it was.

Charles also found the changing of signs in math confusing, and it was much better if they were consistently one operation or another:

> Yeah, but usually it's just one, if it says times at the front, it's times like the same way as take away, so you're not, it's not confusing, it doesn't go times, take away, times, take away, times, take away.... If it's times, take away, times, take away, in same pattern, it's not confusing, but if it's times, times, times, times, take away, take away, take away, times [it is confusing].

Ernie was confused by spelling rules, and seemed to have some confusion in trying to explain what he meant:

> ... 'cause I usually go on E D, I go shh [making motions] or I sometimes go or 'da'. Sometimes it doesn't say the, it suppose to go 'ta' sometimes. That makes me get mistakes. I'm like going 'huh?' Then how come there's a E D there instead of a P there. That kind of mix me up.

Ernie illustrated his confusion by giving an example of a word he was uncertain of, and I witnessed the confusion (and frustration) at work:

Ernie: I spell a lot of big words wrong and some small words wrong like "bird". [laughs at self]

L: Really?

Ernie: Yeah, but on my spelling test I got it right but when I was studying I'm like mixing up the two letters I and A. I'm like mixing up those two.

L: Yeah, I see, you're thinking about using A instead of I, I can see that.

Ernie: No I meant like – how does it go B A I D – bird – no B R A I D. Does it have that spell?

L: I don't think there's an A in bird.

Ernie: There isn't?

L: No, I don't think so.

Ernie: Then it must be the R and then I, I get mixed up.

L: Try to print it, maybe print it on some of that newspaper over there and see. See what it looks like when you print it.

Ernie: Mmm, mmm, is it B R I D. [prints out three ways: B R I D, B R A I D, B I R D].

L: That's where you get mixed up, eh?

Ernie: Mmhmm, B I R D.

L: So you've got B R I D or B I R D. Which one do you think looks better? Which one looks right?

Ernie: That one, the third one [points correctly to BIRD].

L: Yeah. So once you get it spelled correctly, you can recognise it, eh?

Ernie: Yup.

L: Yeah, but when it comes to kind of putting it out there it kind of gets mixed up.

Ernie: Mmhmm.

L: Uh. Does it bother you sometimes?

Ernie: Yep.

L: Yeah. What's that like?

Ernie: Mmm, weird, because I get it mixed up ... and I ... get frustrated ... because I should have got at least a extra word or got a different letter in there".

Confused by complicated explanations

Some of the participants gave examples of being confused by the complex

explanations given by teachers. Amelia talked about her confusion:

> ... if they say it too complicating, like in math, I [don't] understand what
> they're saying like—blah blah blah, blah blah blah, OK, now you go take
> the blah blah blah, and write blah blah blah. God, what's the point of that?
> ... because they're explaining it like, like I'm in another world like um,
> like a scientist, only more complicating than one.

Hannah had similar confusing experiences with math. She used to like math, but

not anymore:

> ... 'cause before it was easier and then the teacher started, well, my teacher
> this year was really complicating, and saying how to do the stuff, like, you
> wouldn't be able to think about it, you're, you're allowed to think in your
> mind, but you had to write it down on a piece of paper, you couldn't just
> write the answer, you had to write the whole question out.

Hannah would prefer to have explanations a little clearer and briefer "if they help, but not like lots, like don't go on and on forever it would be good, 'cause then the kids would understand, not be confused and the things in their brain going "awww" [making gestures suggesting confusion], you just want to go "oooo" [making a frustrated face].

Frederick found some instructions confusing:

> ... if they give the instructions in French I don't normally get the
> assignment done very quickly 'cause I have to go, I have to say it in
> French, and then I have to write it down in French, about what I think I
> said, and how I think you write it, and then I have to check into my
> French/English Dictionary and half the spelling's wrong, so I get some of
> the instructions wrong, so it's quite confusing.

George gave a math example when explaining how he would miss parts of what was said.

> ... like, the teacher asks me, like, a hard math question, like, two times
> three minus something, like, and then, we're working on one thing, and
> there's this and then, when he calls, I like, [answer] 'three' and it's, like,
> three and then he's like, 'OK, now finish the question'. I say 'what other
> question?' [laughs], it's like: 'The other part. You did the first part, now
> do the second part'.... It helps if it's on paper, like, if he's written it on
> paper, on piece of paper, it's more easier 'cause I, if he's just given it, in
> talking, it's [hard].

Confusion about grades for work

Some participants were confused by the grades they received for their work. George told of an incident in which he had received extensive help from the teacher with the mechanics (spelling, punctuation) of a story, and then was shocked by the C- grade he received. He was confused by the explanation, as it seemed that the teacher wanted him to write more, and not simply use larger fonts to disguise the brevity of the story. George then discovered that it was the actual substance of the story that was lacking "he just

thought, well there wasn't enough to the story line like I missed a whole bunch of things in the story like I should have added and all that". Frederick could not always understand the grades he received: "... because like, a lot of our marks are based on reading; how well we can comprehend reading, but then it will seem confusing, because...." He lost a few marks for it being late, even though there had not been enough class time to complete it.

Summary of confusion experience

The participants experienced confusion in a number of ways. Some were confused by the words they had to read, as they were unable to understand the material even if they could sound them out. Some were confused by the tasks set before them and by the complicated explanations and directions given by teachers. Some were confused about the grades they received for their work.

Experience of Computers Making a Difference

Computers seemed to be an important part of the participants' experience at school. Most had experienced both advantages and disadvantages of computers, which were used in schools for reading, writing, spell checking, math drills, spelling tests, creating reports/projects, searching/downloading, cutting and pasting, and games. Negative aspects of the computers were that they could be boring, repetitive, and frustrating. Common complaints were that the technology was outdated, in short supply, or not working.

<u>Advantages and positive experiences with computers</u>

Writing seemed to be the most common use made of computers by the participants. All had used word processing features of computers for writing stories, reports, or projects. Most were uncertain if typing was better, easier, or faster than handwriting, but they generally agreed that the writing process was easier on the computer.

Ernie said, "I use a computer to do my writing". This, he said, works "good", but "I have to look where I'm typing, or it's hard...". "[Writing on a computer is] a lot quicker because it usually takes me, about the starting of recess, to 11:30 with the pencil and paper, it takes me a lot quicker". Charles was unclear about the relative merits of pencil versus computer. He felt he could print more quickly than type, but "I'm faster at typing on the computer than [cursive] handwriting". Hannah was not confident about her keyboarding "Well, I'm not a really good typer but I ... I can type ... It's slower".

Spell checking seemed to be universally appreciated. George said,

> Like you type a word, and it's wrong, and then you go to spell check, and it has ... these words ... and you pick which one, just like that, and that works good for me 'cause I don't always know how to spell it, but I know how it looks.

Charles explained

> ...it's not that hard, usually because we have word spelling. So if you're already, well, you're down to the bottom, you can erase something, you just go to word spelling and you use it, highlight the word, and it comes up in this little tiny box.

Frederick was somewhat ambivalent, saying that it was good that the spell checker was available, but he still had to have a teacher proof-read, when he was using

the spell checker, because "I could still be putting in the wrong 'there'". Frederick said he had "medium" typing skills, but was uncertain whether he could write more effectively on the computer than handwriting. He gave an example of an assignment, "like a story to work on our handwriting and she knew that mine wasn't up to class and so she made me do mine on the computer. It would have taken me half the time to do it in handwriting but no one could have read it and I had an extra day to work on it than everyone else 'cause I was a slow typist". He said he got a "pretty good grade on it, 45 out of 50", but it had some errors, such as putting the wrong "there" four times, and the wrong "to" twice.

George reported being able to produce more written output with the computer. "I can like I ... there's this one day where I was just typing and typing and typing. I never took my hands off the keyboard.... Teacher comes over 'you did five hundred words in an hour?' 'Yup' "

Several of the participants liked the Co-Writer software, which evidently helped with writing by predicting what the student was trying to type and offering suggestions. This was felt to be helpful by most who used it. Ernie said: "Oh, it helps us on our—on our writing, like, so we don't really get a mistake 'cause it's like, it's kind of like a dictionary.... Like when you go to b, b e c—it goes "because," or, or other words like because, became, be, be careful, all these words.... Choose which one we are supposed to use, that we wanta use". Benjamin had similar experiences with Co-Writer "... sometimes when I go to [Learning Skills], got this reading thing on the computer and this writing thing. Like you see the word and you, it goes way better writing".

Hannah and Charles noted that it was easy to do projects when they could search the Internet or Encarta (a multi-media encyclopaedia) for material to cut and paste into their work. Hannah felt that "… most people have computers and they always go on the Internet and stuff so they, it's easier for them do long projects". Charles said: "You can go to Find and then, you know, see this thing. And if you want to just find it, like names, you put names like of people or something and you can look up names". George was disappointed that he did not have Internet access this year, due to a misunderstanding "I never knew, I thought you had to be in the programme the special programme I was, like, whoa, I'm gonna sign up next year".

Some computer programmes were apparently meant to instruct and assess. One would present individual words that the student would try to remember and write from memory. Benjamin said "It shows you a word but it tells you the hard part, and it goes away when you press Enter." The programme showed it, and then gave the student "three tries" to write it properly. He admitted that he "cheated one time" by writing on his hands, but hastily added that he "hardly ever ever ever does it". He said it was "hard" and it helped to write the answers on his hands, because they seemed to stay in his memory longer.

Frederick described the same programme:

It goes, 'this is the word *something*', and then it goes 'remember the hard parts of the word, and then it says, 'click *ready* when you're ready to spell the word, and then spell the word *something*', and then you type it out, and like, it's, 'OK, memorise it, click *ready*, type it out'.

Another programme sounded like Cloze activities, as Benjamin described it:

Sometimes there's these sentences, you gotta read them, you gotta find the missing word or what happens, and there's other stuff, like, we can't find

the missing word or what one has, doesn't have the same two letters and everything in it, and stuff like that.

Disadvantages and negative experiences with computers

While most of the participants were enthusiastic about their work on computers, some found them a nuisance. Benjamin reported that his Learning Skills teacher had him do reading and writing on the computer every day. He said it was boring, and although he really enjoyed games and other activities on computers, he did not like going to the Learning Skills programme because of the constant computer use:

Frederick was not impressed with the Success Maker software. It was all that he did when he went to the BOOST room, which became tedious. He found it insulting and it made him feel stupid. It selected words that were too easy for him at first, but if he made an error, the computer would bring that word back many times, until it was convinced that the student knew it.

> I spelled the word 'Christmas' wrong and then ... I had the word, that word, I had it four times in the next session, the next day I had it twenty one times.... If you get something wrong, it continues all the way up.... If you get it right a certain amount of times you move up....

It was pretty discouraging to face his past mistakes every day. He did this "word study" activity during his reading period, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Frederick said that: "I found it boring ... 'cause there was a lesson, a game, a lesson, a game, a then a lesson and a game... It got really boring and ... you can't get out of them quickly".

Amelia mentioned that when she did her spelling list on the computer, she would lose points for having no space between the item number and the word. "I'm good at

computer but, for some reason I always put the periods close by. I'm supposed to leave a space." She reported that the teacher also sometimes "... marks them [spelling words] wrong if you get the handwriting wrong".

Limited access to computers

Some of the students felt that they had limited access to computers, and that those available were inadequate. Benjamin observed that "They have one computer in my class but it's boring ... doesn't do very much". Hannah said that they had old Macs with no Internet or colour printing. She would like her school to get colour printers "...'cause you're not allowed to print colour off the computer 'cause it doesn't work or something or they just don't want you to have colour."

Hannah observed that,

> ...each classroom has one, but there not very good, they're just the old ones, or they have little boxes, an there's paint, there's ... number munchers, ... typing tutor and the way you ... write reports down, and stuff, and you've got access to um, I forget what it's called, it's somewhere where you can look up Rome and all these animals and everything ... Encarta. But it's an old Encarta so, not the greatest.

Hannah wished her family had more money to get a home computer. Frederick, Charles, and Benjamin's parents said they were in the process of getting new machines. George had a "really high tech" computer at home, and felt that some kids complained that the school equipment was poor. He did not think it was fair to be held back by poor technology, and was pleased that he had a good one at home. George said that some people might think it was cheating to use word processing and spell checking, because they did not have their own computer. He said that just because some people did not

have a home computer as good as his, did not mean that they could not do their work at school. The school was equipped with a few similar computers, and anyone could get on them and write if they needed to.

Frederick said technically he was not cheating, because the school board [district psychologist] told him he should use a computer. In fact, he felt that the school was supposed to be providing him with a computer to do this with. Frederick was quite interested in getting speech recognition software, where he could dictate directly to the computer, and have it typed for him.

Frederick was indignant in telling about an incident, where he felt entitled to the use of a computer, but:

> ... like a teacher just, like, sitting down and asking me to move, and she's, like, I just finished my story, or my paper actually, and the teacher, like, kicked me off my computer, told me to save it as fast as I could, kicked me off the computer, and let someone else, just, print theirs, and then came and said 'spell check it on your own or have someone else help, have the person beside you help [you]' and it was the kid, one of my friends, that wasn't, that isn't very great at spelling either.

Summary of computers making a difference

Computers have become a significant part of these children's experience, and while several were bored with the programmes and thought the technology had some problems, they all seemed to feel that there were significant advantages to be had by writing with the computer.

Summary of Impact of Teaching Style and Programme

The participants observed in a variety of ways that what their teachers did or did not do, their personal style, and the programme structure made a significant difference in

their school experiences. The five themes above concern this more general theme. The teachers themselves could be described as nice or mean, depending on various behaviours. Even when it was not apparent to the students, many of the programming choices were sources of challenge or success for the participants. The participants appreciated when the teachers selected the appropriate work for the students to do. Time was very important, as many of the participants felt that there was not enough time to accomplish what they were assigned, and the time restrictions seemed to have been imposed by the teachers. The participants experienced considerable frustration due to their own difficulties, as well as some of the behaviours of teachers and parents. They also experienced confusion in the context of reading and writing material, as well as other situations at school and home. Often the teachers were the source of confusion as they were unclear in the explanation and/or their expectations for what the student had to do. The participants also felt that computers were important in their programme, with both advantages and disadvantages to their use.

Summary of Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences of students with literacy-based learning disabilities, in contexts of literacy, in an attempt to answer the following research question: "What are the common experiences among children with learning disabilities in literacy during situations of reading and writing in school?" A phenomenological methodology was engaged to gain deeper and richer understanding of the nature and meaning of the phenomenon in question (Karlsson, 1994; van Manen, 1990), the participant's experience of reading and writing in school situations. Eight

children with learning disabilities affecting their literacy skills were interviewed, and the contents of those interviews were explored in detail for experiences common to most. Nine common themes emerged from this research that elucidated the experiences of the participants. Four of these common themes were related to the generally positive experience that the participants seemed to have had in school and with literacy. Another five of the themes were related to the impact of their teacher style and the school programme.

Summary of the Experience of Learning Disabilities

The essence of the participants' experience of school was that it was OK, and that they were OK. They experienced themselves as having had some problems with reading and/or writing early in their schooling, but this seemed to have been generally overcome, in part thanks to hard work, and in part due to the efforts of nice teachers. They had all experienced considerable progress in their skills, and felt well on their way to having no problems at all. Most enjoyed aspects of reading and writing, regardless of their skill level.

Their reading and writing problems, whether fully in the past, or continuing to give them some trouble, were not front and centre as previous literature seemed to suggest. Some did not even feel that they had learning disabilities, but those that acknowledged the learning disability seemed not to be overly concerned about the label or the placement in special education programmes. Certainly, they did not seem to experience much shame, rejection, and stigma, as is common in the literature. These children were able to place their literacy skill weaknesses in the larger context of their

everyday experience at school and in their lives in general. While recognising that they were not always at the same "level" in reading, writing and/or spelling as their peers, this was not considered much of a problem. They were all able to identify strengths and weaknesses, skills and abilities that may or may not have anything to do with school or literacy, and they seemed to weight their importance equally. All felt that they were socially accepted and reasonably popular, and their experience of bullying, name-calling and teasing was minimal. Generally, they experienced themselves as more similar to their peers than different from them.

Another facet of their experience was the impact of teaching styles and programmes. They had all experienced teachers who had made a positive or negative difference in their experience of school generally and of literacy specifically. Special education staff seemed to be the nicest, since they were the ones who assigned the right level of work and held the most reasonable expectations. The participants appreciated the teachers who were understanding and sensitive, who gave encouragement and rewards, and whose structure allowed them to concentrate and get their work done. They did not like mean teachers, who yelled and treated children badly. They were sometimes confused by complicated explanations and instructions. They were sometimes frustrated by the difficulty of tasks, the demands of the teachers, and their inability to meet expectations (of teachers, parents, and/or themselves). They were sometimes upset by the time restrictions they experienced, as there did not seem to be enough time to complete what they needed to do. They all used computers in school, but were ambivalent about their value. Getting to write with computers, and take advantage of the

word processing features was experienced as being positive, while the repetitive, boring computer-based instructional programmes were experienced as being negative.

Overall their essential experience of their teachers, their schools, their work, their peers, and themselves was OK. Chapter 5 includes sections comparing these results with the findings from the available literature, and discussing implications of this study for future research and for practice.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter discusses the results described in Chapter 4, in five sections. The first section compares the results with the findings from the available literature and attempts to reconcile results that are inconsistent with previous research. The second section discusses limitations to the study. The third section explores implications for future research. The fourth section discusses implications for practice in education and counselling. The fifth section provides a conclusion to the discussion.

Where the current results overlap and support previous findings, they tend to extend and illuminate the experience of children with learning disabilities. Where the current results differ from previous findings, there emerge opportunities for further research to explore if they hold in other contexts, and if they truly represent some changes in the experience of children with learning disabilities over the last several years.

Comparison with the Literature

There are some significant similarities and differences between the results of this study and those of comparable previous research and anecdotal reports. By "comparable" I am referring to literature in which the experiences of children and adolescents with learning disabilities have been explored. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 will serve as the pool from which themes and findings will be drawn in order to situate the current results. During my review of that literature, I discovered few studies that had discussed the day-to-day literacy activities engaged in by children and

adolescents with learning disabilities, and that even fewer explored the experience of these children from their point of view. Much of this section, therefore, compares the findings from a small number of studies within the general literature concerning children and adolescents with learning disabilities.

The first section is divided into subsections that explore the common themes presented in Chapter 4. The two general themes, the OK experience, and the importance of teacher style, are presented in the context of the literature, with subsections concerning the nine common themes that comprise them.

OK Experience

Perhaps the most striking finding in this study was that the participants seemed to feel generally OK about their school experiences, including experiences of literacy. I had expected the participants to tell stories of negative experiences filled with pain, frustration, disappointment and anger (Bender & Wall, 1994; Bryan & Bryan, 1981; Kronick, 1978). Instead, I found students who, despite the difficulties they may have experienced in learning to read and write, were generally feeling pretty good about themselves, about school, and about their skills. Four of the common themes presented in Chapter 4 touch on aspects of this generally OK experience. These themes overlap and do not readily lend themselves to isolated discussion. Nor do they readily match themes observed in previous research. The participants experienced themselves as being more similar to than different from their peers, and seemed to situate their learning difficulties within a larger context of their lives. They experienced success in school subjects as well as extracurricular activities. They experienced progress in their literacy skills and were

pleased with their development. They experienced enjoying elements of reading, writing, and/or spelling.

More similar than different

The participants in this study seemed to feel that they were more similar to than different from their peers in most respects. They were able to identify strengths and weaknesses in their own skills, and in those of others, and felt that this made them pretty much like everybody else. Previous literature tended to emphasise the alternative outcome; that children with learning disabilities tended to feel different, to experience social difficulties, to feel isolated and to be socially rejected and to consider the label stigmatising (Bryan & Bryan, 1981; Guterman, 1995; Reid & Button, 1995).

Peer relationships

Unlike much of the previous literature concerning children with learning disabilities, the participants in this study seemed to feel generally quite popular, and experienced little of the social problems often referred to in the literature (Bender & Wall, 1994; Bryan & Bryan, 1981). The minimal experience of social difficulty by the participants in this study stood in contrast to the results of several similar studies, which highlight themes of "Victimization" (Reid & Button, 1995), "Name-Calling" (Albinger, 1995; Guterman, 1995); "Betrayal" (Reid & Button, 1995); "Rejection" and "Isolation" (Guterman, 1995; Reid & Button, 1995; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992). The experience of negative social interactions did not seem to be common for the participants in this study.

The results of this study appear similar in terms of social acceptance to those of Bear et al. (1993) who found that children with learning disabilities felt that they were socially accepted, despite peer ratings to the contrary. Bear et al. suggested that this was not due to obliviousness or insensitivity on the part of the children with LD, but to their emphasis on the positive aspects of their peer relationships. The participants in this study tended to be quite positive in their feelings about social situations, and although they were not oblivious to the comments of others, they were able to view themselves and their relationships in a favourable light.

Impact of the "Learning Disabilities" label

Unlike those in some of the previous literature, the participants in this study did not appear to experience much connection with the concept or label of learning disabilities. Although several used the words "learning disability", only a few applied the term, or the meaning of the term to themselves. They seemed to have a general sense that it meant they had trouble learning to read or write, but were somewhat unclear. This was consistent with Albinger's (1995) participants who were unable to explain what their learning disability was. Most were unaware that they even had a learning disability, and only three (her older participants) could explain their learning disability and how it affected their learning. The others simply stated that they had problems with reading, writing or math.

The literature is inconsistent in regard to the experience of stigma. Whereas some previous studies have found the LD label to be stigmatising (Albinger, 1995; Bryant, 1989; Guterman, 1995; Reid & Button, 1995), others have found more ambivalence.

Wilczenski's (1992) participants, for example, were divided in considering the learning disability as either a "stigmatizing identity" or a "nonstigmatizing identity". Wilczenski suggested that the latter was a more positive outcome, where the student could accept the LD, and make appropriate choices toward success.

The participants in this study experienced some of this ambivalence in their feelings about possible stigma of the label. Unlike Albinger's (1995) students, who made up stories to hide their visits to the resource room, the participants in this study seemed to have no concerns about going to the Learning Skills programme, or the possible rejection by their peers. Some, in fact, thought that their peers were jealous, since the students who got to go for extra help were allowed to "play" on computers the whole time, got plenty of attention, and received rewards and treats for their work there. These participants seemed more like Wilczenski's participants who felt that LD was a "nonstigmatizing identity", in that they did not seem at all embarrassed by it, and felt that it did not matter much to anyone who knew.

Things at which the participants felt successful

Like the participants of Albinger (1995), Vespi and Yewchuk (1992), and Guterman (1995), all of the children in this study were able to name skills and activities they felt good about. As with Albinger's and Guterman's participants, those in the present study largely focused on things outside of school, such as Nintendo, Pokémon cards, sports, and on subjects within school that were unrelated to their academic weaknesses, such as music, art or woodwork. This seemed to be common to the participants in this study, and those of other studies, and may represent an important form

of self-concept. These children appear to have a balanced, multidimensional view of themselves, and seem able to put their problems with reading and writing into a larger context.

Similarly, Wilczenski (1992) said that her participants made statements that she felt characterised their learning disabilities as either "specifically handicapping" or "globally handicapping". Wilczenski suggested that the most positive approach is to view the learning disability as specifically handicapping. This "...leads students to a more accurate appraisal of their strengths and weaknesses. Armed with a circumscribed view of the nature of their learning disabilities, students were less likely to form global negative self-evaluations" (p. 58). Like some of Wilczenski's (1992) participants, the participants in this study believed that everybody had strengths and weaknesses, and that their learning disability did not stigmatise them, or define them. They appeared to experience their difficulties as being specific (to literacy), rather than global, having experienced considerable success, not only in activities outside of school, but in most school subjects as well.

This result appears to relate to literature concerning self-esteem. Although I did not measure self-concept or self-esteem in any psychometric or standardised manner, it seemed as though the participants in the study felt generally OK about themselves, in almost all areas they talked about. The participants' self-concepts did not seem to centre on their alleged weaknesses in literacy. They seemed to put literacy in its place, as a narrow, and not particularly significant, part of their overall being and experience. This was in contrast to much of the anecdotal and research literature.

Numerous anecdotal reports from professionals in the LD field describe how low self-esteem is prevalent in children, adolescents and adults with learning disabilities (Burka, 1983; Byrne & Crawford, 1990; Dane, 1990; Dinklage, 1991; Osman, & Blinder, 1982; Pickar, 1986; Rosenthal, 1992; Schwarz, 1992; Ungerleider, 1985). Similarly, parents of children with learning disabilities (Donawa, 1995; Wylie, 1984) have characterised their children as experiencing problems with self-esteem. Also, adults with learning disabilities recounting their own experiences in school (Brown, 1994; Druck, 1994; Fairbanks & Hill, 1989; Weinstein, 1994) had written about their struggles with their self-esteem.

Empirical research has not always supported these anecdotal accounts (Bear & Minke, 1996; Bender & Wall, 1994; Huntington & Bender, 1993). Studies where measures of self-concept and self-esteem differentiated among various types began to show consistently that children and adolescents with learning disabilities exhibited lower academic self-concept and self-perceptions of competence (Bear, Juvonen, & McInerney, 1993; Chapman, 1988; Coleman, McHam, & Minnett, 1992; Coleman & Minnett, 1993; Heath, 1995; Short, 1992; Smith & Nagle, 1995; Vaughn, & Haager, 1992). When the experiences of children with LD have been sought directly, they seem to differentiate between relatively low *academic* self-esteem and relatively strong *overall* self-esteem (Albinger, 1995; Guterman, 1995; McPhail, 1993; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992).

Vespi and Yewchuk's (1992) participants, for example, expressed "...generally positive feelings of self-image and self-confidence" (p. 64). Each of their participants felt that they were bright, and were eager to talk about activities they excelled at. "It is

only when they are mired down in reading or writing tasks that their self-doubts surface" (p. 65).

McPhail (1993) found that adolescents with learning disabilities were more self-satisfied (self-esteem), felt more active and energetic, and experienced more cognitive efficiency, than other low achieving (but not LD) and average achieving peers during school hours. McPhail attributed this to early identification of her participant's learning disabilities and felt "...their subsequent special education placement has been positive and therapeutic for them" (p. 624). Similarly, Chapman (1988) and more recently, Bear and Minke (1996), found that children who receive special education support tend to have higher self-worth than do those in general education classes without support.

Progress

References to progress are infrequent in the literature concerning children with learning disabilities. Some of the research exploring the perceptions of these children did comment on expectations for success and academic progress, but usually in a negative tone. Children with learning disabilities are usually found to have lower expectations for academic success than do their non-disabled peers (Chapman, 1988; Rogers & Saklofske, 1985). For example, Albinger's (1995) students viewed LD as a "permanent condition" rather than a "modifiable condition" (Wilczenski, 1992) that doomed them to limited learning and opportunities. "...most expressed the thought that they would never be really good at reading, that school would always be difficult, and that the work in the regular classroom was too hard" (p. 619). Similarly, Vespi and Yewchuk's (1992) participants were confident about their intelligence and abilities, but their self-concept

had been undermined by repeated failures. It was increasingly difficult for them to remain optimistic about their likely progress in academics. This was not the case for the participants in the present study. They tended to feel that their learning disabilities, if they even had them, were not permanent and did not seriously affect their future potential.

Some of the participants in the present study felt that their special education placements had been instrumental in their progress in literacy. This is in contrast to previous literature. Fairbanks' (1992) participant indicated that he made significant progress, through a great deal of effort, but it appeared that this progress was made *despite* the school system's oppressive programme. Similarly, Guterman's (1995) participants generally appreciated the value of their placement in the special education resource, but most felt that it had done little for their academic skills. Most felt that they still had significant academic delays, and that the curriculum was "low level, irrelevant, and repetitive" (p. 119).

The participants in this study, on the other hand, seemed to be more like those of Klingner, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen and Forgan (1998) who felt that the curriculum in the general education programme was hard and that in the pull-out class was easy. Curriculum level is an important consideration when interpreting progress. Most of the participants in this study who talked about progress framed it as the work getting easier. This may be looked at in several ways. It is possible that the teachers were sensitive to the child's "level", and provided work at exactly the right level, so that success was constant. It is also possible that the children were getting noticeably better, and that the same work they used to struggle with was now within their ability. As was observed by

several of the participants, there was a downside to progress. If, for example, they got all the spelling words correct one week, they would be assigned a new, harder, set of words the following week.

Regardless of where their sense of progress was coming from, it seemed to have a powerful effect on their enjoyment of school. They seemed to feel confident that things were improving, and that school was getting better. While they may not be aware of their "level", they nonetheless seemed pleased with where they were "at" in literacy.

Experience of enjoying literacy

Enjoyment of reading and writing activities was common among the participants in this study, but rarely mentioned in previous literature. Most of the studies reviewed in Chapter 2 had focused on other elements of the lives and experience of children with learning disabilities. Few addressed the experiences of everyday tasks at all, including literacy. The general sense from much of the previous literature suggests that reading and writing were a struggle, and far from enjoyable.

Some studies discuss academic motivation, and these generally report that children with learning disabilities are less inclined than their normally achieving peers to be motivated for academic tasks, especially those at which they expect to fail (Chapman 1988; Licht, 1983; Rogers & Saklofske, 1985). In other words, children might be expected to avoid, rather than enjoy and seek out those activities with which they are struggling. The participants in this study felt that they were doing OK in school, making progress in their skills, and this may have kept them positive, enthusiastic and motivated.

Impact of Teacher Style and Programme

The second general theme in the participants' common experiences involved the impact of teacher style. Five common experiences emerged in this study that related to their teachers' interpersonal behaviour and programming choices. The participants experienced some of their teachers as being nice or mean. They experienced having too little time to do what they needed to do, they experienced various frustrations and they experienced confusion in a variety of contexts. They made considerable use of computers in their programme, and expressed positive and negative experiences with them. Although these experiences are presented as separate themes, they overlap and are not easily discussed in isolation. Nor do they readily match the previous findings in the literature, where similar concepts are described in different frames of reference.

Relationships with teachers

Like previous literature, relationships with teachers occupied a significant place in the experience of the participants in this study. A number of studies reported students with learning disabilities having negative comments about teachers (Albinger, 1995; Bryant, 1989; Fairbanks, 1992; Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Reid & Button, 1995).

Fairbanks' (1992) participant had experienced a range of relationships with teachers from "everyone's worst nightmare" (p. 482) to those who were "supportive, offering suggestions or assistance discreetly" (p. 486). Reid and Button's (1995) participants had similar positive and negative experiences with teachers, some being very grateful for the help and concern teachers offered, and others feeling oppressed, tormented, and misunderstood by teachers.

<u>Encouragement, praise and rewards</u>

The participants in this study appreciated teachers who gave encouragement, praise and rewards. Bear and Minke (1996) felt that the positive feedback the children received on their schoolwork and their general ability contributed to their positive self-esteem. Bear and Minke observed that in the segregated special education placement, where students received more individual attention as well as concrete rewards for academic behaviours, the negative influence of social comparisons found in integrated settings was offset. The participants in this study seemed to echo this finding, as they enjoyed the rewards and feedback they received at the Learning Skills class, but said little positive about their general education class placements.

The participants in this study were inconsistent in their preference for where they would receive their extra help. Although most liked the Learning Skills teacher, and generally liked the help they received there, some felt that they were unable to get their other work done because of always being pulled out. Similarly, Albinger's (1995) participants favoured having the resource teacher come to their regular classes to help, "because they would not miss so much of their regular work" (p. 620). Klingner, et al. (1998) found that students with learning disabilities who had experience with both models were almost evenly split in their preference for pull-out and inclusion. Klingner et al. were surprised that the students did not have strong feelings either way, as did the professionals writing about them.

<u>Appropriate level of work</u>

Participants in this study preferred teachers who they felt assigned work that was at the right "level" for them. Usually, the Learning Skills teachers were thought to do this better than do the classroom teachers, which may have been part of why the students preferred their programme. This finding echoed that of Klingner et al. (1998), who found that students with LD said the work was harder in general education class than in the special education resource. Klingner et al. observed that this could be interpreted in different ways, but the most probable explanation was that the students in special education placements were experiencing work at the appropriate level, which they did not have in the general education classroom, and found it "easy".

Similarly, Guterman (1995) found that her participants were ambivalent about the special education work. Although the curriculum was "low-level, irrelevant and repetitive", and they had yet to master the basic skills, they nonetheless felt that the placement was wise, noting that it allowed for more individualised attention than would be available in general education classes. Reid and Button's participants were also bored. "The repetitive drills that teachers said were helpful, the students found boring" (p. 610). Their students wanted more hands-on activities and more teacher demonstrations. The teachers only taught one way: talking. The students wanted to use their skills and talents, and do less reading and writing.

<u>Learned helplessness</u>

Participants in this study appeared to have become quite comfortable with the level of help they generally received, echoing previous research that had found children

and adolescents with LD tended to exhibit more "learned helplessness" than their non-disabled peers (Bryan, 1986; Dinklage, 1991; Kronick, 1978, 1987; Rosenthal, 1992). Kronick (1987) explained that teachers and parents have "inadvertently contributed to learned helplessness by assuming the burden of modifying the environment to accommodate the learning style of children with learning problems" (p. 34). Guterman (1995) found something similar, suggesting that "learning disabilities teachers may inadvertently contribute to 'learned helplessness' by attempting to coax students to do work, rather than allowing them to be in charge of their own learning experiences" (p. 121). This may help explain why some of the participants in this study seemed to rely on the teachers, and found it annoying when they were not immediately or directly helpful.

Although the label "learned helplessness" does not readily apply to these participants, some may have developed a complaisance and dependence upon the help that has been made available to them. On the other hand, they seemed to feel that they would overcome their learning problem, if they had not already, and they would do fine in the future. They may in fact be more self-reliant and capable than they initially appeared.

Teachers who were not liked

Although several participants talked about teachers who yelled at children or embarrassed them in some ways, none of their accounts of mean teachers seemed as severe as those from some previous literature. Reid and Button (1995) used words like oppression and victimisation by teachers to describe the experience of their participants.

Experience of not enough time

Not having enough time was very frustrating and discouraging, and provoked considerable anxiety for some participants. Similarly, Reid and Button's (1995) participants reported feeling that the teachers talked too slowly, which was boring, or too fast and too much. They also complained that teachers either repeated too much, or refused to repeat things that were said when the students with LD were out of the room.

Although time was a significant concern of the students in this study, it has appeared only briefly in previous research. Other than a passing reference to time constraints in Reid and Button (1995), I could find little mention of the issue. Evidently the participants in previous research have not reported experiencing as much difficulty with time limits as those in this study. This may be because some teachers are adjusting time limits to meet the needs of the children with learning disabilities. Bear and Minke (1996) made the interesting observation that their participants did not find that they worked too slowly. Bear and Minke attributed this to the fact that the teachers were adapting the work to suit the child's working pace, so the children never experienced the time-pressures that some of the participants in this study seemed to experience.

Having to make up for going to resource

In contrast to the results of some previous studies, none of the participants in this study were expected to make up for work they missed when they went to the Learning Skills or BOOST rooms. Some of Albinger's (1995) participants were concerned about missing work and having to make it up on their own time, and missing instructions so they would not know what to do. The resource room was therefore viewed as

"punishment" because it meant twice as much work for these children. In contrast, however, the resource work was often viewed as easier than the work they were missing in general education classes. Reid and Button (1995) noted that numerous stories were told about participants being punished by teachers for being away to resource class by not helping them understand the material they had missed. Guterman (1995) also found that classroom teachers did not have time to explain the material again for the students with LD, or to help with their individualised work. A few of the participants in this study mentioned similar challenges returning from the Learning Skills class, but most did not experience much difficulty in this regard.

Experience of frustration

A nearly universal experience in this study was frustration. The participants gave examples of being frustrated with their inability to do the academic work, whether because it was too hard, or there was too much assigned, or they did not have enough time to complete it. Frustration is also a consistent theme/experience in the literature (Albinger 1995; Burka, 1983; Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Silver & Hagin, 1990; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992). Vespi and Yewchuk's participants had high expectations for themselves and became frustrated with their poor performance, despite their intelligence and continued effort. Reid and Button's (1995) participants expressed considerable frustration. Their "Anna" was frustrated by her inability to perform like others "...I couldn't do it like everybody else. ...I'm halfway on the first page and they're done. And it makes me pretty mad, because I can't do the reading as fast" (p. 610).

While frustration was a common experience for the participants in this study, as with other studies, it did not appear to be pervasive or debilitating. Generally, they had adequate means of dealing with frustration, and got over it reasonably well.

Experience of confusion

Confusion was a common experience for the participants in this study, but has not been discussed in any great detail in the literature concerning children with learning disabilities. Cohen (1986) suggested that "learning disabilities always result, to a greater or lesser extent, in moments of helplessness, confusion, and, as a result, feelings of humiliation and failure" (p. 291). On the other hand, McPhail's (1993) participants with learning disabilities did not experience as much confusion as did their peers while in school. McPhail observed that the students with LD were more positive, alert, energetic, and less confused/more clear, because of the support and individual attention they had received over the years.

Experience of computers making a difference

Computers seemed to represent a significant part in the programming for the participants in this study, who tended to be ambivalent about the technology they used, citing advantages and drawbacks.

Computers and other forms of assistive technology are discussed in detail in a recent report by Lewis (1998). Lewis asserts that assistive technology has two major purposes:

> First, it can augment an individual's strengths so that his or her abilities
> can counterbalance the effects of any disabilities. Second, technology can

provide an alternative mode of performing a task so that disabilities are compensated for or bypassed entirely. (p. 17)

Lewis describes several types of technology, including personal computers, and how they can be used to overcome a number of barriers and improve the lives of children with learning disabilities. Word processing features such as basic typing, saving, editing, spell checking, grammar checking, thesaurus and printing are thought to be very helpful. Some software will also read text aloud, which allows writers to monitor their work. Other software can recognise voices and convert speech into text, so the person can dictate directly to the computer. Computer-based instruction in reading, spelling, and math are also widely available, from inexpensive single-user CD-ROMs to complex, school-wide comprehensive academic programmes, such as the Success Maker programme used by some of the participants in this study. Lewis comments on the early research that is showing advantages to these types of computer application, but does not present much concerning the student's experience of this technology. There is little other mention of computers or other assistive technology in the literature concerning children with learning disabilities, particularly the literature that explores their experiences. The participants in this study apparently felt that computers were important in their daily experiences, and were generally helpful in the development of their writing.

Possible Explanations for the Results

One possible explanation for the generally positive outlook of the participants might be their "personality". By this, I mean the characteristics that they come to school with, in part shaped by their family and experiences outside of school. They might be a

particularly positive group of individuals, who find the good in their experiences. As I discuss in more detail in the section on strengths and limitations below, there might be a systematic bias in the sample that makes positive outcomes more likely. A related explanation might be the participants' desire to please the investigator. Every effort was made to provide a safe interview environment, such that the participants felt free to make negative as well as positive comments, but they might nonetheless have been trying to say what they imagined I wanted to hear.

Another possible explanation might be the age of the participants. Age, or more accurately, developmental level, might have some significant bearing on the results. The children in this study were between nine and thirteen years of age and would be expected to function at a different level than children outside of that range. Their perceptions and understanding of the process of education going on around them might be significantly different from that of adolescent students, of students younger than nine, and of adults (including school personnel and parents). The discussion by Licht and Kistner (1986) about the developmental levels of children with learning disabilities, and how that might affect their perceptions of their intelligence, achievement, and self-worth, provide an example of how age and developmental level can affect the experiences of students. Developmental level can also substantially affect the type of reporting in the interviews. I found that the older participants spoke more clearly and included more detail than the younger participants. They had a longer time frame from which to draw examples, having been in school longer than the younger children, and they were also able to place their experiences in context more readily.

Another possible explanation for the experience of some participants may have been the influence of the work of Mel Levine. Many of the local special education staff had attended a presentation by Levine, and had adopted some of his theories and methods. At least half of the participants had been regularly read to from *All Kinds of Minds* (Levine, 1993) as a deliberate practice of the Learning Skills teachers, to help them to feel that everyone had problems, and that they were not unique. Part of the process of "Demystification", as proposed by Levine (Levine, 1987, 1994), focuses on telling children about their learning disabilities, and what could be done to help, while at the same time helping them to realise that others students have similar difficulties.

Another possible explanation follows McPhail (1993), who also found relatively positive outcomes for her participants. She concluded that the early detection and remediation of students' learning problems and years of "individualized attention, small classes, increased parental involvement, and levels of expectations commensurate with their abilities..." (p. 626) may have accounted for her participants' higher level of satisfaction with school. Similarly, Bear and Minke (1996) reported that the students with learning disabilities in their study who received individualised instruction and more positive feedback held more favourable self-perceptions.

McPhail's explanation might apply to the present study. All but one participant had been diagnosed several years earlier, and had received considerable support in school. The one participant who was recently diagnosed, and had never received support, was the only one with self-reported low self-esteem, and depression-like symptoms.

A related factor in the more positive outcomes found here, compared with much of the previous literature, might be the evolution of the whole educational system. The

concrete school experiences of children change over time, as educational research enhances understanding and affects educational policy and practice. When adults describe their childhood experiences, they might be talking about twenty or thirty years earlier. When adolescents talk about their early years, they too are referring to situations that happened in a different educational era. Even ten years can make a significant difference in terms of the educational policy and practice. For example, the British Columbia Ministry of Education began serious implementation of a universal "Inclusion" model of education in the late 1980's. Prior to that time, children with special education needs were assigned to specialised pull-out programmes. In the last ten years, great changes have occurred, so the experiences of a young adult could have been considerably different from those of a child of nine or ten. Much of the literature discussed in this study was published several years ago, some as long ago as the early 1980's. Given the lag between research and publication, some of the data was probably collected more than twenty years ago, and it stands to reason that the children and adolescents of that era would have considerably different concrete educational experiences. If one assumes that the evolution of the educational system in the province is toward a "better" system, and that the trend is toward improving the educational experience, then it also stands to reason that the experience is likely to have been "better" than it was 20 years ago, and the results of research would be expected to reflect the improvements.

Another potential factor in the positive experiences of the participants might be found in the section on impact of teacher style and programme. Many of the participants described experiences of teacher behaviours and attitudes that were supportive and encouraging, as well as programming that seemed to provide successes and positive

experiences. Some of the teachers appeared to be providing appropriate levels of work to ensure success, and also offering encouragement and positive feedback about the child's work. Also, there may be a tendency for the participants to selectively notice or at least selectively report the more positive experiences. One of Bear and Minke's (1996) findings seemed to support this hypothesis. They found children with learning disabilities were selectively focusing on favourable criteria when determining their academic self-worth. They "propose that although the favourable self-evaluations of achievement by children with LD may be inconsistent with their low scores on standardised tests, they are not inconsistent with the positive feedback many of them generally receive in the classroom" (p. 30).

These possible explanations or factors that may have contributed to the results of this study have implications for future research and for practice. These implications are discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Strengths and Limitations

There are a number of elements in the present research that help strengthen it but which also have a limiting effect. These concerned the process of selecting participants, the depth of the interviewing, the age range selected, and the focus on experiences of literacy.

Selected sample

The selection of the participants both strengthened and limited the study. Two main factors led to their selection, in addition to their meeting the criteria set forth in

Chapter 3. First, they were originally contacted through their teachers of the Learning Skills and BOOST programmes in their school district. Letters were sent to the families of children with learning disabilities by teachers who knew that I sought candidates who met certain criteria. Those teachers might have been selective in sending the letters, choosing or not choosing potential participants in some biased manner, and thereby increasing the chances of including children who would report certain types of experiences. One selection bias that some teachers might have had was to send the letters to students they felt would have more to say during interviews. At least one of the teachers mentioned that there was no point in sending letters to children who had little to say.

A second related factor might also have skewed the results. The participants, by definition, were volunteers. They were asked, or encouraged, by their parents, and participated willingly. There were probably 40 or more parents who received letters who did not contact me to include their children. There may be systematic differences between those children and the ones who agreed to participate. It is impossible to gauge the extent to which these factors might have skewed the results, but they are important to bear in mind when interpreting the findings. It is possible that the volunteers had more confidence in sharing their experiences with the interviewer than those who chose not to participate.

Depth of interviewing

While the data were limited to interviews with eight participants, the study was strengthened by the depth of interviewing. Each child was interviewed at least three

times, and as many as six, for about 45 minutes each session. This was felt to have been sufficient to reach a saturation point for each participant, as well as a saturation of themes. While it is possible that further themes would emerge if more participants were involved, or more material might emerge with more interviews with those already in the study, saturation is a subjective judgement, based on the evolving content of the interviews, and the on-going interpretation of them. It was with some confidence that I was able to discontinue the interviews as I felt we had obtained about as much information as would be found with more interviews.

Age range

Another strength and limitation of the study was the inclusion of children between nine and thirteen years of age. This age range was selected, as was discussed in Chapter 3, to help understand the experience of children who have had some time in school, and experiences with learning difficulties, but prior to the teen years, when other factors confound the experience. This narrow sample allowed for a more focused discussion of the experiences for that age range. However, this also inhibited comparison of the results with those of studies in which the experiences of adolescents and adults were explored.

Another limitation from the choice of the age range involved the functioning level of the participants. Because some were young, and/or had significant language and metacognitive limitations, the interviews required more structure and direction than is typical of phenomenological studies. Some of the participants had difficulties understanding the questions, and required clarification, which often meant making the questions quite concrete and simplistic. This tended to guide the discussions more than I

would have liked. Also, the younger children tended to wander through many topics, and did not stay focused on the frame provided in the introduction. An additional adjustment to the method involved the participant validation of the interpretations. Usually, the phenomenologist has the participants read drafts of the interpretive work, to check for accuracy. In this case, only fragments could be shared with the participants, and they were presented orally, since most of the students did not have adequate skills to read through my preliminary written work.

Focus on literacy

The study was limited to a focus on the experience of literacy. It was felt that because literacy was such a significant part of school, and because much of the literature available concerning children with learning disabilities dealt with deficiencies in and improvement of literacy skills, it was appropriate to keep this narrow focus. Limiting the focus to experiences of literacy enabled a more thorough understanding of one of the most important aspects of school, rather than lightly touching upon a wide range of experiences in the lives of children with learning disabilities.

The phenomenological methodology employed made it more difficult to focus the topic of the interviews, and limit the talk to literacy. A balance was struck between the efforts to simultaneously guide the interviews toward literacy topics, and to maintain the spirit of phenomenological method, which calls for minimal direction from the interviewer. Although the guiding questions asked provoked discussion of literacy experiences, many others topics emerged. One strength of this study was the illumination of the experience of literacy within the context of the children's overall school

experiences. One significant theme that emerged, in fact, related to the way in which the children situated their literacy difficulties within a more balanced sense of self, and did not experience themselves as particularly different from their peers.

It is recognised that there are many children with learning disabilities in areas other than literacy, and I have left it to other researchers to illuminate the experiences of those children.

These elements had both strengthening and limiting effects on the research. Other researchers might consider these elements when designing future studies. Implications for future research are explored in the following section.

Implications for Future Research

There are several implications for future research from this study. Some of the limitations of this study could be sources of further research. Replications and extensions of the study could be undertaken to reinforce or challenge the results, with similar participants or children younger or older than those included. Some of the results suggest opportunities for further research, to help explore the factors that contribute to them.

Replication

Future research could attempt to replicate this study, interviewing children with similar circumstances, ages, and other characteristics, to explore whether the same general common themes arise from interpretation and analysis of their experience. As was discussed in the previous section on strengths and limitations of this study, there may be some systematic biases within the eight individuals who comprised the participant

pool. Therefore, another researcher might select a different group of children with learning disabilities affecting their reading and writing, and conduct similar interviews. This would help strengthen the current study, by providing a comparable study with which to evaluate the results. At this point in the research in this field, there are some gaps due to the inconsistent methods employed to research the area, and in the samples selected to study. Are some of the observed differences artefacts of the research methodologies? If so, consistency and replication of studies would be helpful in ruling out these effects.

Extension

There could be some value in extending the current findings, through similar studies, but with slightly different participant groups. For example, another researcher could select children with learning disabilities in areas other than literacy. Whereas much of the research concerning children with learning disabilities has involved children with literacy problems, there are many types of learning disabilities that warrant study. One would expect to find some interesting similarities and differences between the current findings and those of research concerning other learning disabilities.

Another possible extension of this research might be into age levels outside of the range included here. As was discussed in previous sections concerning the selection of participants for this study, there were reasons why I chose the nine to thirteen age group. Although I chose to avoid children under nine to prevent problems with young informants, they might have some interesting observations concerning their literacy skills. They would have less experience in school, and would be closer to the beginning

stage of reading and writing than the participants in this study, so their perspective might be different. I had asked most of the participants in this study if they could recall early reading and writing situations. They tended to say "it was hard", but did not seem able to elaborate much. Perhaps children in the earliest stages would be able to describe those experiences more clearly than could children already several years into the process.

Similarly, there might be something to be gained from interviewing children older than thirteen. Previous studies alerted me to possible themes that some of the older participants touched upon, highlighting similarities and differences between children and teens. Other than McPhail's (1993) adolescents with LD, who seemed to feel better in school than their peers, most adolescents who have shared their experiences have been quite negative. Of the participants in this study, two of the young teens described some significant negative experiences, and sounded at times like the adolescents in previous research.

It would be very interesting to explore where some of the participants "are at" in a few years. This could be done as a follow-up, longitudinal style study, where the same individuals could be interviewed over a period of years, to explore how their experiences change over time. This might help resolve some of the issues discussed in a previous section concerning generations and the evolution of the educational system. It was noted that participants who were children or adolescents 10 or 20 years ago would have been educated somewhat differently than participants who are children and adolescents now. Returning to the same children when they are adolescents or adults might answer some questions about the differences that appear in the literature. Are there systematic differences in perceptions and experiences between age groups? At what ages do

perceptions change? Do the perceptions of individual children change when they become adolescents? What causes those changes in perceptions?

Further exploration of themes

One of the most significant results of this study was that the participants generally felt OK about their school experience. This is particularly significant because it was not really expected, given the general tone of previous research, and the prior experiences of the researcher. It is very important that this be explored further, to help discover some of the factors that might contribute to this positive outcome, since one goal for many teachers and parents is to have the child with learning disabilities feel OK about school.

Possible explanations for this outcome were discussed in a previous section of this chapter, but were mostly speculative. There may be any number of factors contributing to these children's positive experience, including home and school circumstances and "built-in" factors such as "personality". To the extent that school personnel or parents can facilitate the positive experience through programme adjustments or parenting style, it is worthwhile systematically studying what makes for a positive outcome.

What factors contribute to positive experience?

The participants identified a number of factors that they felt contributed to their positive experience, although they did not state it in exactly those words. They talked about nice teachers (as well as mean teachers) and what sorts of attitudes and behaviours make them likeable. These have been discussed in previous sections of Chapter 4, and will not be repeated. It should be pointed out, however, that the teacher styles that

children appreciate, and which they feel contribute to their positive experiences, might not be effective in accomplishing other goals of education, such as the improvement of skills. Careful investigation of these styles and personal behaviours of "nice" teachers, in terms of what makes them nice, and whether they are also "effective", might provide direction for training teachers.

Another factor that could be further explored is the interest the children showed in computers and assistive technology. Little research has explored the use of computers with children and adolescents with learning disabilities, and even less has considered the experiences of using technology. The participants generally seemed to like computers, and appreciated the word processing features, but were not thrilled with some of the repetitive activities involved in computer assisted instruction. If this were further explored, and found to be a consistent experience, this could have implications for special education, where there appears to be increasing use of computers in programmes for children with learning disabilities. Another area for exploration might be the effectiveness of computers for children with learning disabilities. Although this study did not examine effectiveness, several of the participants estimated their computer skills, and compared them with other strategies, such as handwriting efficiency. Further research could be conducted to see if students with learning disabilities could write more effectively with computers compared with traditional paper and pencil methods.

One possible factor that warrants special attention might be demystification. A number of the participants talked about the book *All Kinds of Minds* (Levine, 1993), which they felt helped them to understand that everyone has problems, and that their learning difficulties were not unique. This is part of the demystification process

suggested by Mel Levine, and is part of the strategy employed by the special education department in the school district. It would be worthwhile investigating the effect of this process on children with learning disabilities. Currently, there is no direct evidence that these participants had better attitudes toward their learning disabilities *because* of the daily readings from the book, but there does appear to be some connection that could be explored further. The results of such research would have implications for practice, since many of the special education staff have deliberately invested time and energy in implementing the demystification process.

What factors interfere with positive experience?

The participants also mentioned factors that interfered with their positive experience, such as the problems they had meeting time limits, and the frustration and confusion they felt at times. Lack of time has not been discussed in much detail in the literature concerning children with learning disabilities. The participants in this study had a number of problems with time, and these could be investigated separately, or in conjunction with other factors. What causes the children to experience problems with time? Are they being assigned unreasonable amounts of work and too little time to complete it? Are they given ample time, but do not manage it well? Are there related issues, such as organizational problems and misunderstandings about the task expectations that take longer to sort out? Are the children applying too much attention to the "wrong" components of the task? All of these questions could be researched in an effort to understand why children with learning disabilities experience a shortage of time.

Confusion is another common experience for the participants in this study that has rarely been mentioned in previous research. Future research could be conducted on confusion in the experience of children with learning disabilities. What is confusion? What situations (school subjects, strategies employed by teachers, time of day, language) increase or decrease confusion for children with learning disabilities? Studies that could answer these questions would have implications for practice.

Similarly, the participants were frustrated by situations in school, and further research could be conducted to explore the types of situations that are more or less likely to be frustrating, and what works to prevent or reduce frustration for children with learning disabilities. What strategies do children with LD use to handle their frustrations?

Factors not identified by the participants

One factor not mentioned by the participants, but which nonetheless may have a significant impact on their experience of school is the time of identification of the learning disability. As with the participants in the McPhail (1993) study, early identification seemed to contribute to positive experiences, because the students then received years of individualised support. In this study, the one adolescent who was negative had not been diagnosed with a learning disability until recently. The others had been identified years before, and had received support for a considerable time. The connection between early identification and commencement of support and the positive experiences of children with learning disabilities should be researched more fully.

<u>Complex research designs</u>

Investigating the factors that promote and/or interfere with positive outcomes might be best accomplished through complex research designs, in which data are collected from numerous sources and examined holistically. Data might be collected from the perceptions of the participants, along with those of their teachers, parents, siblings, and peers, classroom and playground observations, examination of the participants' work, exploration of historical data such as school reports, psycho-educational testing, and so forth. This would allow a detailed exploration of the factors contributing to the positive frame of mind these children apparently carry with them, so that we might better understand what we can do to support them and foster the development of that attitude.

Because the study was phenomenological in nature, the focus was on the experiences of the participants. However, their experiences might not be consistent with the perceptions of others, and this presents some challenges. For example, many of the participants believed that they were making good progress in their reading and writing skills. It is unclear how they developed that impression. They may have been basing some of it on their own sense of where their skills had come from and where they were now. They may have been receiving feedback from teachers, parents, or others, that they were doing well, or a combination of factors. Nonetheless, it was noted that for many of the participants, their estimates of their skill levels were inconsistent with their teachers' estimates. School files included reports from teachers and psycho-educational information that indicates much weaker skills than the participants feel they have.

Whereas they certainly have made progress relative to their starting point, they have remained far behind their peers, according to the evaluation systems of their teachers.

This study did not explore these discrepancies, other than to note that they existed in a number of cases. It might prove very helpful to teachers, especially, if future research could investigate the relationships between student and teacher estimates of literacy skills, rates of progress and so forth. This could only be accomplished with multiple sources of data, not relying strictly on the perceptions of only one person.

Implications for Practice

There are a number of implications for practice in education and in counselling which arise from the results of this study. It will require considerably more research to support and expand upon some of the more novel results, which stand in contrast to the generally negative impression left by previous research. However, I feel that I have provided evidence of credibility throughout this study, and believe that even in the absence of supporting research, I can suggest some implications for practice based on the results.

The general finding that the children in the study had OK experiences in school generally and literacy particularly suggests that something in the school programme and/or their home lives is "working". The common experiences that comprise this general theme provide some insights into what specifically is going right for these children, and allows for speculation as to how these OK experiences might be continued and expanded. There were also several common experiences that appeared to be problem areas, and these also offer opportunities for improvement.

Something is working

It seemed from this study that something is working. The generally OK experiences of the participants, while not overwhelmingly positive, were at least non-negative for the most part. The participants seemed to experience themselves as more similar to their peers than different from them, to see strengths and weaknesses in themselves and others, to experience progress in their skills and to enjoy literacy.

Some of the possible factors contributing to these outcomes might be early identification and support, demystification, teacher styles, and inclusion.

Early identification

One thing that has gone right for most of the participants in this study was that their learning disabilities were recognised early in their schooling, and interventions were implemented long ago. As McPhail (1993) suggested, this lead to years of individualised support for some, which was a contributing factor in the positive outcomes. Catching the problem at the early stages reduces the failure experiences and is likely to increase the experiences of success, progress, and enjoyment as found in this study. By contrast, the only participant whose experiences were negative was the one whose LD had only recently been diagnosed, and who received little support until mid-grade 6. The implication is clear from this result, and from previous literature, that early identification is preferable to later identification.

Demystification

Several of the participants explained how they felt the readings from *All Kinds of Minds* (Levine (1993) helped them to understand their own minds, and to realise that everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and that differences are OK. This is part of the Learning Skills programme, as many of the teachers adhere to Levine's (1987, 1994) idea of "Demystification", which is a process of helping the child to understand the nature of his or her learning disability. If a child knows the name for their problem, and can understand the extent of it, implications for learning, and probable outcomes, then the child becomes more powerful in dealing with it; and can become proactive and thereby experience more positive outcomes than when he or she struggles in ignorance. Adult outcome studies expressed similar themes. They tended to find that the successful adults with learning disabilities were those who were aware of, accepted, and reframed their disability, developed a proactive approach and set goals to maximise strengths and minimise weaknesses (Reiff et al., 1995; Spekman et al., 1992; Wilczenski, 1992).

This is a complex issue. Demystification is not a matter of simply telling the child that she or he has a learning disability. The label itself does little to clarify or help. In fact, it probably does more to confuse and trouble the children than improve their situation. Developmental levels and metacognitive skills play a role in the child's ability to comprehend the abstract concepts involved with labels and diagnoses. Children are less able than adults or older adolescents are to process these types of information. Even if the label and diagnostic information is told to the child, she or he will likely take from it whatever they can and simplify it to fit with their understanding of themselves anyway.

What seems to be most appropriate is the identification of strengths and weaknesses, which even the youngest of children seem to be able to understand and integrate into their multidimensional sense of self. The participants in this study seemed to have a strong sense of being good at some things and not good at other things. Some things they were good at were school subjects, and others were activities outside of school. Similarly, they were not good at some school subjects, and were not good at some things unrelated to school. This multidimensional perspective seemed to be much "healthier" than the focus on deficits and weaknesses implied by the application of labels and diagnostic criteria.

Therefore, a delicate balance might be appropriate. Whereas it seems important for the children to be aware of having a learning disability, so they can tackle it with insight and strategies, it is perhaps more important that the label or diagnosis not consume the identities of the children and adversely affect the positive approach they have developed toward themselves and toward school.

<u>Teachers should be nice, not mean</u>

The participants all appreciated nice teachers and did not like mean teachers. This is probably not unique to children with learning disabilities. The children with learning disabilities had more teachers in their school programmes than many, however, since they went to a learning skills teacher, were helped by teacher assistants, or learning assistance teachers, and so forth, while general education students typically had one classroom teacher. Middle school students had several teachers, but the adolescents with learning disabilities always had more. It seemed to be the support teachers who were most

appreciated. The special education staff seemed to be liked, whereas regular class teachers were not as well liked. The difference appeared to rest in the activities and expectations of these teachers. The special educators seemed to "know" what level of work the child with the learning disability needed to be doing. They were experienced as supplying work that was not too hard or too easy, but just right. In contrast, the students experienced classroom teachers as being somewhat too high in their expectations, and often frustrated the participants by giving too much work, too little time, not enough help, too much help, or confusing explanations.

The implications of this finding are not clear. To the extent that future research bears out the finding that children with learning disabilities prefer their special education staff to their classroom teachers, it might be worthwhile exploring the factors that contribute to those teachers being more liked. Many of the preferred behaviours and attitudes of the teacher that were appreciated involved practical, day-to-day actions that could be done by any teacher, and might help engage the children with learning disabilities, not only in special education placements, but in regular classrooms as well. As has been found in previous research, the teachers who take an interest, and who engage the student in the learning process appear to be the most powerful factors in keeping potential drop-outs in school, and promoting their motivation to succeed (Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Lichtenstein, 1993). Teachers are likely to be better liked, which helps engage children in their education if teachers pay attention to the experience of the children with learning disabilities in their classes, make an effort to be understanding and sensitive to these children's situations, and not embarrass them. They would do well to give encouragement, praise and recognition for effort and give tangible

rewards for the children's work. They might strive to facilitate a classroom environment that is structured and disciplined, familiar, consistent and predictable, quiet and conducive to concentration, which rewards appropriate behaviour, is safe for the children with learning disabilities to read aloud without fear of being embarrassed, and fair.

General education teachers might be more appreciated by their students with learning disabilities if they provided appropriate work for them, and were felt to be aware of the child's learning levels and needs. As one student pointed out, there were no materials at her level in the regular classroom, so she needed to ask the Learning Skills teacher for books. This could send a message to the student that the teacher does not want to deal with the child with the learning disability, does not care to provide materials, is not aware of the child's needs, and that the child does not belong in that class. The special education teachers who provided appropriate work, that was seen by the participants as neither too hard nor too easy, were appreciated. This is probably because the child felt successful when working on such material; challenged, but not failing. Some complained that teachers would give work that made them feel stupid because it was too easy. It is not the work, but the feelings it evokes, that makes the difference.

Confusion and frustration

Confusion and frustration were common experiences of the participants in this study, and appear to be common for many children and youth with learning disabilities. These experiences are probably unavoidable in part because of the nature of the learning disability. Confusion is especially common for children with language-based learning problems in general education classrooms, where it is especially difficult to meet the

language needs of all students. Children who do not understand the oral presentations of the teacher are likely to be left behind. This might be corrected through the adjustment of the teacher's use of language, where she or he could be vigilant of the language used. The addition of extra helpers in the class might serve to alleviate this problem, as the assistant could "translate" immediately to ensure that the child comprehends.

Frustration is another experience that the teacher has a significant role in. The student might experience the work the teacher provides as too difficult or the time limits too restrictive. The teacher might not be aware of the frustration until it manifests in violence or other dramatic behaviours. An assistant in the class might be helpful in heading off frustration before it builds. However, it always remains the responsibility of the teacher to provide learning situations that do not provoke undue stress and frustration.

Inclusion and belonging

The experience of being more similar than different was common among the participants. One possible explanation of this might be related to the model of education in which they are engaged. The movement toward inclusion has been strong in British Columbia schools for more than a decade, and one significant rationale for the policy has been that children with special needs should be helped to feel that they belong in the general education school, and society in general. The local school district provides a combined inclusion and pull-out programme, so that much of the time, children with learning disabilities are involved in general education programming, with an hour or two each day spent working on their language arts with a small group in the learning skills room within the same school. This model may be in part responsible for the children's

sense of belonging and sameness with their peers. While it is out of the scope of this paper to discuss the relative merits of inclusion, integration, pull-out, or segregation, it would appear that the hybrid model has some advantages, and the participants in this study may be experiencing those. This is similar to the results of Klingner et al. (1998), whose participants were divided about the cost and benefits of inclusion and pull-out programmes.

The special education teachers seem to have the advantage over the general education teachers, as they have smaller groups to work with, can focus on specific learning difficulties and strategies for dealing with them, and have ready access to the resources in their centre to meet the specific learning needs of the child with learning disabilities. They consequently can achieve greater success with the students in reading and writing, and this in turn can motivate the children within the Learning Skills class. The experience is more positive for the child, and the child therefore likes the special education teacher better than the classroom teacher, who has 25 other children with complex needs, much broader curriculum to work through, and limited access to specialised materials and instructional strategies.

The demands on general education teachers are extreme, and it would be unfair to suggest that they need to behave more like special education resource teachers when dealing with children with learning disabilities in some of these concrete ways, without drastically changing the demands on their time and attention. If class sizes were reduced to similar ratios seen in resource classes, then general education classroom teachers would be better able to meet the needs of such children themselves. However, the financial costs of such class side reductions would be great.

Consideration of time

There was a strong common experience among the participants in this study that there was not enough time. The various situations in which time was problematic included math, reading, assignments, and tests. The students' experience of not having enough time does not necessarily mean that the teacher does not allow enough time. The teachers may have given "enough" time, but the children may not be making appropriate use of it. Regardless of the "actual" situation, the children experience time pressures, and this is causing them problems. It may be important for teachers and special educators to consider the time situation more carefully. This may mean allowing more time for the student to do what they need to do, helping the children to develop better time management strategies so that they can better use the time available, and/or purposefully reducing the emphasis on speed in favour of quality of work.

More attention to math

Curiously, math was more of a problem than I would have expected. Most of the participants expressed concerns about their math skills. Many of them had not memorised their facts, so it took longer to calculate. Several acknowledged that word problems could be tricky, because sometimes the words were too hard to read, or the language was confusing. Sometimes they got mixed up trying to do simple calculations, because they did not read the sign correctly, and added when they should have subtracted. Some did not feel that they understood the math processes being taught in too complicated a manner.

From many of the files I read concerning these children, test scores showed that they had minor delays in math, when compared with their literacy problems. Their individualised programmes tended to focus on reading and writing goals, whereas with math, there is little adaptation, they are taught the regular math programme, and some evidently feel that they are struggling. There are often subtle effects of learning disabilities that are not apparent in the test scores. Therefore, it might be important for the school team supporting children with learning disabilities to explore domains other than reading and writing to ensure that the programme is balanced.

More interesting use of computers

Most of the participants enjoyed computers, and seemed to really benefit from the software designed to assist their written expression. This should be encouraged and extended. Some children with learning disabilities affecting their written output could perhaps benefit from the use of speech-recognition software, which several were very interested in. Most felt that they were getting better, but were still not very effective typists, and this might suggest a need for more early keyboarding skills.

Some of the children experienced boring, repetitive, and degrading work on computer-based instruction programmes. This type of intervention, while possibly effective in increasing skills, seemed to be seriously frustrating the students who used them, and turning them away from computers, and from special education. It will be important for teachers to find creative and interesting uses of the technology, which obviously has infinite potential to help children with learning disabilities.

Counselling Implications

As a counselling psychologist, I have been interested in the role of counselling for children with learning disabilities for many years. The results of this research suggest some important roles the counsellor can play in the lives of children and youth with learning disabilities.

The first general finding was that these children's experience of school and literacy was OK. This is significant, in that it is considerably different from the tone of much of the previous literature. It suggests that, unlike some of the previous counselling literature, the focus may not be so much on treatment, as on maintenance.

There has been considerable literature published in counselling and psychotherapy journals concerning the treatment of clients with learning disabilities. Much of this literature has taken as its point of departure the previous research showing significant social, emotional, and behavioural problems associated with learning disabilities. Some of this literature discusses possible origins of these symptoms and treatment possibilities for individuals with learning disabilities (Byrne & Crawford, 1990; Migden, 1983, 1990; Rosenthal, 1992; Wetherley, 1985).

Proactive focus

Rather than focusing on treating the problems resulting from the learning disabilities, the counsellor might have a more proactive role in maintaining the positive experiences of these children. As was discussed above, there are some positive outcomes for the children and adolescents with learning disabilities, which suggests that something is working. Schools are often identifying the children's learning disabilities early, and

providing appropriate support. Teachers are often sensitive and understanding, and provide work at the appropriate level. The students feel that they belong, and are similar to their peers. They feel that they are good at some things, and appear to have reasonably strong self-esteem. There is a role for the school counsellor in facilitating and maintaining much of this. The counsellor can help to increase the likelihood of these supportive factors occurring. The counsellor can help to sensitise the teachers to the emotional realities of the child with the learning disabilities, encourage teachers to be understanding and advocate on their behalf for adaptations, allowances, additional time, and other accommodations to ensure success (Price, Johnson, & Evelo, 1994). The counsellor could help the teacher to provide the supportive environment that helps children with learning disabilities feel secure, wanted, and valued in the class.

Advocacy

Advocacy is important in a variety of contexts. Counsellors can advocate on behalf of the student with learning disabilities, in order to obtain or maintain services and programmes. Parents can be helped to develop their advocacy skills for approaching the teachers, administrators or school board in support of their child. The counsellor can be instrumental in this development (Wetherley, 1985). The students themselves can become advocates on their own behalf. This takes considerable training and courage, but pays off in effectiveness within school and in future pursuits (Phillips, 1990). Again, counsellors, engaged in individual relationships with the students, may be best situated to facilitate the development of self-advocacy skills.

<u>Demystification</u>

One of the key themes discovered in this research was that the participants seemed to feel pretty good about themselves. They were able to put their literacy skill weaknesses into perspective, not making too much of the LD label, or their placement in special education classes, but situated their problem with reading and writing within a broader context of their overall experience. In this, they appeared to be quite balanced and "healthy". In part, this outcome might be related to the demystification process discussed in previous sections of this paper. The children had been deliberately helped to understand that they were not the only ones with learning difficulties, through readings from a book about other children with problems. There may be other factors, such as the attitudes of their parents and teachers that also contributed to this balanced, healthy, perspective. The counsellor can facilitate these factors, by participating in demystification with the child, teachers, and family and helping them all to understand the nature of the learning disability, the child's strengths and weaknesses, the importance of self-understanding and self-advocacy for the student with LD, and consideration of future implications.

One type of demystification proposed by Dinklage (1991) involved support groups, where (college) students with learning disabilities could meet to share their experiences, and to find validation. There, they could feel understood and accepted, and with a non-disabled leader in the group, they might also be educated in specific helpful ways. The main purpose of the group would be to help the LD person to make sense of their disability.

> Making sense out of the dyslexic's experience doesn't rewire the brain and
> eliminate the problem, but it can lose its shameful, nightmarish quality and

be brought down to human scale where it is simply something to cope with. (p. 22)

This might also be a helpful process for younger children. The participants in this study were already drawing support from other children with learning difficulties, either within their special education classes, or in general education. They would compare their skills and difficulties with others, and find comfort in knowing that others had problems too. This was informal, and probably not as effective as if a counsellor deliberately facilitated the connections between children with similar experiences.

Previous literature supports the idea of helping students to understand their learning disability, to accept it, and to move toward tackling their academic challenges with a more assertive, action oriented manner (Lichtenstein, 1993; Trenholm, 1993; Wilczenski, 1992). The studies of adults with learning disabilities make this type of outlook a significant priority (Gerber & Reiff, 1991; Gerber, Reiff, & Ginsberg, 1996; Reiff & Gerber, 1994; Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1993; Reiff, Ginsberg, & Gerber, 1995; Spekman et al., 1992). According to this literature, success is associated with self-awareness and acceptance of a learning disability, a reframing of experience, a proactive approach, a sense of control in life, a desire to succeed, perseverance, resiliency, emotional stability, coping strategies, stress reduction strategies, appropriate goal setting and goal directedness, pursuit of careers which maximise strengths and minimise weaknesses, and presence and use of effective support systems. The counsellor can have a significant role in the development of these attitudes and behaviours (Wilczenski, 1992).

Supporting families

The counsellor might work with the families of children with learning disabilities, in the same proactive manner, helping them to understand the child's special educational needs, and encouraging them to support the child in a variety of ways (Lombana, 1992; Wetherley, 1985). The families of the children in this study appeared to already be very understanding and supportive, which is in contrast to much of the previous literature concerning families of children with learning disabilities. Most of this literature has concentrated on the role of families in causing, maintaining, or exacerbating the learning problem, and described the types of family therapy that might correct this (Coles, 1987; Green, 1990, 1992; Humphries & Bauman, 1980; Johnson, 1987; Klein, Altman, Dreizen, Friedman, & Powers, 1981a, 1981b; Margalit, 1982; Perosa & Perosa, 1981; Spacone & Hansen, 1984). The results of this study challenge the general tone of this literature, suggesting that perhaps these families are not as dysfunctional as previous research has described, but may in fact be doing a great deal to facilitate the positive outcomes I found. However, it should be remembered that the families/children who volunteered to participate may be different from those that did not participate.

Case management

There are often a number of people involved with the child's programming at school and in the community. There can be several teachers, teacher assistants, school psychologists, administrators, and professionals outside of the school, and the counsellor. These teams can become unwieldy, as the members have important information and insights to contribute, and co-ordination of this knowledge becomes extremely important.

Case management for the child's individualised programme could be a role of the school counsellor (Wetherley, 1985), especially when the child is in secondary school, and the scheduling and course selection activities become increasingly complex. Secondary students with learning disabilities often apply for adjudication of final examinations for graduation, whereby they are allowed adaptations similar to those used in their regular classes. This application requires some co-ordination and advocacy, which might best be done by the counsellor who knows the child's history and circumstances.

Confusion and frustration

A counsellor can have an important role in helping the child with both confusion and frustration. In working individually with the student with learning disabilities, a counsellor has opportunities to observe confusion and frustration at work. When I interviewed some of the participants, they became confused by some of my questions, and managed to confuse me when they were explaining some things. I also observed frustration at work for several of them, as they tried to show me their reading or spelling skills, and made errors. In both of these circumstances, I restrained my instincts as a counsellor to intervene, and simply observed how they handled themselves, because I was attempting to maintain a phenomenological interviewing stance. However, I witnessed opportunities for interventions such as those described by some previous literature on the impact of LD on therapy.

<u>Conclusion</u>

This study has approached the research question: "What are the common experiences among children with learning disabilities in literacy during situations of reading and writing in school?" The research took the form of a phenomenological investigation, in which eight children with learning disabilities were asked about their experiences of literacy in school. From three to six interviews with each child resulted in a great deal of recorded material that I analysed and interpreted, eventually extracting nine common experiences. Four of these common experiences combined into a general theme, that children with learning disabilities appear to experience literacy, school, and themselves as OK. These common experiences included the experience of being more similar to peers than different, the experience of success in a variety of areas other than literacy, the experience of making progress in literacy and the experience of enjoying literacy. Five other themes combined into a general theme concerning the impact of teaching style and programming. These common experiences included the experience of teachers making a difference, the experience of not enough time, the experience of frustration, the experience of confusion, and the experience of computers making a difference.

These common experiences and general themes were compared with previous literature, and significant similarities and differences were revealed. Possible explanations for these outcomes were discussed, and limitations of the study were outlined. From these discussions, a number of implications for future research, educational practice, and counselling were highlighted.

It is hoped that this research has accomplished the goals I set several years ago when it began to take shape. As a school psychologist, and counselling psychologist, I have had more than a decade of exposure to the lives of children and adolescents with learning disabilities, in addition to my own personal experiences with learning difficulties. I wanted to further explore those experiences, and fill in some gaps in my own understanding, and perhaps that of others working with such children. I set about exploring the literature that had been written about children and adolescents with learning disabilities, and found very little of the voice of the children themselves. I then decided to attempt to bring forth their voices, to let them tell their own stories, and to reduce the imposition of my own, and to try to understand what it is "really like" for the child with learning disabilities.

Little did I suspect that they would surprise me with those voices and so profoundly change my perspective. Much of their experiences seemed more positive than I had expected, and this forced me to re-examine my previous experience, the re-examine the literature, and to see with a fresh vision what these children were experiencing, to hear with open ears what they were really saying. What I discovered above all was that there is far more to learn from the children we think of as having problems with learning.

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Appendix B
<u>Demographic Questionnaire</u>

Identifying code: _____

The following questionnaire is designed to help me understand your child and his or her context: where he or she is "coming from". All of your answers will be kept confidential, and nothing that can identify you will be included in the final report.

Child's Name: _____ Birthdate: _____
School: _____ Grade: _____ Repeated Grade(s)? : _____
Mailing Address: _____
_____ Telephone: _____

Mother's Name: _____ Age: _____
Education: _____
Occupation: _____
History of Learning Difficulties?: _____
_____
Ethnic Background: _____

Father's Name: _____ Age: _____
Education: _____
Occupation: _____
History of Learning Difficulties?: _____
_____
Ethnic Background: _____

Siblings (Names, Ages): _____
_____
Extended family (support network): _____
_____

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Informed Consent Form
"A qualitative study of the reading and writing experiences
of children with learning disabilities"

Consent:

    I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

    I would like a copy of the research summary when the study is complete. [yes/no]

    I consent/do not consent (circle one) to my child's participation in this study.

_____   _____
Parent or Guardian Signature   Date

_____   _____
Signature of a Witness   Date

Appendix D

<u>Interview Protocol for Children with LD</u>

Example Preamble:

I would like to learn more about what you experience in school. Most children have an easier time with some parts of school than others, and some are really good at some things, and not so good at others. I am asking a number of children in the schools about what it is like learning and doing reading and writing.

Some children have a harder time thinking of the right words, so I would like to offer you a number of ways of letting me know. We will meet several times over the next few weeks, and each time, I will give you a chance to tell about your experiences and answer a few questions. I want to completely understand your experiences, so I will sometimes ask for your help to clarify what you mean, or what you feel.

Example Questions:

- Tell me what it's like for you in school.
- Tell me what it is like to read/write?
- Can you describe a situation when you were learning to read/writing?
- Was it hard for you to learn to read/write?
- Do you still have trouble with reading/writing?
- Can you tell me what you are thinking and feeling when you are reading/writing?
- Think of a time when you last read something. Tell me about it.
- Does someone help you with your reading/writing at school? What is that like? Do you like getting help?
- Do other children need help also?
- How would you compare your reading/writing abilities to other children?
- How much do you read?
- What types of things do you read? (Books, magazines, comics, computer screens, words on the wall, signs, advertising)
- What types of things do you write? (Journal, stories, assignments, poetry)
- Do you write on paper? Do you use a pencil or pen? Do you print or handwrite?

- Do you "write" on the computer? Do you use a keyboard, microphone, touch the screen?
- What is your writing like?
- What things are really hard for you? Easy?
- Are you doing as well as you'd like to do?
- Are some teachers better than others?
- What makes a good teacher, bad teacher?
- How did you do on your report card?
- Do you do the same work as other kids?
- How well does stuff stay in your memory?
- What is the Learning Skills programme/BOOST programme?
- What kind of things would you do with Mrs. [special education teacher]?
- What's it like in your regular class, is it difficult for you to concentrate?
- Do you have to make up the work you miss when you are at LSP/BOOST?
- What is a learning disability?
- Were you the only one that had trouble getting it done in three days?
- What about your family (mom, dad, siblings)? Do they help out?
- Do you ever find yourself getting angry in class about stuff like that?
- What do you do when you get angry like that? How do you stop yourself from snapping?
- Sounds like it was frustrating. How does that feel, when she says that?
- How good are you with computers?
- Are you looking forward to school next year?
- What are your favourite parts of school?
- What would you like to change about school?

Appendix E

Field notes
(jotted while processing the interviews and transcripts)

- The significant issues with speech, language, and other areas of communication, which made it that much harder to comprehend these kids, and for them to express what was going on for them.

- The overwhelming, catastrophizing thinking of kids like Dexter, who felt that everybody was better at everything than them. This later changed to a more moderate view.

- All had something positive to say about their resource teacher.

- None of them could sustain a discussion about reading and writing for long. All drifted to topics such as sports, Pokémon, of playing. Note that these may be topics that they feel comfortable with because they are successful or popular because of?

- Most talked mostly about relationships with peers, teachers, and to a lesser degree, parents and siblings.

- Most struck me as very immature, in their language, their thinking, their emotional development, and their topics of interest. Pokémon, beanie babies.

- Some conjured images of heroics, power, and mastery. James Bond for Benjamin. Good defending against Evil for Dexter. Grandiose fantasies. Maybe this is related to their alleged feelings of inadequacy?

- Not clear that they felt stupid. Some felt quite smart, or at least average.

- Some denied having a learning disability at all.

- Some felt that they had overcome the problem, that it was behind them, and that they were progressing ahead.

- The older kids, in middle school, experience a different set of circumstances, with the BOOST program, than do the kids in elementary SLD programs.

- French Immersion for three, makes a big difference to them. Amelia and George blame French for their reading problem.

- Need to look at a bunch of simultaneous processes, this is getting complex.

- Case descriptions, including basic demographics, family situations, report information. Careful that this doesn't get to be the focus. Remember, phenomenology needs to focus on the kids perceptions, and the "facts" don't matter too much.

- Adding non-verbal information along with transcripts. My observations help with understanding the context. Flat words can be misunderstood by the reader. Esp. for kids who don't speak well, have confusing language, or rely too much on the listener's knowledge.

- Interpretation of transcripts, by case, across cases. Hard, because each session adds something, but not until the en will I get what's going on.

- It seemed as I interviewed the participants, that most of them talked about the concrete activities, rather than their feelings. This may be related, as Bill [Borgen] said, to the fact that these kids were functioning at the concrete-operations stage of cognitive development.

- Questions in the interview moved further from the original phenomenological approach, as every question the interviewer posed moved the discussion in specific directions, not necessarily the direction the participants might have taken the topic. Indeed, the asking of a question tends to shape the entire discussion for the alert participant, who might perceive the tone of the question, and attempt to do and say what the interviewer appeared to want.

- It's so hard to stay free from judgement and intervention. I get so frustrated at some of the teachers, from what the children say.