MANAGING A LEARNING DISABILITY AT THE POST-SECONDARY LEVEL A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Managing a Learning Disability at the Post-Secondary Level
A Qualitative Study

by

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Abstract

Students living with learning disabilities often face a host of problems that complicate the school environment for them. Given the academic concerns of such students and their high risk for dropping out of school, this study set out to determine how post-secondary students manage their disabilities. The study utilized a qualitative research methodology of conducting open-ended, semi-structured interviews with six learning-disabled students attending a post-secondary institution. Noteworthy themes included: self-awareness, public awareness, self-advocacy, support from significant others, support from faculty members, support from the Center for Students with Disabilities, hard work and determination, and ability to take control. Students articulated the struggles they encountered throughout their school lives but they now feel stronger for having had to struggle. At the post-secondary level, they continue to struggle and to feel misunderstood. They feel that people pejoratively categorize them as learning disabled rather than accepting them as people with distinct learning needs.

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When the idea of completing a thesis became more realistic, many people encouraged me and assured me that I could succeed.

The best piece of advice came from my colleague and friend Lester Marshall who told me to start writing for myself. This piece of advice many times saved me from giving up. When in doubt, I told myself I was writing for only me.

With the guidance of Dr. Tim Seifert, I began the process of writing for someone other than myself. Dr. Seifert made me realize that I could not just ramble on forever, that I needed structure. Rather than just tell "their" stories, I had to narrow down some area of the literature that I was going to explore. Thank you, Dr. Seifert, for your guidance and patience.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Having raised her own two children who were diagnosed with learning disabilities, Dr. Barbara Cordini (1990), author of *Living with a Learning Disability*, noted the feeling of worthlessness often experienced by children living with learning disabilities. Sadly, some of these children grow up feeling that they are incomplete and worthless. Some become what are called acting-out people, behaviorally manifesting their frustrations and becoming juvenile delinquents. Others become severely depressed and commit suicide.

Students with learning disabilities lack motivation, exhibit an external locus of control, and have low self-esteem. Lack of motivation and poor concept of self-worth, combined with external attributions for success, inhibit the student from being successful academically (Biller, 1985). Students with learning disabilities frequently fail to attain the educational requirements necessary to pursue studies at the post-secondary level.

The present study, which focuses on students completing post-secondary studeies and coping with learning disabilities, shows how they manage their learning disabilities at the post-secondary level. For the most part, information relating to how such students manage their disabilities at the post-secondary level is minimal. As stated by Fourqurean, Meisgeier, Swank, and Williams (1991), "There is a dearth of information by which to guide secondary program planners to serve students with learning disabilities and to plan the transition from school to adult life" (p.400). The paucity of information spawned this researcher's interest in exploring how students with learning disabilities manage their disabilities at the post-secondary level. Students gave important information about how they manage their learning disabilities. This information will, perhaps, serve to assist

educators in planning and programming for the success of learning-disabled students.

According to Dalke and Schmitt (1987), as students with learning disabilities move from high school to post-secondary institutions, they may be confronted with many more challenges than are some peers who do not have learning disabilities. When students with learning disabilities have been admitted to college, they often need further assistance in college so they can graduate (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992; Vogel & Adelman, 1992). Research indicates that the processing and academic problems which school-age students with learning disabilities experience continue to pose difficulties when these students become adults in community, vocational, personal and academic domains (Adelman & Vogel, 1990; Gerber & Reiff, 1991).

From the perspective of Cordini (1990), input is needed from adult post-secondary groups of learning-disabled students, especially to aid others who are coping with similar problems and who are intending to go to college. The fact that the participants in this study are currently attending a post-secondary institution indicates that they are able to overcome or circumvent many of the obstacles that have often prevented learning-disabled students from achieving success. This coincides with the request of Gerber and Semmel (1984) for receiving input from the individual learning-disabled adult student who has succeeded, in order to ascertain directions for future research in this area. They consider clinical profiles and anecdotes as significant in contributing to a realization of what life is like for learning-disabled adults. Such students, as considered here, will have succeeded in our public school system. This study should add valuable insight into future directions for designing programs for the learning disabled, thus

increasing the degree of success for a greater proportion of these students. Clinical profiles and anecdotes will direct further research.

Background

Even though the research over the past thirty years has looked at the topic of learning disabilities from an educational perspective, Canning (1996) concludes that there is still a low level of awareness at the school level. Students with learning disabilities are found in most classrooms; yet few educators have sufficient understanding to identify students with a learning disability or design an appropriate instructional program for them. Canning concluded that, more than for any other group, the parents of learning disabled students expressed strong concern about the lack of services for these students and the low level of awareness concerning the characteristics of this type of disability.

Although people with learning disabilities are currently much less likely to attend a college or university than their normally achieving peers (Wagner, 1989), they have become more prevalent on college campuses during the past ten to fifteen years. An increasing number of students with learning disabilities are enrolling in and graduating from post-secondary institutions (Adelman & Vogel, 1992; Fairweather & Shaver, 1991). As a result of this higher enrolment in post-secondary, there is an even greater opportunity to learn from this population of adults managing their learning disabilities. Their unique perspective can be not only instructive but also invaluable to all who seek to understand learning disabilities and the management of these disabilities in adult development.

Fairweather and Shaver (1990) found that only 17.1 percent of students identified with learning disabilities enrolled in post-secondary courses. In this context, the successful transition of learning-disabled students to higher education is especially significant. People who have learning disabilities are more likely to have lower educational and occupational aspirations than peers who have no serious learning disabilities (Dowdy, Carter, & Smith, 1990; White, Deschler, Schumaker, Warner, Alley, & Clark, 1983).

We need theoretical and practical information to enhance career counseling and vocational interventions for the learning-disabled population (Rojewski, 1996). There is little in the literature to show the experiences of this population in the managing of their disabilities during college. Studies to ascertain the patterns of successful functioning that promote high levels of vocational success thus far have been largely neglected in the research on adults with learning disabilities (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992). The field has operated with a deficit model and a focus on remediating skills. Even though the research shows clearly that learning disabilities do not go away despite intensive academic intervention, there continues to be a focus on remediating those deficits. As well as providing remediation skills, we need to direct our attention to helping individuals with learning disabilities to adapt to their disabilities and to manage them.

Cowen (1993) points out that college-bound students with learning disabilities must face more challenges than their non-disabled peers. These challenges include: becoming aware of the learning disability and its effect on learning, describing the learning disability in plain language, and increasing the self-awareness or self-advocacy

skills needed to advocate for services at the post-secondary level (Gerber & Reiff, 1991).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to discover how learning-disabled students at the post-secondary level manage their learning disabilities in order to have success at this level. Because there are few studies exploring the experiences of post-secondary learning-disabled students, a phenomenological study devoted to understanding these students' lived experiences as post-secondary students best lends itself to examining this phenomenon. As a result, factors that promote college success for learning-disabled students will be identified. Understanding these factors should promote the success of other students who are coping with learning disabilities and who plan to continue studies at the post-secondary level.

Definition

Defining learning disabilities has been a challenge since Sam Kirk's first attempt in 1962 (Kirk, 1986). Most definitions of learning disabilities focus on school-based criteria. As a result, efforts to change existing definitions to operational, as well as many of the clinical methods commonly used to identify learning disabilities, do not generalize to adults (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1993). The growing number of adults living with learning disabilities and seeking support services or accommodations in post-secondary education indicates a trend that adds urgency to the movement to establish an operational definition and more rigorous criteria for applying the learning-disabled label

(Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990). While many definitions have been used since the term was first applied in the 1960's, there is an emerging consensus of support for the definition of learning disabilities given by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1994):

> Learning disability is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, and reading, writing, reasoning, and mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Problems in self-regulatory behaviours, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but they do not themselves constitute a learning disability. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not the result of those conditions or influences [p.6].

Shaw, Cullen, McGuire, and Brinckerhoff (1995) based their operational definition for adults with learning disabilities on the NJCLD definition for the following reasons:

- it is the most descriptive definition of learning disabilities;
- it is in line with the concept of intra-individual differences across areas;
- it suggests that learning disabilities exist throughout the life span;
- it deals with learning disabilities as the primary condition, while acknowledging possible concomitant disabling conditions;
- it does not rule out the possibility that learning disabilities can occur in people who are gifted and talented; and
- it has support from a broad range of professional constituencies.

Significance of the Study

This study done at a post-secondary institution in Atlantic Canada provides basic research on the question of success as it relates to those students who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities. It raises a whole new set of questions for the field, not only questions that have to do with managing a learning disability at the post-secondary level, but broader questions that involve learning-disabilities curricula, instruction, and counselling practices within the school system forwarding its students to post-secondary institutions. Theoretical and practical information is needed to enhance career counselling and personal development for this population. Overall, there is a need for practical and effective methods of educating and a need to eliminate barriers that can potentially keep these students from succeeding. According to Vogel, Hruby, and Adelman, (1993), there are very few studies regarding the identification of factors that would promote college success. This research investigated these factors so that students with learning disabilities will be better prepared for post-secondary education.

This study will suggest a re-evaluation of current educational practices utilized to enhance the lives of persons with learning disabilities. As a result, goals should focus on outcomes related to success. Educators can then look beyond the school age child and consider the needs of the learning disabled student once the student moves on to post-secondary education.

This study may help influence the direction of future curriculum development for students with learning disabilities. Hearing the stories of students who successfully

completed their formal education will lend insight into the methods that work for students with learning disabilities. Adopting the perspective of the successful student will inform future changes and improvements within the current public system of education. Results of this study can have significant implications for school administrators and university educators who provide services for students with learning disabilities.

Most important, this study can influence program developers regarding the secondary curriculum content in Newfoundland--at the provincial department of education, at the local school boards, and within the local schools.

Overall, this study will suggest strategies by which students can become more aware of their disabilities, know when and how to self-advocate and when and how to seek supports; these strategies allow for taking control of their learning disabilities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature focusing on adult outcomes for individuals with learning disabilities highlights just how "at risk" they are. Many reports refer to elevated high school drop-out rates and the on-going impact of learning disabilities across the life span, with underemployment, job difficulties, prolonged dependence on others, ongoing self-esteem and emotional difficulties, and high rates of dissatisfaction with their lives (e.g., Rogan & Hartman, 1990; Sitlington & Frank, 1990). Researchers have often cited a number of problems for adolescents with learning disabilities, including poor self-concept and external locus of control caused by repeated failures and the inability to self-advocate when necessary (Dowdy, Carter, & Smith, 1990; Rojewski, 1996). Problems with academic skills and performance are common hallmarks of learning disabilities (Dalke & Schmitt, 1987), as evidenced in numerous studies depicting failure (Hallahan & Kaufman, 1997; Schunk, 1989; Seligman, 1992); and a high dropout rate among the learning disabled (Gerber & Reiff, 1991; Lichenstein, 1993; White et al., 1983). Adolescents with learning disabilities hold significantly lower educational aspirations than their peers who do not have learning disabilities (Gottfredson, Finucci, & Childs, 1984; Dowdy et al., 1990).

Consequently, the learning disabled students appear to be underrepresented within the post-secondary population (Fourqurean et al., 1991). College preparatory course work is essential for those students who appear to have the potential for post-secondary education. Aune (1991) emphasizes that these students must have the

opportunity to experience the nature of college demands by having access to content and concepts critical to college success. The importance of understanding one's disability is particularly relevant to students with learning disabilities, but the task of helping students to understand their disability is frequently ignored in secondary school settings. As a consequence, many post-secondary transition programs have found the need to address this area in their programs (Aune, 1991; Dalke & Franzene, 1988).

In recent years the field of learning disabilities has begun to focus its energies on adults with learning disabilities. Before now a school-age emphasis and academic-skills orientation resulted in a lack of awareness about continuing problems within the adult population. Approaches to increase and enhance assertiveness, self-advocacy, learning and coping skills are more often encountered through self-help groups at the post-secondary level. Understanding the nature of learning disabilities, developing of good communication skills, and refining the ability to work in groups are also learned at this level, rather than at the secondary school level (Aune, 1991; Rojewski, 1996; Ryan & Price, 1992).

The successful students who have learning disabilities, as reported in the literature, manage to succeed in an educational environment where success is often dependent on those areas in which they typically exhibit weaknesses. Within the population of individuals with learning disabilities, researchers have found many that are successful, well adjusted, and satisfied with their lives (Adelman & Vogel, 1990; Gerber, et al., 1992; Spekman, Goldberg & Herman 1992; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999). These individuals, despite severe learning disabilities, have often attained

personal, social, and career success. Four factors identified as enabling them to overcome the risks associated with learning disabilities at the post-secondary level include: having an awareness of their learning disability, being able to access supports, having control (internally and externally), and developing self-advocacy skills. The literature review will further consider these four factors that enable learning disabled students to overcome their difficulties.

Awareness

"It cannot be stated too many times that one plank in the foundation for successful transition from secondary to post-secondary settings is a clear, realistic knowledge of one's own disability" (Ryan & Price, 1992, p.10). Successful learning disabled adults are knowledgeable about the impact their disabilities have upon their lives (Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman, 1993). Awareness of a learning disability can lead to acceptance of weaknesses. Adelman and Vogel (1990) have argued that acceptance and self-awareness of the impact of a learning disability may help one recognize strengths, assess limitations accurately, and make appropriate accommodations to achieve personal goals. Aune (1991) points out that a student's understanding and acceptance of his or her strengths, weaknesses, and the learning disability itself form the foundation for all other transition activities.

A clear and realistic understanding of one's learning disability is instrumental for empowering the individual in many areas of his or her life, including social, familial, academic and vocational situations (Ryan & Price, 1992). Without an understanding and

acceptance of their abilities, students are able neither to select appropriate goals nor to advocate for themselves (Aune, 1991). In addition, a lack of knowledge about one's ability can lead to a lack of acceptance of self and an inability to communicate one's needs and abilities to others (Getzel & Gugerty, 1992). Cowen (1993) states that post-secondary students need to develop a clear understanding of the nature of their learning disability as the first step toward building future determination skills. Once students understand that a learning disability is not a reflection of limited intellectual ability and that it will not be outgrown, they may be more receptive to discussing their unique profiles and limitations.

Gerber, Reiff and Ginsberg (1996) use a different term to describe the process of becoming aware of strengths and weaknesses. The process of reframing has been identified as key to achieving high levels of vocational success in adults with learning disabilities. Simply put, reframing "refers to a set of decisions relating to reinterpreting the learning-disabilities experience in a more productive and positive manner" (Gerber et al., 1996, p.481). The ethnographic studies on learning-disabled adults done by Gerber and Reiff (1991) presented clear evidence that the adults in the highly successful and moderately successful categories positively reframed their learning disabilities. It was not uncommon for the successful adults to express thoughts such as: "Despite the fact that I could not read well, I knew I could succeed because I would not have found myself in such a selective academic program" and "If I have enough time I know I can do it" and "In junior high I began to realize that I was good in math. I could handle more complex stuff. I no longer thought I was stupid, and I knew I wasn't mentally retarded."

Self-Advocacy

Awareness of a disability is closely related to self-advocacy which is an important step in obtaining accommodations and services (Greenbaum, Graham, Scales & Williams, 1995). Self-advocacy for college students with learning disabilities can be defined as the ability to recognize and meet the needs specific to one's learning disability, without compromising the dignity of oneself or others (Goldhammer & Brinckerhoff, 1992). Self-advocacy is seen as an important strategy that needs to be learned. The literature suggests that, despite their importance, self-advocacy skills are often not directly taught in high school (Aune & Ness, 1991; Ryan & Price, 1992; Wilson, 1994). High school students with learning disabilities often begin their post-secondary education with little knowledge about their disability, its effects on their learning, or kinds of support networks on campus (Aune, 1991; Brinckerhoff et al., 1993; Dalke & Schmitt, 1987).

Communicating one's needs succinctly and making informed decisions are often difficult for college-bound students who may have been accustomed to having decisions made for them by well-meaning parents, high school teachers, or classmates. In many ways the educational system from which these students have emerged has perpetuated a false sense of dependency (Shaw, Brinckerhoff, Kistler & McGuire, 1990). Often students, who graduate from public school and apply for post-secondary education, are unwilling to disclose the fact that they have a learning disability. Only twenty-two of the forty-nine participants of a study carried out by Greenbaum, et al., (1995) admitted that they had a learning disability. The main reason for disclosing a learning disability was

attributed to counseling at the high school level by a guidance counselor who encouraged self-awareness so that help could be provided when needed. According to Greenbaum and his co-writers, participants experiencing success at the post-secondary level are knowledgeable about their disability, they can specifically describe their learning problems during interview sessions. Students with learning disabilities need to develop a talent for realistic self-appraisal and risk-taking by being knowledgeable about themselves and skilled in knowing when and where to self-advocate (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities [NJCLD],1994).

Self-advocacy is a related term that is often used almost interchangeably with self-determination. Self-advocacy is considered to be a subset of self-determination (Wehmeyer & Berkobien, 1991). According to Field (1996), self-advocacy refers to taking action on one's own behalf. Acts of self-advocacy lead to greater self-determination. An understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses and an acceptance of self form the foundation of self-determination (Field & Hoffman, 1994).

Self-determination is emerging as a priority in the transition movement. It refers to individuals learning to make choices as they live with learning disabilities; they set goals regarding their lives and the services they receive and initiate actions to achieve those goals (Browning, Brown, & Dunn, 1993). Achieving personal goals in an academic setting while experiencing a learning disability amounts to hard work. Reis, Neu and McGuire (1997) investigated a group of post-secondary learning-disabled students who had been previously diagnosed as gifted students. The majority of the participants reported the belief that their capacity for hard work was their greatest asset, and the data

indicated that a constructive interpretation of their negative school experiences caused this work ethic to emerge.

Self-determination is becoming more widely investigated as one component of secondary students' readiness for adulthood. Durlak, Rose, and Bursuck (1994) refer to a number of self-determination skills that relate to students making a successful transition to post-secondary education. Self-determination includes such characteristics as: assertiveness, self-advocacy, creativity, and independence. For students with learning disabilities these factors may be critical to establishing a career and making future choices for education and training. Students who understand the nature of their learning disability need to acquire self-advocacy skills. Such skills foster independence (Aune, 1991).

Parents and special education teachers have encouraged dependency in students with learning disabilities protecting them, that is, by advocating and doing for them what students can do themselves (Rose & Bursuck, 1990). Teaching students to deal with success and failure situations requires teaching them to face rather than avoid these situations and by discouraging dependency--all are ways to prevent recurring failure. Durlak, Rose, and Bursuck (1994) provide a study which makes a step toward educating school personnel on the characteristics of students with learning disabilities and conveying reasons that self-determination skills are so critical for such students. A number of self-determination skills have been identified that are related to students making a successful transition to post-secondary education. The results suggest that students with learning disabilities can acquire, maintain, and generalize skills to focus on

the self-determination skills of self-advocacy and self-awareness. The findings support research suggesting that students with learning disabilities must be taught such skills directly (Schumaker & Hazel, 1984).

Learning disabled students must learn to become their own best advocates. In order to do this, learning-disabled students must be self-determined individuals (Ward, 1988). Ward defines self-determination as the ability to assume responsibility for one's own goals, accomplishments, and setbacks. Hence, the student develops relationships with benefactors and employs techniques to cope with meeting the demands of school.

Supports

Support from significant others enables learning-disabled students to integrate specific personal traits and special compensation strategies. Others encourage and directly help students achieve their goals. Over twenty percent of participants studied by Reis et al. (1997) report that another person such as a friend, fiancé(e), or faculty member was most helpful.

Once students with learning disabilities have been admitted to college, they often need further assistance in how to stay in college (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). Parents are seen as playing a primary role during the initial stages of the transition planning process by encouraging the students to reach for realistic educational goals and helping them understand their profiles and strengths and weaknesses (Cordini, 1990; Cowen, 1993). Hartzell and Compton (1984) conclude that college graduates had the advantage of

strong family support and private tutoring.

Support, guidance, and encouragement from families of learning-disabled students are factors that contribute to their success. Supports include financial and emotional supports (Greenbaum et al.,1995; Spekman et al.,1992,1993). These studies found that the lives of learning disabled adults are enhanced by an effective family support system. Other supports, such as the relationship with a tutor or mentor, continue to be important in adulthood as in earlier years. The one-on-one relationship with someone who understands the learning disability and has faith in the person's ability to succeed was identified as one of the most important aspects of services provided to students (Adelman & Vogel, 1993). Adults dealing with a disability need to be encouraged to seek the necessary individual counseling or to participate in appropriate group therapy with peers, family members, and spouses. Such psychological support may be important in assisting individuals through difficult transitions and periods of stress (Vogel & Hruby, 1993). During transitions, support groups can also be beneficial in addressing issues of adjustment and in overcoming feelings of fear and inadequacy that new situations may engender. Other support services needed by learning-disabled students at the post-secondary level are typically coordinated by a staff member. The staff member is responsible for providing students with a variety of "academic adjustments." Instructional modifications often include test-taking modifications, readers, note-takers, use of tape-recorded textbooks, and access to adaptive technology (Adelman & Vogel, 1991).

The most convincing reason for fostering the use of assistive technology by adults

with learning disabilities is the body of reports that indicate the effectiveness of such technology in compensating for specific learning disabilities. Primus (1990) found that the use of word processing enhanced the writing ability of post-secondary students with learning disabilities. Brown (1987) reported that speech synthesis in conjunction with word processing improves the quality and quantity of written language production. Spell-checkers are useful in helping learning-disabled college students compensate for spelling difficulties (Cutler, 1990). Tape recorders, calculators and VCR systems can be useful for adults with learning disabilities (Vogel, 1987). Gerber (1991) stressed that highly successful adults with learning disabilities tend to be users of assistive technology.

Given the failure of historical approaches for remediating learning disabilities, the use of assistive technology appears to offer a viable alternative for dealing with the problems experienced by adults with learning disabilities. It does not try to improve deficits that have shown resistance to remedial approaches but rather allows for a compensatory approach that seeks to work around deficits while capitalizing on strengths. The move toward independence, difficult for many persons with learning disabilities, can be facilitated through the use of assistive technology.

Control

Awareness of a learning disability gives learning-disabled students a certain amount of control. Adults studied by Gerber et al., (1992) experienced years of failure until they were able to take control and move on. The degree of control attained by the learning-disabled participants distinguished the highly successful group from the

moderately successful group. The overriding theme of the highly successful group was control. Meanwhile, many of the participants in the moderately successful group sought control mainly to cover up their weaknesses. Fear of being found out was common, and hiding the disability was almost an end in itself for the moderately successful group. The key problem that adults with learning disabilities face is not the disability per se but, rather, the inability to confront the challenges they encounter as they learn to live with the disability and overcome it (Gerber et al., 1992).

Control is identified as a critical protective factor, given that events beyond individual control are considered the most harmful (Cohler, 1987); those individuals who manage to take control are likely to be most successful (Spekman et al., 1993). Control is the key to success for adults with learning disabilities. Control means making internal decisions --conscious decisions to take charge of one's life--and giving external manifestations--adapting and shaping oneself in order to move ahead (Gerber et al., 1992). The internal decisions include the desire to excel, setting goals, reframing, accepting the disability, recognizing strengths, and understanding the learning disability. External manifestations include persistence and fitting individuals to environments in which they can succeed. Gerber and colleagues place "control" as the major encompassing theme related to success--the umbrella under which all the other factors are contained.

Spekman, Goldberg, & Herman (1992) identify a nearly identical set of factors related to success, although their terminology differs. They describe successful learning-disabled adults as those who express and demonstrate a strong sense of being in control

of what happens in their lives. These adults actively engage others, make decisions, and take responsibility for these decisions. Implicit is an inherent belief in themselves as agents capable of change and influence. Successful adults seem to be in control of deciding when to take the next step. They also accept and use the supports provided by family members and others.

Conclusion

An examination of the literature makes clear the need for the improvement of student services for secondary level students. In particular, self-advocacy skills, awareness and acceptance, supports and control, are important factors to be considered. It would appear that the development of these attributes in persons with learning disabilities should be given as much attention as efforts to improve academic skills, particularly during secondary schooling (Herman & Goldberg, 1993).

CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Given the current limited understanding in the area of learning disabilities a qualitative "inside-out" approach is a logical direction for future studies of learning disabled adults (Gerber & Reiff, 1991). The "inside-out" approach is referred to as an approach that assists researchers in exploring areas previously only poorly understood. As Miles & Huberman (1984) explained, a qualitative study is especially useful for inquiries in poorly chartered waters. Qualitative data, with its emphasis on people's lived experiences, is fundamentally well suited for locating the meaning people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives--and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them.

This is a phenomenological study investigating students' views about managing their learning disabilities at the post-secondary level. Accepting that phenomenology is "the study of experiences and the way we put them together to develop a world view" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.82), the study provides a framework for conducting the current research. According to Caines (1998), qualitative research is not trying to prove a particular hypothesis or test a set of variables. Its purpose is to come to understand how others experience a phenomenon (p.41). Phenomenologists explore the structures of consciousness in human experiences (Polkinghome, 1989). Phenomenology has roots in the philosophical perspectives of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and has been used in the social and human sciences, especially in sociology (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992), psychology (Giorgi, 1985), nursing and the health sciences (Nieswiadomy, 1983).

The author's approach focuses on the meaning of individuals' experiences, placing them central in this research. The research task is to understand how the learning-disabled students at the post-secondary level interpret their success. The author chose the qualitative paradigm because it affords the opportunity to do in-depth interviews. In this study, an interpretation will be drawn from the perspective of the participants, who will be asked to elucidate their lived experiences with learning disabilities. In the present study, guiding interview questions were used to direct the sessions (Appendix C). As anticipated, participants were willing to discuss personal experiences in detail. It is the views of the students being studied that are important; and to the fullest extent possible, these views were captured in order to obtain an accurate "measure" of reality. According to Polit and Hungler (1997) "qualitative research tends to emphasize the dynamic, holistic, and individual aspects of the human experience and attempts to capture those aspects in their entirety, within the context of those who are experiencing them" (p.325). This type of data may be best conveyed anecdotally in a semi-structured interview format.

Sample

Students who are living with learning disabilities and who are registered at the post-secondary level were informed of the research study through the Centre for Students with Disabilities. The Centre provides specialized services to post-secondary students who are able to document having some form of disability, including a learning disability. A letter was written requesting the participation of students (Appendix A). Six students responded to the request and were chosen to participate in the study. The time and place

of interviews was decided following initial contact with the students. Interviews took place between November 1999 and June 2000.

Limitations of the Study

This research is limited to the views of the participants and it cannot be made so general as to include all learning disabled students. The method of inquiry (in-depth interviews) and the analysis, based upon the participants' wording of their perceptions, offset its limitations in quantity and generalizability.

Ethical Considerations

Since all participants are adults and the topic requires freely-given disclosure of personal experiences, ethical considerations, while important, should not be of great concern. All participants were assured of confidentiality. Fictitious names were assigned to all participants. The consent letter for participation in the study emphasized confidentiality, voluntary participation, and each participant's right to withdraw at any point during the study.

Type of Instrument

For a phenomenological study, the usual process of collecting information primarily involves in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998). Thus, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used in this study to investigate the participants' views of managing their learning disabilities while they were studying at the post-secondary level. The interview

schedule was administered to cover in detail four areas of concern: awareness, self-advocacy, supports, and control. The interview schedule included open-ended questions across four categories: awareness of ability, self-advocacy skills, access to supports, and ability to take control; these categories were determined through the literature review to be potentially significant for the success of post-secondary students with learning disabilities. See Appendix C for semi-structured instrument protocol.

Procedure

Six participants volunteered to participate in this study and completed a participant consent form (See Appendix A). The participants decided on the location for each interview to take place. Each interview was completed in one and one-half hours. At the onset of the interview, trust was established by ensuring confidentiality, utilizing a non-judgmental approach to both the participant and the setting, and demonstrating respect through active listening. Participants were informed that they could refrain from answering questions if they so desired. It was agreed at the outset of each interview that follow-up interviews would be scheduled only if clarification was needed and if such follow-up was acceptable to the participant. The interviews were recorded using a hand-held recorder and later transcribed to computer. Participants were given an opportunity following the research project to obtain the taped interviews; otherwise, these tapes would be destroyed. All participants preferred to have the tapes erased following the conclusion of the study. Before beginning the taped interview, each participant signed a letter of consent stating that involvement in this research study was completely voluntary.

A "closed questionnaire" was used to determine demographics (Appendix B). Also, the interviewer gave an account of her own interest and work in the area of learning disabilities. This gave both parties an opportunity to establish rapport before the interview began. It was a positive experience and all participants appeared to be quite relaxed. As recommended by some researchers (e.g., Bogden & Biklen, 1992), written accounts were kept of the author's own thoughts about the data being collected.

The open-ended nature of the pre-selected questions permitted the interviewees to add any information not covered by the questions on the interview schedule. In this way the various factors that contribute to their success at the post-secondary level would be explored in depth.

Data Analysis

Preparation for data analysis involved tagging the interviews by date and transcribing the audio recordings of the student interviews onto computer disks. Each tape was assigned a record number, a detailed account of time, date, and place of interview. All notes taken during and after the interviews were also assigned the same organizational infrastructure. The tapes were then transcribed in long hand and later converted into word processing files. The interview transcripts generated a vast amount of information, which needed to be reduced to what was of most importance. As stated by Moustakas (1994):

> Each experience is considered in its singularity, and for itself. Within the brackets, the phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way, a graded series of reductions coming from a

> transcendental state, a total differentiated description of the most essential constituents of the phenomenon (p.16).

Moustakas (1994) referred to bracketing the focus of the research as the first step. The researcher engaged in disciplined and systematic efforts of setting aside prejudgements regarding the phenomenon being investigated. It is necessary to be completely open, receptive, and naïve while listening and while having research participants describe their experiences of the phenomenon being investigated. What is doubted are the scientific "facts," the knowing of things in advance, from an external base rather than from internal reflection and meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

The open-ended interview transcripts provided the researcher with an extraordinary amount of information. This information needed to be reduced to what was most important and relevant to the topic of research. This phase in the data analysis Moustakas (1994) referred to as phenomenological reduction. As he described it:

> To summarise, the steps of Phenomenological reduction include: Bracketing, in which the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question; Horizonalizing, every statement initially is treated as having equal value. Later, statements irrelevant to the topic and question as well as those that are repetitive or overlapping are deleted, leaving only the Horizons (the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon); Clustering the Horizons into Themes; and Organizing the Horizons and Themes into a Coherent Textural Description of the phenomenon (p.97).

After an in-depth reading of the transcriptions the researcher concentrated on the four themes of self-awareness, advocacy skills, supports and control. Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to data analysis as coding the data. This means that the data collected in this study was analysed into codes. These meaningful units of data were clustered into common themes representing the students' views on managing a learning

disability at the post-secondary level. These views will be further elaborated in Chapter 4. Finally, the themes were used to illustrate how the students manage their learning disabilities in order to be successful at the post-secondary level.

CHAPTER 4: INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The presentation and discussion of findings of this study will begin first by introducing the students. Then the themes that emerged from the phenomenological analysis of the students' views regarding the management of their learning disabilities at the post-secondary level will be discussed.

The Post-Secondary Students

Six students responded to the author's request to obtain participants for the present study. Five of the six students were registered at the same post-secondary institution and were completing courses when the interviews took place. One student, not now attending but planning to return the following semester, had been away for two semesters. All six students were diagnosed with learning disabilities during their public school years. All six students became aware of the study as a result of their involvement with the Centre for Students with Disabilities at the post-secondary level. The Centre provided the students with the letter of request seeking their participation in the present study.

For the purpose of confidentiality the author will refer to the students as **S1, S2, S3, S4, S5** and **S6**. The first student (**S1**) is a twenty-one year old male completing his third year towards an Earth Science degree. Because he was aware of his learning disability from an early age, his sense of awareness enables him to talk about his strengths and weaknesses in some detail. He believes that his parents played a major part

in helping him become aware of his learning disability. **S1** refers to his learning disability as dyslexia, difficulty reading and writing; and as dyscalculia, difficulty in math. He also exhibits characteristics of a visual perceptual weakness. He wears special coloured glasses to help him in this area. **S1** considers his strengths to be his good memory and personality. **S1** is quite involved at the post-secondary level. He feels comfortable asking others for needed support. The necessary supports, he says, have been available to him. He feels personally in control at the post-secondary level and is making plans to further his education when he completes his science degree.

S2 is a 25-year-old male with one year of coursework completed at the post-secondary level. **S2** waited for four years following graduation from high school to attend post-secondary. He worked full-time until he began university, but has recently quit university to return to his job. He is registering for correspondence courses next term. Having been diagnosed with dyslexia at an early age, he seems keenly aware of his strengths and weaknesses. He does well in university partly because of the supports he receives from the Centre for Students with Disabilities while attending. He can express knowledge learned verbally, but he cannot read it or write it well. He feels that, if he had received oral testing in high school, he would have obtained better marks and would have attended post-secondary immediately following graduation.

S3 is a 20-year-old female, completing her third-year of an arts degree at the post-secondary level. Although she has dysgraphia, a writing disability, she is experiencing success at the post-secondary level. **S3** is conscious of her strengths and weaknesses and is comfortable asking for the support she needs. She credits much of her success at the

post-secondary level to the support she receives from both her parents and the university. **S3** feels she is a good self-advocate. She also expresses a desire to work at the government level as an advocate for other people with disabilities.

S4, a 20-year-old male and second year student, wishes to enter a business degree program following completion of his second year. Initially he had intended to do the more demanding commerce degree program, which includes work terms, but felt he was unable to complete the requirement of six courses in his first term. **S4** is struggling with the written assignments, especially in English Language courses; he broke down during the interview. He has difficulty approaching professors and explaining his disability. **S4** does not appear to have a good awareness of his disability. He feels his being placed in special education prevented him from being prepared for post-secondary studies. He believes that the lack of supports at the high school level, following special education placement in the early grades, caused him to struggle. **S4** seems determined to persevere. His learning disability was diagnosed during his last year of high school. **S4** scored high on an intelligence test but showed weaknesses in written language. He has to do the required courses in English Language at the post-secondary level in order to continue on with the other courses for his degree program. As a result he experiences great anxiety. The time he needs to complete the written assignments in the English courses prevents him from doing better with his other courses.

S4 states that he did not receive much support from his parents while he was going through the public school system. **S4** is receiving supports at the post-secondary level but does not feel that they are sufficient for his needs. He is not involved in any

extra curricular activities and often wishes he could talk to other post-secondary students with learning disabilities. In this respect, he relies mostly on his girlfriend for support.

S5 is completing his fourth year toward a philosophy major and religious studies minor and is experiencing reasonable success at the post-secondary level. He finds this setting to be a big improvement over the public school system where he felt ostracized socially. He does not need a lot of support at the post-secondary level as long as he is not required to complete exams. If supports are needed, he knows how to get them. He was identified as having a learning disability from an early age and has received supports from his family throughout his public schooling. He believes that he is in reasonable control at university and is highly involved in extra curricular activities. He is able to take control by knowing which courses to avoid. This has included avoiding mathematics courses for the past four years.

S6 successfully completed an honors program in geophysics. He has a writing and reading disability. His strengths are in the areas of mathematics and science. He attributes his success to his personality and to his good memory. **S6** does not feel that he has much awareness of his learning disability. He appears to lack the words needed to adequately describe his dyslexia. However, he is acutely aware of his strengths and weaknesses. He considers himself a hard worker with great determination. Support from his parents at an early age helped him to experience success in the public school system. A supportive girl friend helped him all the way through university. S6 received a job as a geophysicist with an oil company shortly after his graduation.

As a result of the large amount of relevant information collected during the six

interviews, I feel it is important to present the information in the following format. I will continue to refer to participants as **S1** (Subject 1); **S2** (Subject 2); **S3** (Subject 3); **S4** (Subject 4); **S5** (Subject 5); **S6** (Subject 6) throughout the presentation of data. Information gathered from each participant on individual themes will be presented in the order in which the interviews took place. The data collected from each participant and based on all four themes will be presented. For each theme, the information gathered from **S1** will be presented first, followed by the information gathered from **S2** on that same theme. This order of presentation will continue in order to accurately convey relevant information from all six participants on each of the four themes. This order of presentation will allow for a more holistic look at each participant's views on managing a learning disability at the post-secondary level.

The first theme the researcher discussed with each participant was "awareness" of disability and its implications for their lives. This theme investigated students' ability to explain their disability; their personal strengths and weaknesses; and their level of comfort while conversing on the subject. This theme encompassed two sub-themes: self-awareness and public awareness.

The theme of "self-advocacy" investigated the students' thoughts regarding their ability to advocate for themselves at the post-secondary level. This second theme showed the experiences of students before their attending post-secondary studies. Students were asked to give their thoughts about this theme and discuss those times when they felt they were able to self-advocate at the post-secondary level. During the discussions, the sub-theme of self-determination became important to the understanding of the data.

The third theme, that of "supports", focused on the various sources of supports that participants believed contributed to their success at the post-secondary level. Students were given the opportunity to express their feelings concerning availability of supports and their levels of comfort when requesting support at the post-secondary level. During the analysis three sub-themes emerged toward a greater understanding of the theme: faculty support, test-taking supports, and support from significant others.

The final theme, that of "control", explored the various ways by which participants could take personal control at the post-secondary level. While investigating this theme, the sub-theme of hard work emerged as important to the overall discussion.

Upon the completion of the presentation and interpretation of data, there will follow a discussion highlighting the relationship between the major themes and the experience of success for the learning-disabled population studying at the post-secondary level.

Theme One: Awareness

Self-Awareness

All participants were able to talk at length about their learning disabilities, about their individual strengths and weaknesses, and about the contribution that self-awareness of their disabilities made to their success; it was evident that lack of awareness caused them to struggle.

S1 became aware of his disability at an early age and was able to describe his disability in detail. He is completing his third-year science program. When asked if he

could explain his learning disability to others, **S1** responded:

> Yes, I have what is called dyslexia. That's mainly a reading and writing problem. It is actually not knowing how to write. I have difficulty in the actual writing of the letters and the actual spelling of the words and then reading of the words. It is somewhat of a package really. In this package there are several items. One is dyslexia and the other is dyscalculia, which is a problem with math. I tend to reverse numbers. I have trouble with low end math, simple calculations. High order algebra and calculations tend not to be much trouble. Actual theory in physics and chemistry I have no trouble with. It's the math in these courses that tends to be very basic. I understand the Theory of Intermolecular Forces. I also wear special glasses for light sensitivity. It has not been studied enough yet to prove it is an actual condition. My glasses are blue and I wear them all the time. This doesn't correct my dyslexia. It only corrects the way my eyes pick up light. So my depth perception, for example, was atrocious. I couldn't catch a ball, run straight ... was clumsy, fell down stairs. You know I almost got hit by cars and trucks because I couldn't perceive depth. Until I got those glasses--and all that changed. The high gloss paper in books and the lights in schools really contribute to this problem. The images of the letters are distorted and the glasses tend to cut down on this distortion and glare.

S1 felt remarkably comfortable talking about his strengths and weaknesses. When he was asked if this had always been the case, **S1** responded:

> I can't remember a time ever feeling embarrassed about my problem. If you are locked up in yourself and the shame of having dyslexia, you are not going to seek help. I can't write at all. It's not that I can't write sentence structure, I can't spell. I have high intelligence but these problems linger on. I consider myself illiterate, to be honest. I have a poor memory for things, like, even spelling my own name. I am still terrible with time, no concept of time whatsoever. I still get Tuesday and Thursday mixed up. But factual information, that's not a problem. The answer to---the longest river in the world---that will stay in my mind forever. What little reading I have, I remember words as pictures. For example, if you conjure up a picture of an apple in your mind, you know what an apple looks like. It's an apple because it looks like an apple. I do the same thing with words. The word is computer because it looks like a computer. I would never be able to spell computer. Co is it? Man, I loathed going to school. It was a never-ending frustration. Like, you can imagine watching your class mates everyday. And you know you were pretty sure that you were as smart as they were. You were watching them get further ahead in their school work even though you were spending hours and hours drilling phonics and math at home with your mom. You'd probably spend four or five hours working on a project that still wasn't finished. Everyone else talked about how easy it was. That was a bit frustrating. It was not until grade seven I kind of found out for myself what was going on. I

> think I hit a climax at about grade six. In grade three I actually had a diagnosis of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). I don't think it was right. I was told I'd need help reading and writing until I learned to do it myself. By grade six I had the special glasses and things started to look up. They made looking at the words so much more comfortable. So I wasn't officially diagnosed until grade twelve when I had official documentation that I was dyslexic.

S2 was not attending classes when the interview took place. He waited four years after graduation from high school to attend post-secondary. After he had completed two semesters successfully, he decided to return to work. He planned to return to his studies at university the following semester. When asked if he could explain his disability to others, he responded:

> The first time I learned about my learning disability was in grade four. I started going to a place where I got individual help. It was there I learned a lot about dyslexia. When I started going there I started to realize a lot. Even though I had trouble with reading and writing I had a really good memory. At this level, I had the most trouble with German. You can imagine if you have trouble writing English, another language is going to be even harder. I'm an auditory learner. I learn best when I hear it. When I have lots of time, I can read something three or four times and then it's implanted on my brain. Once I got it, it stays. You see when I write, I find my brain is moving too fast for my hand. If it's not that then it is the spelling problem. It takes too much energy. I didn't know much about learning disabilities as a child. The information was very, very scarce. No information was ever given to me other than that one time. I found little bits on television. There was nothing to say why my brain works differently. I haven't even read the documentation--don't need to. It's all about me. And I know myself better than anyone. I already know a lot about science and biology. I mean, I have friends coming to me and asking me to help them because I know so much in that area. I have always been an outside person. I can tell you anything about nature. Right now, I got a fishing pole in my bag just in case I want to go fishing.

S2 was accurately aware of his strengths and weaknesses. When asked to talk more about his strengths and weaknesses, he continued:

> I think I make up for my problems in reading and writing. My brain is just different. I know I can speak the knowledge. I can really tell people what I know. If I had been able to do oral exams in high school I probably would have gotten a better mark to keep up my average. Then I would have been able to go on to university like an ordinary student.

In response to the question, "Did you always feel comfortable talking about your

learning disability?" **S2** responded:

> There was nothing to say--that my brain worked differently. Finding good information was impossible. Yes, I talked about it to my friends. They actually helped me out. I didn't have any problem like that. I just didn't try hard enough. Pretty much, it's been like that since grade four when that lady explained it to me. After that I knew why I was like I was.

S3 was quite aware of her learning disability. She felt comfortable talking about her strengths and weaknesses. She is successfully completing her third year. When asked if she could explain her disability, she responded:

> I don't think there is enough awareness out there. I have difficulty in Math because of perceptual weaknesses. I got around it and had an 80 percent average, even though they told me I probably wouldn't ever be able to do Math. I did academic Math and I had problems graphing. I enlarged the graph paper so that the blocks were bigger. Then I could actually see what was going on. Because of my perceptual problems the lines on the graph would move after I looked at it for awhile. When I enlarged the graph paper the blocks were so big that I couldn't miscount them. It wasn't until in grade three or four that I really started to notice. I'd be reading and I'd drop a line. Then I'd realize when I went back over it, I'd realize why I wasn't grasping the meaning of what I was reading. It wasn't that I couldn't understand what I was reading. It was just that I was missing important information. I had to do things like follow with my finger or use a ruler. I'd do whatever I could so I wouldn't miss any of the information. That became a real problem at university. Because I have to follow real carefully, it takes me longer to read. I'm an auditory learner. About 80 percent of what I pick up is through listening to lectures in class. Awareness is very important. I feel fine talking about it. I find that the more I talk about it, then the more help someone else might get.

In response to the question, "Has this always been the case?" **S3** offered the following response:

> Once I actually went to a teacher in high school and asked her if I could speak what I had to write on an exam. Then she would know what I was trying to say. Then if I had trouble with writing the material she'd know that I knew it. So it worked out really well. It's impossible to have awareness, the ability to understand your own disability, especially in high school. In here I help the professors realize that I need extra time for tests. A couple of them have said no. Some have asked why I need it. Then I tell them because I have a scribe. I may need something read over twice so that I'll understand it. Therefore it is going to take me more time. Most of them said yes. Do I feel comfortable? Yes, I've come

to grips with it. It wasn't until about grade three or four that I started to notice.

S4 is struggling with his language courses and is finding that becoming aware at a late age was detrimental to his learning. He is completing his second year and plans on doing a business degree. **S4** had not been identified with a learning disability until grade twelve. He considered his years spent in special education as detrimental to his learning. In response to the question, "Can you explain your disability to others?" he responded:

> No one ever told me, but I had an idea. No one ever really said you have a learning disability. No one ever told me or helped me understand it. After all those years of school, no one ever picked up that I had a learning disability. That really makes me mad. Finally it gets written down on paper in grade twelve. I find out I have a learning disability when I am graduating. I used to see stuff on television about people who were really smart but couldn't read or write very well. It's hard to get it all on paper, the way I want to. I'm constantly checking every single word for spelling. I'm trying to get my idea down and trying to concentrate on a lot of things at the same time, to make sure I got it right. It takes a lot of time. The same thing happened to this guy on television. That was a kind of boost for me. I thought then that maybe I could be like him, smart but still have troubles writing. With the right equipment like a computer and software that I got now, I can write. I can read fine.

When asked about his strengths and weaknesses, **S4** provided the following information and opinion:

> Well, the thing that really slows me down is my writing. My spelling is really poor. My grammar skills are really low because I didn't have the opportunity in normal class for all those years. I didn't get the opportunity to practise writing all those essays, and stuff. I'm like--trying to catch up now. It seems like every one is ahead a few steps. With the right equipment like a computer and software that I got now, I can write. When I get as close as I can to a word, the software will pick up the word that I want to go in there.

S5 was completing his fourth year philosophy degree with a religious studies minor. He was enjoying university and having success. This was a big improvement over public school where he felt socially ostracized. He was identified at an early age with a learning disability. However, he feels it was late when he became aware of his strengths and weaknesses. When asked, "Can you explain your learning disability to others?" he responded:

> All the way through school my grammar was horrible, atrocious. I remember getting back one of first papers at university. I got 45 percent. That's when it hit me. My auditory weakness was diagnosed my last year of high school. I was already in university by the time the documentation was provided. That's when I found out I had an auditory weakness. I had to jump through some hoops at first to get the documentation for the Centre for Students with Disabilities. I'm able to ask for what I want. I'm good with people but I'm a bit reserved at times. Awareness of time, being able to keep deadlines ... that's important. I don't like testing. My handwriting is atrocious. I have horrible handwriting and when I'm writing an exam my thoughts are somewhat jumbled. That's why I prefer papers. Then I can make my thoughts more coherent. God knows, it's a lot easier on the professor. I pity the prof who has to go through my exam. One thing I've learned in speed-reading class here is to use my pencil to keep my eyes from wandering. My attention does tend to wander. One thing that has helped me here is doing courses with no exams. I do a lot better with papers. It gives me a better chance to put my thoughts together. The amount of time I need to do that definitely plays a big part. The two courses I got 85 percent were courses with no exams.

When he was asked, "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" **S5** offered the following response:

> I'm a philosophy major. That sort of speaks for itself. Oh God, I've been avoiding math courses for five years. In the arts program I don't have to do math. I can do history or languages. When I was in grade two I was diagnosed with dyslexia. But the reading has become a strength, sort of taken care of itself. I needed extra time not because of the reading but taking what I got from the reading and putting it into words--trying to make sense of it all. Sometimes I have to have stuff repeated in order to understand it. Other times when I'm reading, I'll say a word that's not even there. I misinterpret words, depending on my frame of mind. My weakness is memorizing formulas, periodic tables. I just can't wrap my head around it. I'm very much a visual learner. That's, like, listening to professors' lectures is not the best thing for me. I have to ask a lot of questions.

When asked, "Do you feel comfortable talking about your learning disability?" **S5** responded:

> I think in high school you have to be a jock or a science geek. I was neither. There wasn't much there to interest me. Also, I just couldn't relate to anyone. It was sort of like a self-imposed exile. When I was in university I was able to find people like myself. But the whole system is geared more to left-brained than right-brained people. You have science, chemistry, computers ... that's where you're encouraged to go ... regardless of your interests. I was lucky I was diagnosed in grade two.

> Then in grade twelve I find out I have an auditory weakness. The auditory weakness is probably right on. My strengths were always leading toward the arts. My attention does tend to wander. Sometimes when I am reading philosophy, I find my mind wander so I have to put forth a little more effort. My high point in high school was literature. I actually did it twice in the last year to avoid doing the science. Again, the thing that has helped me in university is courses where there are no exams.

S6 had just graduated from university with honours in geophysics when the interview took place. He became employed shortly after graduation as a geophysicist. In school he had experienced difficulty in school because of his learning disability. **S6** responded to the question, "Can you explain your disability to others?" as follows:

> It's very important for me to know who I am and what I want to do. It's also important for me to be aware of my limitations. I guess everyone has strengths and weaknesses. My weakness happens to be in reading and writing. Most of my difficulties are in spelling. I have a lot of problems with pronunciation of words. I say one word for another and I honestly don't know if I saw it like that or what. When it comes to math and science I have no problem. But I am a very slow reader. The spelling is still really difficult. I avoid it as much as I can. Not avoid it, but work around it so that people don't notice. That's my biggest difficulty, definitely, getting my ideas on paper. The same weaknesses are still there as I always had. I'm not able to sound out using phonics. Even with all that time trying to remediate, I'm still the same. My strengths are my good memory and personality skills. I use them to my advantage. I was not afraid to ask questions. I'm pretty enthusiastic, aggressive. I don't mind asking questions if I don't understand something. I'll ask right away, get it resolved. I think when you are born with dyslexia something is taken from you. But you're not so bad because you use what you have and learn to cope with it. I look the same as everybody else.

When he was asked, "Do you feel comfortable talking about your disability?", **S6** responded:

> I can't even describe my disability. Like the psychologist who couldn't give me a term to use. I was never given a term like dyslexia or anything like that. When I talked to the psychologist about that, he said those are terms they don't like to use anymore. Those terms sort of restrict people or they put them in a category. That's not what should be done. That's really what I needed. It's hard. If someone had taken me at an early age and given me the right way to describe it, I would have been better prepared. Like, when I used to go and see my profs, I still didn't have a grip on that. I just didn't have the preparation.

Public Awareness

Of the six students interviewed, four of them expressed the need for more public awareness in the area of learning disabilities. **S1** expressed his concern that individual teachers in the school system do not have enough understanding: "The only way I got through high school was my close network of friends. The majority of teachers didn't have enough understanding of my problem to give me the support I needed."

S3 expressed the importance of being aware at an early age: "Awareness is important. I wonder how many teachers know about learning disabilities. You got to know more about it when you are young."

S4 expressed his frustration for not having been diagnosed at an early age with a learning disability:

> There needs to be more education in the schools. They need to take these kids and show them some videos on learning disabilities. Then they would get the message that there is hope for them. There was none of that for me. That's why I am doing this interview. If I can do anything for kids like me, I'll do it. I know a lot more has to be done in the schools. There is nothing there. At least for me there was nothing there. I can see all the kids dropping out that have the same problems, or getting into trouble.

Even though **S6** had graduated successfully, he realized that many of the frustrations he experienced may have been the result of lack of awareness:

> Some professors, especially English, just don't understand. I don't think they really understood my learning disability while I was here either. The Blundon Centre was really great and all. They did a lot for me. But I don't think they had the full training in that field, to fully understand it. Each person with a learning disability is an individual with different needs. But they sort of treat learning disabilities as a sort of a whole. They basically said a two-hour extra time limit is usually what learning-disabled students get to complete exams. But I had different needs. I needed a lot more time for the language exams. The two hours extra just was not enough for me.

Theme Two: Advocacy

Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy for college students with learning disabilities is seen as an important strategy that needs to be learned, in order for these students to have success. None of these students received instruction in becoming a self-advocate. However, all of them worked at being advocates in their own way. **S1** responded to the following question, "Do you feel you are a good advocate for yourself?" as follows:

> As a result of being involved in music for many years, I became accustomed to performing in public. This contributed to my ability to speak up. You have to be a good advocate in order to succeed. Others who don't have this opportunity need to have some kind of training.

S1 never received any training in the area of self-advocacy skills. He responded to the second question, "Did you receive instruction in learning to self-advocate before attending post-secondary education?" by stating:

> I never received any training in school. My mom helped me from an early age. I did not know what dyslexia was until I was in grade seven. I knew there was something wrong. I never had any formal teaching of self-advocacy skills. I watched my parents. There was no such course as self-advocacy 1001, unfortunately. I think there is a need for it. I kind of taught myself along the way with my parents' help. They helped me know that I had a problem and that this problem could be easily coped with by having some concessions allowed.

With respect to the question, "Do you feel you can learn this skill independently?" **S1** responded:

> I basically learned how to self-advocate out of necessity when I was in high school. My high school years were rough actually – in the way of getting help. It prepared me for this. I have no problem asking for what I want; a self-advocate, I guess.

S2 had completed his one year of post-secondary successfully but did not understand what the word "self-advocacy" meant. This lack of understanding showed when he was asked if he was a good advocate for himself, and he responded:

> A self-advocate? I've never heard it put like that before. But the Centre for Students with Disabilities seemed to do it all for me here. I didn't have to do much.

When he was asked if he felt there is a need for training in this area, **S2** was quick to reply:

> Oh, God, yes. Like if I didn't have Mom, I never would have gotten through high school. She had to push for me. When I went to see the principal to talk about my dyslexia, he didn't even know anything about it. So my mom made an appointment to go see him. Once he read over the documentation, he had a better idea of what I needed to have happen.

S2 felt that he was a good self-advocate in high school without even having heard the term before. When asked, "Can you describe specific times when you were able to self-advocate?" he answered:

> I did keep telling people though, especially in high school. I would tell teachers what I needed in order to graduate. I was the very first person in my high school to get oral testing. After me there were about five or six learning disabled students who asked for it. They came to me actually. Again it was because of the Center I went to in grade four--that helped me and another student that went there. We both got help after that.

S2 felt that he had received some assistance in becoming a self-advocate once he reflected on his school years. At the same time, he felt his personality helped him ask for what he felt he needed. When asked, "Did you receive any training in the area of becoming a self-advocate?" he responded:

> I guess in a way I did get help while at the Centre --- with learning about what I need to do to get help. Well, I was a spiteful little kid. I was a bit of a procrastinator. Well, I did half decent in high school except for English. I was concerned that if I wanted to go to university, I wouldn't be able because of my English mark. When I went to do my exam, they told me I couldn't do it orally. A person from the Department of Education actually said it was not allowed. They said in order to do an English exam at the high school level it had to be written. I couldn't write. A lot of the words I spelled were wrong. So if I was marked down

> for poor spelling, I knew I'd fail. So the man from the Department said I could get a pass – 50 percent, if I didn't write it. But that was all he could do for me. I did everything to try and meet with him. My mom kicked up a fuss. I never got to meet with him. I tried to make a difference, especially for others who would have to go through the same thing to graduate.

S3 felt that being a good self-advocate was essential to success. When asked, "Do you feel you are a good advocate?" she responded:

> I try to be a self-advocate. As a result of being president of the Disabilities Organization, I have become more of an advocate. Before that, I just didn't have the nerve, I guess. But now I realize if I don't do it, then maybe no one will.

S3 felt that she had received a little training in the area of advocacy while in high school. However, she felt training was needed to prepare her for post-secondary:

> There's nothing here at this university. I didn't get any seminars or anything like that on self-advocacy. I got a little in high school. There were a couple of teachers who had me speak in class. They saw me as being very vocal about my learning disability. I'm pretty open to teach others. I don't want someone else to go through what I went through. At high school I had to become a good self-advocate. But that's not good enough when you are talking about post-secondary and government officials.

When **S3** was asked if it was possible to learn this skill independently, she felt that her experiences helped her as an individual and also assisted her in helping others:

> I think things that you've done that have helped you to realize that they've helped you, may help somebody else. Another person may have learned something that you may never have even thought about, that they may be able to help you with. I think peer teaching would be the thing. Others who have found what works can tell others – something you may not have heard of or thought about. Because of my learning disability I realize there are certain things you have to do to get help. You can when you want to. I kind of feel that it can be learned independently by certain people. Often people may be too shy. Shyness, I would say, is one of the biggest factors. Also, self-confidence is important. The more confidence you have the better. I found the Organization to be a great place to talk about your problems and stuff.

Overall, **S3** felt that self-advocacy skills can be learned. In response to the question, "Can you describe specific times when you were able to self-advocate?" she felt that there was a certain approach that worked for her at the post-secondary level:

> Being a self-advocate for me, is basically letting the prof know that take home exams are best for me. I went to the head of the Religious Studies Faculty and I basically told him that I wanted to try something that they were probably not going to agree with. I explained how I wouldn't have to worry about time and I could concentrate on the grammar. It could even be a different exam than everyone else. He agreed as long as I didn't use a word processor. He preferred I got a parent to edit it. I got a 70 percent instead of the 50 percent I got before.

S4 did not feel he was a good advocate and felt that many of the problems he was experiencing at the post-secondary stemmed from the fact that he had no training in this area:

> I don't know. It's hard to face someone who doesn't really understand learning disabilities. I don't feel like arguing. I really didn't think I was overly bright before I got here. I was pretty good at hiding it then. Like, none of my friends would ever know. So I guess I need the confidence. I don't care any more. I tell them now I can't write. I don't feel ashamed any more.

Not having been taught how to become a self-advocate, **S4** had difficulty approaching professors and explaining his disability. When he did, he felt it was still no use:

> The paper says I should not be penalized for grammar, spelling, or stuff like that. It was on paper, right there, and it was handed to her. Actually it was put under her door. I put it there. But it was coming from the Centre for Students with Disabilities. It was going to be sent to her. But I decided to deliver it myself. And it wasn't even noticed. This is what I mean about the lack of education in learning disabilities. I approached her and I tried to go for it. I told her it was on paper – what I needed. She was like – I can only correct what you put down. She killed me in grammar. No one really ever prepared me for anything. So I try to adjust and talk to them. But they don't really want to read the information about me. You tell them about the documentation but they don't care.

This same student, **S4**, graphically expressed his opinion that there is need for teaching in this area.

> I think direct teaching of self-advocacy skills would help if you could get it, but there's only so many things they can teach you. Oh, definitely, there needs to be teaching in this area. You've got to have strategies, a better way to talk about it. You need to know your learning disability and be able to talk about it. It's always good to learn how to do that better. Every day is like a race. Imagine if you were

> blind, and someone challenged you to run up the stairs. That's what it is like every day.

When asked if there is a need in our school system to teach students how to self-advocate, **S5** responded:

> Maybe to say that I learned it on my own is a bit of an exaggeration. I went through leadership programs here through Student Development. So I think there are programs available to students there.

S5 felt that he was a good self-advocate and had no trouble being a self-advocate when he needed to be:

> Like, generally, my first thing when I register, I try to get the professor to know my name and face. Some people say it doesn't make a difference, but it does for me. Once the prof knows your face, it is easy to do well. The prof is the main person to help you understand the course and direct you toward resources that are available. Even though I never heard it said like that, I think I have been able to do it. Through the jigs and the reels, I learned to speak up for myself. Yes, I learned myself--going to the profs and asking the Centre. I suppose that's self-advocacy, and I think generally self-promotion, definitely. I ran for council. That was a character-building experience.

One student, **S6**, managed to graduate from university without knowing what the term self-advocacy meant. In response to whether or not he felt he was a good advocate for himself, **S6** responded:

> Yah, like in junior high and high school, my parents helped me along. In high school I started to do a little more for myself. My parents tried to back off a bit so that I would become independent and take care of myself.

S6 did not receive any training in the area of advocacy skills and felt his parents were responsible for teaching him. He recounted that, "They basically told me I had to fight for myself and raise my own issues." **S6** had difficulty advocating at times, especially when completing language courses:

> I found the Language Department really hard to deal with. I had to do two language courses, even though I was in the science area. My poor grammar and poor spelling--that was a big deal for them. I really had to push those issues so that they could understand. My first semester I had three A's and a 35 percent in English. I had a lot of problems with the professor who just didn't understand

> learning disabilities. But other than that, I found getting involved really helped me. I did lots of volunteer work--sat on the Mayor's Advisory Committee. I used to give help to the people at the Centre for Students with Disabilities. If there were any new students on campus with learning disabilities, I'd talk to them if they needed someone to talk to.

Self-Determination

In the literature self-determination is a related term that is often used almost interchangeably with self-advocacy. Self-determination is emerging as a priority in the transition movement. It refers to individuals with learning disabilities learning to make choices, to set goals regarding their lives and the services they receive, and to initiate actions to achieve those goals (Browning et al., 1993). Achieving personal goals in an academic setting while experiencing a learning disability demands much hard work (Reis et al., 1997). Four of the six students interviewed referred to self-determination and hard work when discussing their self-advocacy skills. **S3** felt that being determined was her biggest asset to being able to self-advocate:

> You have to have determination to look a prof in the eye and say that you are no more than I am. I basically take the attitude that I'm no different than anyone else, except I have to overcome a lot of stuff that others don't. You have to have a high level of self-determination. Without it you're just not going to be able to do it. Determination is what causes anybody to keep going. Especially when you hit a hurdle. You have to have determination to go on after you've had that hurdle. Self-determination helps you find a way around that hurdle. Meet the prof face to face --this takes self-determination. I guess being a self-advocate and being self-determined helps when dealing with teachers. They see a picture of worry and determination when they meet you face to face. They'll see that this person really wants to do this in my course; so they take that into consideration when grading you. A lot of them will come up to you later and ask you if they can help in any way. I see a lot of people with learning disabilities who won't speak to the prof themselves because they feel they don't have the vocabulary. They'll call them but they won't speak to them in person.

S4 expressed the belief that determination was an important factor which kept him

going:

> I'm pretty determined. I'm not one to quit or give up. The only support I had was my girlfriend who helped me with English in high school. I've read some stuff myself and the main thing is that there are determined, successful learning disabled students and they don't give up. They're successful at business. They're so used to getting doors slapped in their face, and there is only so much you can take. If I was going to give up it would have been in high school. I just wouldn't quit. I wanted to keep on going. I knew I could do it. It was like a roller coaster ride. One day I'd be right down and mad with everything. And then a few days later I'd say, no, let's not go there. I can do this. I just wasn't going to give up.

S6 felt that determination went hand-in-hand with hard work and was necessary in order to have success:

> Aside from the supports, you have to be really determined. Looking back now I can really see that determination and hard work rather than overcoming the learning disability is what it is all about.

Theme Three: Supports

Significant others

Case studies of high-ability students who have achieved success even though they have learning disabilities report that another person such as a friend, fiancé(e), or faculty member was most helpful to them (Reis, et al., 1997). All of the six students interviewed referred to significant others when discussing supports that helped them have success. When asked if he received supports at university, S1 responded:

> One reason why I credit getting as far as I got is because of my mom and dad. The hours they put into me I am internally grateful to them. I can't remember a time ever feeling embarrassed about my problems. I survive on a close network of friends. I am in a Society, The Society of Creative Anachronisms. There's a lot of people from different academic backgrounds. There are two math majors. I ask them for help every day. There are English majors who give me a hand with my writing as well. Even today I survive on my close network of friends.

S2 felt that he was successful because of the support he received from his mother.

He described this support as follows:

> Oh my God, my mom was the main support. I never would have gotten through school without her. She would always stay on top of me and my schoolwork. Every time I needed to complete a project for school, she helped me do the research at the library and helped me with the notes. I'd spend hours with her showing me what I had to do and she would help me get it all down.

S3 felt that friends and parents were vitally important. She expressed the support this way:

> I think that friends are a big key. They help you relax. I find great support in that. And you know we just support each other in a lot of things. I spend a lot of time helping others. I realize I got it really good alongside other people. It kind of gives you gumption to go on. You realize you've got something another person doesn't have. I get peer support for some of my problems, mainly writing. It helps to have somebody who is completing post-secondary education in order to be able to understand you a bit better. A lot has to do with parents. After you've hit one of those hurdles to go on, they remind you of your accomplishments. Even though you've hit a hurdle they push you on. They see the struggle. Profs don't see that. At home you let your guard down. You put forth a different face at the time.

S4 received support from his girlfriend, beginning in high school. He showed his gratitude for her support by saying:

> My girlfriend is a big help. I write stuff down, and she refines it for me basically. She has been doing that since high school. When I write something down, she'll go back and critique it, kind of thing.

S5, who considered his parents and friends to be his main supports, talked about the support he received:

> My parents have been very supportive. They were there all the way through school. They gave me lots of support in the early years. They really stressed a good education. One thing I do have here that I didn't have before is a network of support from other students. I have support from so many who help me when I need it. My friends are always there for me. I didn't have that in high school. One thing I have learned in university is that the social and the academic are intertwined. I have been volunteering with orientation and other volunteer groups. I credit my success here at the post-secondary to getting involved.

S6 graduated from the post-secondary level and credits his success to the support he received from his girlfriend:

> In school my mom was always there for me. When I came here I became more independent. If it wasn't for my girlfriend I wouldn't have finished my honours degree in geophysics. She spent so many hours going through my papers, editing them for me. Every paper I ever handed in she proof - read for me. Without that support I don't think I'd be where I am today.

Faculty Support

There were mixed feelings about the supports given by faculty. Two of the six students interviewed had experienced no difficulty with receiving faculty support. Four of the students felt that the amount of support provided by some of the faculty at the post-secondary level was not sufficient for their needs.

S1 praised the professors saying they were quite supportive:

> The majority of profs bent over backwards. If there is a problem they just need to see the document from the psychologist that states that you have a learning disability. I had a couple of profs who took time out of their schedule and sat down with me to write a test rather than use a scribe from the Centre. The prof basically hand wrote my test for me during a lab period. The older profs seem to be more supportive.

S2 seemed to think the supports he received while attending post-secondary were sufficient; he had no difficulty dealing with the professors:

> The Centre for Students with Disabilities gave me a form with all the information on it, and a scribe was provided for every course during exam time and tests. The professors didn't mind doing this for me. Not one of them disagreed with it. It's because of this I am coming back.

S3 had mixed feelings. Some of the professors were not supportive while others were highly supportive:

> One prof felt that it wouldn't be fair to other students if I used a processor to do my take-home exam. It's hard to understand. What I tried to explain to him was that they already had an advantage over me. They didn't even make it known that a taped exam was possible. I found out from peer group, that one guy was doing taped exams. I think sometimes too, the faculty members are afraid to step on

> each other's toes. I help the professors here realize that I need extra time for tests. A couple of them have said no. Some have asked why I need it. Then I tell them. Most of them have said yes.

S4 felt defeated as he struggled. He felt the professors were not aware of learning disabilities and tended to penalise him on account of his disability with language:

> Marks are deducted for grammar. My teacher failed me on the grammar in my last test. It's not her fault, but I think there needs to be more education in the area of learning disabilities at the post-secondary level. I just can't argue anymore. It was all put on paper and sent to the prof not to mark me down for grammar but I don't know.

Even though **S5** did receive support from some of the professors, he demonstrated that this was not always the case:

> I had profs who were very strict about the amount of time. The main support I need is for testing. They didn't think there was any need for me to have any extra time. So, for example, I needed double the time you would need for a math equation--just to get things straight in my head and then on paper. There was some question about my needing double time. I had to go to the psychologist who assessed my learning disability and have him put in writing that I needed double time. There has to be a relationship between the prof and the student. Depending on the prof, it determines how much time I get. I try to shoot for the courses with the best professor, the one who enjoys teaching. The prof who gave me an 85 percent--he was a joy to watch. Oh, what a great lecturer. Deadlines are a factor with professors but this prof is definitely okay with not having things in on time. He would meet with students for an hour, chat about ideas discussed in class and what you were trying to get down on paper. A lot is contingent on the prof. If you get a prof who is willing to bend over backwards for a student, well, of course, it goes a lot smoother.

S6 did not always receive the support he needed and experienced difficulty when dealing with some of the other professors: In some cases, though, support and understanding were there. He describes the struggle:

> Profs don't like it when the Centre calls. But it looks more powerful when you have the Centre behind you. I did have one prof who said I had to prove the fact that I needed it, the extra time. Then, I've had profs who didn't want to fill out any forms. They didn't care how much extra time I needed. They gave me as much time as I needed. Even though I was in science, I had to do two language courses. I found that department extremely difficult to deal with. Especially with

> my poor grammar and poor spelling. The English professor just didn't understand my learning disability. I got 35 percent in language and A's in all the other courses. I've had profs come to me before exams and remind me that I don't have all my papers done. They remind me that I should get it done. There were a few profs I had some difficulty with. They just couldn't understand why I couldn't spell words correctly. In terms of support, faculty support was not always there. I think a lot of times if the supports are not to do with faculty, they are available.

Technology

The use of technology is referenced in the literature as a necessary support for post-secondary students with learning disabilities. For some of the students proper technology was easy to access. Others found that they did not always have access to the kind of technology needed to complete their work.

S3 stated that she did not always have the technological supports she needed to have success. The professors were not always open to the use of technology:

> Students hide their laptops because the profs are afraid of copyright of their lectures. A lot of the profs use the same exams year after year. They think there is something different about hand-written, recorded, and type-written stuff. Profs don't like students using tape recorders. I've had professors tell me that I wrote an "A" paper but, because of the spelling and grammar mistakes, they couldn't give me an "A." Now if I had the use of proper technology that wouldn't happen.

S4 said that he was comfortable with the supports he received since he came to university:

> It's a huge improvement over anything I've ever had. I get my own room during a test. It's quiet. I get extra time. I get access to a computer.

S6 did not always need access to technology and was comfortable with the supports he received. He graduated from university without ever having access to oral testing or tape recorders. He saw access to more supports as being unfair to the other students:

> I don't use a word processor for exams. It would slow me down. For papers, I always use a computer. Using a computer is a big help. Spell checkers got me

> through high school. I don't know how to spell. You know, talking about this now makes me see that the use of a tape recorder and oral exams may have helped me get my degree. That's the thing, you know. This kind of discussion didn't happen. It's a difficult issue. Here you are in class with all these other people. The prof lets you stay and get more time. You get to finish your exam. Like, I wouldn't abuse it. I would sort of get rid of the exam as fast as I could. It sort of has to be initiated by you--like you have to draw the line. What's fair?

Centre for Students with Disabilities

Two of the students interviewed felt comfortable with the supports provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities. **S1** felt that he would not have been able to attend post-secondary if it were not for the supports he received from this Centre:

> They actually tell you to get in touch with the prof. They basically encourage you to do it on your own. They tell you to get in touch with everyone who is involved in teaching the course, lab instructors as well. You have to get to know them. Don't be just another name, so that when exam time comes around they sort of know your face. I feel comfortable going to the Centre if I run into problems. They provide a great service. They actually step in and give you a hand if you can't get the extra time. That's a great service they provide. It's kind of amazing really that I am completing my third year and I'm unable to read and write. I need someone to read tests to me and a scribe, someone to write the long answers. The Centre provides these supports for you. If that Centre was not in place here, I wouldn't be going there. That is a simple fact. If I didn't have allowances in testing, I wouldn't be able to pass any of the courses. I consider myself illiterate to be honest. I can't write at all. I can't spell. I have a high intelligence but these problems linger.

For the two semesters that **S2** attended post-secondary, he considered the supports provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities to be sufficient for achieving success. He attributes his discontinuing studies at the post-secondary level to reasons other than lack of supports. He spoke at some length about the situation:

> I actually did okay in university because I was allowed a scribe. The Centre arranged to have my exam brought to the Centre. Then I was given a scribe and my exams were scribed for me. Without that, I wouldn't be able to make it. Also, I was okay with take-home assignments because of the word processor. I figured I was going to have to fight to get oral exams. When I went to the Centre, I couldn't believe it. Someone told me about it actually. I couldn't believe the

> knowledge the lady there had about my problems. She read all the information before she met me. I passed in the information, instead of me having to explain everything. She gave me a form with all the information on it, and a scribe was provided for every course during exam time and tests. The professors didn't mind doing this for me. Not one professor disagreed. It blew me away. I couldn't believe there was no need to fight for anything. We have this, and this, and this. All the books were on audio. I couldn't believe it, the exact words that were in the books. It was all pretty much handed to me. I was set up better than I could ever ask for. I do admit that I didn't put all my effort into it. I realize now and that's why I plan to go back and do correspondence courses. I'll still be able to use the service.

S3 felt that she had to fit into a mold and be satisfied with the same supports as everyone else rather than being seen as an individual who was different from other students:

> I get time and a half. I've requested a scribe. Where it takes one person a couple of minutes to read something, I may have to read it over twice to grasp what is going on. Hopefully next semester I'll be doing taped exams. I'm getting docked for spelling and grammar, and it is something I can't help. I'm going to go to the prof and ask for taped exams or go back to take-home exams. If I don't do it, it is not going to be done because ... I'm not saying there is anything wrong with the Centre but they have certain rules that they have to follow. They like for everybody to be in the same mold. They expect everybody to get scribes and readers. So, if I want something different, I have go do it myself or else it won't get done. If I don't approach a prof myself and ask for taped exams, it won't be done.

Aside from the academic supports provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities, **S4** expressed a desire to meet others with learning disabilities. He felt having access to others who are experiencing the same difficulties with learning would help him. This student who is struggling with his language courses does not feel the supports he is getting are sufficient to bring about success:

> I get extra time and it's quiet there, the place I write my exams in the Centre. The extra time and quiet is an improvement. I get the words I want to get down. A computer and some extra time really helps. I think I would really like to meet others like me. I see people that I sort of wonder about. I don't think I know anyone personally. I'm probably wrong about that. There are probably all kinds of people out there. There's, sort of, like--this confidentiality about it all. I get to do my tests in a room at the Centre. It's okay except for English. I just don't get

> enough time. I only get time and a half. There's a lot of pressure on myself. It's a lot of anxiety. I like to do it by myself. That's why I don't want a scribe. Well, see, there's a big downfall, I can't explain about here but it needs to be worked out. I can go home and do my own work. My girlfriend will critique it for me. But when I'm in exams, I can't critique my own work.

S5 became less dependent on the supports offered by the Centre for Students with Disabilities as he progressed in his studies. He explained that the supports were there for him if he needed them:

> The Centre provides you with keyboards and extra time. The first term, they send letters out to profs. I get by more on my own now. In the beginning I needed a lot of help from them. I needed more. Once you have a report from a psychologist stating that you have a learning disability and what you need, you're pretty much able to be on your own.

S6 stated that there was a lack at awareness at the post-secondary level in the area of learning disabilities and, therefore, each individual student's needs were not being met. Even though he had graduated with reasonable success, he believed he did not receive the supports he needed:

> In some ways I don't the university really understood my learning disability either. It would have made so much sense to sit down with me and let me have as much time as I needed. I mean, when the time comes for me to write an exam, like that, I can't put a time limit on it. That's what they want. I don't know how long it is going to take me. There are days when I have extremely good days. There are bad days too. I find some days I can spell. It depends on my mood, how I feel, and how nervous I am. I had extra time in a separate room. I never did have oral exams, which might have been good for me. Profs don't like students using tape recorders, especially when they see you can do it already without it. Boy, if they only knew what went into getting it done. I do my best when I write it and then put it on the computer. But I didn't have a computer. I didn't use a tape recorder either. It could have been good or bad. I forget stuff. As soon as someone says something, I understand. When they leave, I forget everything. A tape recorder would have helped that, I guess. I look back now and I'm sort of sorry I didn't do my exams orally. Actually in earth science I did fairly well. I was a high B and I was getting 90's in math. When I had five labs, five courses, that's when my mark dropped in earth science. I knew the stuff but had trouble getting it all on paper. I always just wrote. If I used a computer and had to spell check, I'd be there for days. They just let me write it and tried to make as much sense out of it as they could. The Centre kind of don't do much for us. I have all the documentation explaining my disability. A lot of times in the beginning of each semester either

> I'll go to the Centre or I'll go to the prof and do it myself. I help them realize that I need extra time for tests. The Centre don't push it on you but they encourage the student to do it, to ask for supports. At least the Centre makes your learning disability official. It looks more powerful when you have the stamp from them.

Many of the supports needed for learning-disabled students to achieve success at the post-secondary level are available on demand. Students have to make arrangements and request supports at different times in order to obtain them. Students who feel comfortable asking for supports decide when supports are needed.

In response to whether or not he felt comfortable requesting supports, **S1** responded:

> I'm comfortable speaking up and asking for supports. I feel I have the confidence to do that. Being involved in music all those years helped me a lot. You need to find yourself in university. I think personally it is a good place.

S2 was not sure if, on his own, he would be able to request supports. For the two semesters he completed at the post-secondary level, he did not have to ask for such supports. They were there for him from the beginning:

> I don't know if I would be able to do it on my own. I never really had to do it. The Centre is so well set up and everything. If I had to do it on my own, I don't know.

S3 seemed quite comfortable asking for supports and expressed that she was also at ease in speaking up:

> If I don't do it, it's not going to be done. I've seen a lot of people with learning disabilities who won't speak up for themselves because they don't have the vocabulary to explain their disability. The students will call them, but they won't speak to them in person. I have no problem meeting the professor face-to-face.

S4 who did not feel he was getting the supports he needed was not comfortable asking for supports. He spoke about the problem:

> I feel a little bit intimidated here. I'm sure, if I had gotten the supports I needed in high school, I'd have more confidence now in asking for what I need. All my needs were written down, and I put it under her door. I think it would be better for me to meet the prof one-on-one. I don't know. I was thinking for the past two days that I have this final in-class paper coming up. I am going to have to say, like, talk about it myself. I am going to have to tell her, like, this information for

> the supports I need is on paper: a computer, extra time, quiet area, not be penalised for spelling and grammar mistakes--stuff like that. I want to tell her I have potential and that this is my situation and explain and see how it goes. It's hard to go to someone's office and be forceful and say I need this and this and this. You know, to tell the prof how to teach the course--that is a difficult thing. I'm doing an English course this term and it's like peeling the skin off my arm. I have got to do it. I got 70 percent on the last one. The reason I did so good was because I got to take it home and was able to put extra time into it. Even with supports I find I'm really behind. English is the killer. My girlfriend is my main support there.

S5 had no difficulty obtaining supports and said that he was comfortable asking for the supports if he needed them:

> Fortunately, I feel comfortable speaking up and asking for supports, going to the Centre. I have no trouble approaching professors, getting him or her to know my name and face. At the beginning of each term I will let the Centre know that I want a certain professor to receive documentation of my learning disability. I would say that for 75 percent of my courses since I've been here. Generally it is for the testing courses where I know I'm going to need help.

S6 who was not sure of the supports he needed, did not always know what to ask for. As a result he graduated from the post-secondary level having received very few supports:

> It wasn't that I didn't feel comfortable, I didn't know sometimes if I needed it—like, oral exams—like, gathering your ideas and stuff. It's more of a conversation when you get in there. I think it would have been harder for the professor to mark you then too. You know, other people might be jealous over the fact that you get more time; so, for that reason, I didn't think it was fair. Like, why do I get extra time and they don't? So I mean, I don't know. That was probably wrong on my part, to think like that. I didn't feel comfortable asking for them, but I knew I needed them, like, I wouldn't abuse it. Like, I'd get rid of the exam as fast as I could--wouldn't even check it over.

Theme Four: Control and Hard Work

The literature considers control to be the key to success for adults with learning disabilities (Spekman et al., 1993). Often the level of awareness a student has about the disability determines how much control he or she is able to obtain (Gerber et al., 1992). Students have different ways of demonstrating control. Students were asked if they were able to take control here at the post-secondary level. **S1** felt very much in control:

> When I got to post-secondary it was totally in my control. Before I knew I had dyslexia, things felt out of control. I know what I need. I know that I can get it. You need to assert yourself and know yourself really well. I know I can go to any prof and, if I run into a problem, I look back at my experience in high school. I take control by letting the person know that he is totally in charge. You can't come on too strong. You need to be diplomatic. The first thing you have to realize is that the prof hasn't even heard of dyslexia. It's important to get personal. Once I had a literature prof who I figured was a bookworm. I asked her what it would be like for her not to be able to read. From that day on I had the support of that prof. She couldn't believe that. She spent a minute in my shoes. She couldn't even comprehend that fact--that she would not be able to read. That kind of communication works well for me.

S2 stated that he had more control at the post-secondary level than he had experienced in the past:

> I feel I have more control here than I did in high school. I've decided to do correspondence courses because I know I'll have more control that way.

S3, who felt she had control, saw that control as a necessary aspect for the achievement of success:

> Without having control at this level, I don't say you'd make it. I take full control of all situations here. I have no trouble taking control. If you don't push it yourself, other people won't try to do it. They'll try to do what they think is best for you, but you have to tell them what you know is best. A lot of times you have to step on a few toes to do that. You have to realize that no one is any more important than you. It's important to realize that you don't have to earn these things. You deserve them.

S4, who is struggling with the language courses, is having difficulty taking

control of the situation. He feels isolated from anyone else who may be having this problem. Confidentiality at the Centre for Students with Disabilities prevents him from meeting others with learning disabilities. That he feels isolated and does not know how to take control he explains in this way:

> I think I've taken control and just tried to survive. I took the risk of coming here. I'm willing to do anything. I don't mind rattling cages after what I've been through. I've got to keep trying and not let this thing get to me. If a blind student can do it, I can do it. They can look at him and see he's disabled. Mine is not so obvious. I figure it was not so long ago that no one knew anything about the whole area of learning disabilities. You were just considered stupid.

S5 connects his ability to take control with his being able to choose his own courses:

> Just being able to pick my own courses gives me control. I have avoided math courses for five years. I think it's easier to have control at the post-secondary level. It's easier to have a niche. You have control over what courses you're going to do. You have so many people to work with--it's easier to get involved.

S5 agreed that it was necessary to take control. Without it he would not have been able to have success. He stated, "You have to have control because without it you're just going to fizzle out and give up. So you have to have control over yourself." He further added:

> I try to shoot for the course with no exams and the course with the best prof. Things were definitely out of control for me in high school. You felt small there not being a part of the group, feeling ostracized from the social environment. You don't have the external resources; at least I didn't, to build myself up. So in that case it was difficult for me to have control because I don't think I was part of the environment. I was sort of away from the social gatherings and what not. Whereas here at university, I have just found it so easy. I ran for council. That was a character-building experience for me. I've had so much experience with different clubs and societies over the last five years. Getting involved was definitely an important factor.

S6 explained he was able to take control by making himself visible to the professors and showing interest:

> I had to show the prof I was interested. You know I was always the guy up front

> with a smile on my face. I wanted him to know that I was interested in doing well but that he had to change his format a little bit to accommodate me. The Centre for Students with Disabilities helped me from the beginning to gain control. That was the first thing they told me--that I was the one controlling the situation. They weren't going to hold my hand. I had to make the first move with the prof. If I didn't I wouldn't get help. You need another person controlling the situation for you when you are young. But when you get older and you know exactly what's wrong and what you need to get where you're going, then it's easy to take control.

Having graduated with honours, **S6** did not feel that he had gained control in having enough time to write his language exams. He felt gaining control was important for success:

> I think it is extremely important to have the ability to explain what you need. That comes down to understanding yourself and what you need. Sometimes it is hard to figure out. When you ask a prof for extra time and they ask you how much, it's very difficult to say 'I need two extra hours and then I'll be finished.' They want to be in control. Even at the Centre when they asked me what I needed ... You know, I sort of had to think about what I needed. When it came to language courses, I didn't feel I had that control. She dictated to me the way she wanted it done. I probably didn't even deserve the 35 percent. I didn't get the exam finished. So I think having control over these situations is extremely important. When you don't have it, the results can be bad for you. When you can control your environment and tell others what you need--that's a good situation. I eventually got through language with a 55 percent. I think the prof realized I only needed it to get on with what I really wanted to do.

An important sub-theme that became evident during the probing on the theme of control was the role hard work played in achieving academic success. Three participants saw exerting control as closely tied to hard work. **S6** felt that having success at the post-secondary level without having oral exams to compensate for his writing and reading weakness, amounted to a lot of hard work:

> Even though I knew everything for the exam, I'd keep studying. I just basically had to have it so deep in my head that it almost came out as soon as the exam was there. I knew exactly what the questions were. It has been a lot of hard work. I was here every morning until one o'clock. I took one night off a week. I used to be stomach sick when I'd have to write something. I was given the message that I had to do it all. So much of my energy went into the writing. It took me five hours to go through the second chapter of my honours paper using a spell checker. I used to write by hand first and then I'd put it on the computer. I never did do six

> courses. I did five one term. It was pretty hectic. It all depends on what courses I am doing. If you put an English course in there, that doubles the work. You've got to be writing papers all the time and that consumes all my time. My first year here, I had to put all my energy into two courses that required a lot of writing. I had no time for study courses. I wouldn't give up on my writing courses. I wanted to make it. I only got a 65 percent. I was super happy with that. I failed a study course and got 45 percent.

S3 spoke about over-learning as a contributor to her success when she was completing exams with a scribe. This over-learning meant that she did not need as much time:

> Final exams are supposed to take you at least two hours. I was finished one exam with a scribe in less than an hour. I had known the material so well that I was just waiting to do it, knowing exactly what to say, to get it out of my head. If I had done it with a tape I wouldn't have taken as long because I had to wait for the scribe to be able to write down my thoughts. A lot of times you have to stop talking and wait for the scribe to write down my thoughts. A lot of times they don't read it back to you until the end, and then they ask you if that was your thought. So that's really hard to try and go back and think if it was the point you were trying to make.

S5 listed motivation and organization as two of the factors contributing to his success:

> Motivation is very important. I try to challenge myself, try to set goals--what I want to do and how I want to do it. Time management is very important to me. It's only recently I discovered a day planner. I took a study course, and it stressed the importance of this. I keep a daily track of my hours. It helps a lot. The way I get information is by writing things out. Just looking at it doesn't work.

Other Emergent Themes

High School.

A strong theme, almost a plea, permeated the conversations with the post-secondary students with learning disabilities--the unfairness of the public school system.

The weakness is ingrained in many pages of the interview transcripts. The students have suffered and struggled. Each and every student spoke about their high school experiences and how they managed to overcome the difficulties. Five out of the six students spoke of how their struggles in high school and their ability to overcome them had contributed to their success later. **S1** refers to the emotional scarring and how the bad experiences contributed to his need to have success:

> The emotional scarring you get when you have a learning disability--I remember having a lot of anxiety and hatred towards language. You can imagine if English is difficult, how hard French is going to be. I wanted to learn French but memorizing has never been my strength. However, I want to prove to myself that I can do it here. My last year in high school I had a midterm in a literature course, which was basically testing the writing ability of the students. Again, I can't write; so, it was kind of redundant in a way--a student can't write, but he is going to write anyway and be evaluated. I had an agreement all year where I would take my assignments home and get them typed with my father's help. Then I'd pass them in a day late. There would be no penalty for passing them in late. When the test was an in-class test, I would take it outside the class and recite the long answers on tape. It came down to it that the school wouldn't allow me to use the tape recorder for the final exam. I basically decided I could not write this test. I then called the department head down to hear my plight. She basically said her hands were tied. They couldn't really let me do this. It went a little deeper than the school. I finally said I could not write this test. My average was 80 percent and I knew I would fail this test. When my parents and I went to the principal, he was amazed that I had these problems. He didn't have a clue about dyslexia--whether or not it was fit to eat. So things have probably changed a bit now. Finally I had to go to the board, and I was allowed to use the tape recorder. I got 75 percent.

S2 spoke of his feelings of hopelessness because no one understood him and everyone just considered him lazy. **S2**, who did not attend post-secondary immediately following high school, felt his bad experiences in high school had kept him from attending. However, in the long run, his high school struggle was the motivator for him; he wanted to prove that he could succeed:

> I think dyslexic people just fall into the category of being lazy. They are just ridiculed for so long. They just give up because it gets so hard. Everyone expects them to do what is the hardest every day of their lives, like read and write. You just get tired.

S4 felt that being put down in high school had the strange effect of encouraging him to be more determined:

> In high school I didn't think I was overly bright. When you can't write something on paper, that's pretty hard to hide. When someone tells you that you can't do something, I guess that makes you more determined. When I came out of special education I went into high school; they just threw me in class. Extra time for tests or anything like that wasn't happening. Whatever I wrote on papers, that was it. I got totally fed up. I didn't have any help and it was really hard. I got through high school without any supports. I'd stay away from courses that had a lot of writing- I'd get burned at test time. I was determined not to give up. I wouldn't get a test finished. It would be taken from me. I wouldn't be able to get down what I was trying to spell on paper. Then they'd come down hard on me and humiliate me for what I'd done. I just wouldn't quit. I wanted to keep on going. I knew I could do it. It was like a roller coaster road. One day you'd be right down and so mad with everything. I'd just get fed up with it. And then a few days later I'd be, like, no, let's not go there, I can do this. I just wasn't going to give up. If I can do anything for kids like me, I'll do it. That is why I'm doing this today.

S5 talked about the many difficulties he had fitting in during his high school years:

> I went to a small high school with about six hundred students. There were always some barriers--social barriers. I had trouble finding my niche there in high school. I really couldn't find anything to belong in. I felt ostracized. This can really put you down a lot. Being here has been great. I haven't gone through any of the crap I went through in high school.

S6 remembers the high school experience and how it contributed to his feelings of low self-esteem:

> I remember I had really poor self-esteem then. I heard from someone else that I'd never go to university, according to my teachers. That's what they told my parents. No wonder learning-disabled students have low self-esteem. It's so discouraging going through school. Even though I have a lot of confidence now, I still like to hear it--like a pat on the back and being told I can do it. Teachers can

> definitely be a big problem. Many of them told me I was not trying hard enough. My grade seven teacher accused me of not trying hard enough. I'm just waiting to run into him. He shot me down and it hurt. I had to struggle so hard. He accused me of not reading enough. To this day I still can't sit down with a novel.

Special Education

Five of the six students were placed in special education classes for remediation of their difficulties. It was reported by these five students that this was not a successful program for them. **S2** felt that placement in special education classes contributed to his lack of academic success. He still feels inadequate when it comes to describing his learning disability:

> I still don't have the information I would like to have. One thing I feel is that learning disabilities are not well researched. That's why I decided to do this interview. I'd probably have my biology degree now if I'd been able to go somewhere other that a special education class and actually learn about my disability. I went to a centre when I was younger, where I learned a little bit about my disability. If I had to have that through junior high and high school, it definitely would have made a difference in my education. I'd have so much more understanding. Just the short amount of time I was there I felt I knew so much more about myself. That never happened in special education classes. They tried to make you different than you were.

S3 was placed in special education classes and remained there until his final year of elementary school. He spoke of his experience:

> After grade six I was no longer in a special needs class. They placed me in a regular class. I had moved and I didn't tell them I had an Individual Program Plan (IPP). They didn't know and I showed them I could do the regular program. It worked out pretty good for me.

S4, who was also placed in special education class, remained there during his primary and elementary years:

> I was in special education for all those years in the early grades. I got sick of

> being there. Actually I didn't study. I did nothing. And still I'd get these awesome marks. One day I said I wasn't going there any more. It was a waste of time. All I needed was help with my spelling. The only reason I ended up there was because I couldn't write down what I knew. When they tried to fail me, they did a test to see how smart I was. I killed it. I was so smart. When the intelligence test was completed I guess I did okay, but I guess I bombed out on the spelling and stuff. So I went to the special education class where, I guess, I got help with reading and writing. The teacher there couldn't believe I was there. She didn't think it was a good place for me. No, I didn't stay there. She got me out of it. It was all information off the top of my head. My grammar skills are still bad because I didn't have the opportunity in a normal class all those years. My mom never really knew either that I had a learning disability. She was listening to the teachers who said that I should be back in special education. But I refused to go back there. I even got fed up with her for not seeing it the way I saw it. She eventually listened to me. Now she is really proud of me. My mom was afraid of the system. She really didn't know what was wrong.

S4 was convinced that a bad experience in Junior High School after having attended special education in elementary school made him more determined to have success. **S4** broke down and cried while recounting the following:

> I had this one teacher. She was the worst I ever had. I'd write an essay and she would make fun of me in front of the class. She was really rude and broke me down. Like, this was the worst. She told me I was dumb. I kept telling myself no and that I could do better. She just kept it up. She made me feel so small. I sort of said I won't let her get over my time. So I stood up for myself. Like, I hate them so much. I just want to do more so that I can say they were wrong. That's why I don't give up.

S6 remained in special education class until high school and explained that he got nothing from being there:

> I was in special education classes in junior high. A lot of the kids were class clowns, trouble makers. I don't think they had the support that I had coming up through the grades. The time was taken up with trying to control these kids. So there wasn't any time to spend on the subject itself. We did a lot of reading and stuff, but I think I would be better off being left in the regular stream. I remember getting nothing out of that special education class. It would have been difficult in regular class looking at all the others do well. I was in special education all the way through, but I don't think it helped. I think I'd be better off today if I was in regular classes. In grade twelve I did regular literature courses. The teacher really understood and she helped a lot. She marked me differently and considered my strengths. She didn't look at my spelling. She discussed answers with me. I had

> enough time. When I did my final exam, I was at it from nine in the morning until four in the afternoon. She was really mad with me when she found out I didn't even take a break. I put a lot of answers on tape.

While exploring the four main themes and their sub-themes, two other sub-themes emerged as significant to the lives of the learning disabled students. These two sub-themes included high school and special education. Indeed, it was clear from student responses that their experiences in high school and their placement in special education classes had presented much difficulty for the students.

Discussion

This study undertook an investigation of a particular educational phenomenon, the managing of a learning disability at the post-secondary level, with four main themes; namely, awareness, self-advocacy, supports, and control. These four constructs were investigated to determine if a relationship exists between these four main constructs and the level of success experienced by learning-disabled students at the post-secondary level. Six interviews were conducted to gather information necessary to determine the relationship existing between these four factors and the degree of success obtained at the post-secondary level, namely, at a university in Atlantic Canada. Upon completion of the investigator's analysis, it became clear that there was a relationship between all four constructs and the experience of success for the learning-disabled students. What follows is a discussion on how the findings of awareness, self-advocacy, supports, and control contribute to the level of success for learning-disabled students at the post-secondary level.

Recent research (Cowen, 1993), has shown that post-secondary students need to develop a clear understanding of the nature of their learning disability. Getzel and Gugerty (1992) maintain that a lack of knowledge about one's own abilities can lead to lack of acceptance of self and an inability to communicate one's needs and abilities to others. This research coincides with other findings which show that those students who are least aware of their learning disabilities are less able to communicate their needs and abilities to the others when difficulties occur (Getzel et al., 1992). Students reported that awareness of disability at an early age was most beneficial to their present level of awareness. Students obtaining explanational terms from psychologists were more comfortable talking about their learning disabilities. Without access to the proper terms being used by professionals, the students were left for most of their school lives wondering what was wrong with them. One student who achieved success at the post-secondary level felt he had not been prepared for the challenges of college. Although he had not been properly diagnosed, he was fully aware of his strengths and weaknesses. Another student reported receiving awareness sessions from an outside program when he was completing grade four. He expressed a need for this kind of intervention. Aside from this one time, he did not receive any other form of training. He credited this intervention with giving him some of the tools he needed to understand how he learned and, in particular, to help him identify his strengths.

In most cases, the students were able to talk openly about their learning styles. Yet, many still lacked awareness concerning the nature of their learning disabilities. Students who struggled the most were ill equipped because they suffered from a lack of

understanding of learning disabilities.

Students reported frustrations when dealing with professors at the post-secondary level. They attributed this mainly to the lack of awareness on the part of professors rather than on the part of students. Reports of the students' experiences suggest that professors who express limited knowledge surrounding this phenomenon do not accommodate the needs of students. According to the students in this study, they often become categorised under the broad heading of learning disabled, a label which prevents the individuals from having their specific needs considered. As one student put it, "they expect us all to fit into the same mold." This frame of thinking extends to staff members of the Centre for Students with Disabilities as well to the individual professors. As a result, students with learning disabilities are often placed in categories where they do not belong. This error indicates that there is an even greater need for the students to have a well-defined knowledge and awareness of their own learning styles and strengths and weaknesses. This view coincides with that of Cowen (1993), who argues that, once diagnosed, post-secondary students need to develop a clearer understanding of the nature of their learning disability.

It is evident from the data that self-advocacy was closely related to self-awareness. Students who did not have the proper terms to describe their disabilities experienced the most difficulty in responding to questions concerning self-advocacy. According to Aune and Ness (1991), self-advocacy is seen as an all-important strategy that needs to be learned. Students reported that they did not receive any direct teaching about how to self-advocate at either the high school or post-secondary levels. Greenbaum

et al. (1995) reported that students who had received counselling in this area were more likely to disclose at the post-secondary level that they have a learning disability. One is left to wonder if the population of learning-disabled students may actually be higher than typically reported. However, students' low rate of awareness may have contributed to the low rate of response to the request for participants in this study.

Students reported that they learned the skill of self-advocacy from a parent or from a caring teacher indirectly. Others learned this skill out of necessity while in high school. Without the skill of self-advocacy, many believed they would not have been able to graduate and pursue post-secondary studies. One student who did not self-advocate at the high school level could not attend post-secondary until four years after graduation. He explained that by not being able to speak for himself he met failure: "not having oral exams at high school caused him to get low marks."

All students reported that the supports provided by their parents and understanding teachers had contributed to their success so far. The subjects in the present study reported that watching their parents standing up for them helped them do the same for themselves in the future. All students reported the need for intervention by significant others such as parents because of their own lack of awareness at the school level. However, those students who considered themselves good self-advocates reported greater independence in this area of self-advocacy when they reached the post-secondary level. On the other hand, those who did not consider themselves good advocates reported that they were still dependent on significant others for support.

All students reported having great determination and a good work ethic. This

finding coincides with the literature which states that achieving personal goals in academic settings while experiencing a learning disability does demand much hard work (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997). All students reported that they were determined to complete their post-secondary studies successfully. One student who did not receive a high enough average to attend a post-secondary institution chose to do so as a mature student four years later just to prove to himself that he could do it. One student already with a degree was able to look back on his post-secondary experience and acknowledge how hard it really was. As he said, "Hard work and determination are more important than overcoming the learning disability." Nowhere in the studied is it stated that a learning disability can be overcome. Rather, direct teaching of skills that focus on self-determination, self-advocacy, and self-awareness are necessary for success (Schumaker & Hazel, 1984). Students reported that a high degree of determination is a prerequisite for becoming a self-advocate. Ward (1998) concurred that the development of determination skills in learning-disabled students is a must if students are to achieve academic success. With these skills, students can become their own best advocates. All students reported that traditional remediation techniques did not work for them. Rather, emphasis on awareness of their learning disability and the development of self-advocacy skills provided what was needed to better prepare them for post-secondary education. All students realized that their particular learning disabilities are with them for life, and that dwelling on their strengths and interests kept them going.

Participants reported that self-awareness of their learning disabilities gave them a certain amount of control. Taking control is seen as critical to success. Gerber et al.,

(1992) reported that learning-disabled students who have a high rate of success attribute it to the degree of control they are able to exhibit. These authors reported that many of the participants in the moderately successful group sought control mainly to cover up their weaknesses. The findings of the present research coincide with the literature in that one student who was struggling exhibited an overriding concern that others would not be able to understand his learning disability. Rather than face the challenge of taking control, he accepted the situation and continued to struggle. This same student reported that it was beyond his control to get supports. He continued to struggle and work even harder to attain a passing grade.

Students reported that it was easier to take control at the post-secondary level than at public school. This coincides with Spekman et al., (1992) who state that successful adults are able to take control and, at the same time, accept supports provided by others. Several students in this study depended heavily on others while attending post-secondary. Students experiencing difficulty did not have a support network other than the supports provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities. Control was easy to obtain for students actively involved with others whether that involvement came in the form of working within societies or clubs or volunteering and helping others on a more private level. The successful students had no difficulty talking to others about their difficulties.

All students reported that supports from others constituted a significant factor for success. Reis et al., (1997) stated that over twenty percent of post-secondary students receive support from others in order to achieve their goals. Students in the present study reported that supports from parents at an early age had contributed to their success and to

their managing any obstacles along the way. For the most part, they viewed this support as being replaced by friends at the post-secondary level. Students whose families did not provide support during the early years reported having a difficult time with attaining success. However, since attending post-secondary, these students recognized that supports from others did contribute to their success.

Students reported receiving support from faculty. When this support was missing or lack of understanding of learning disabilities was evident, students experienced less success. Those students who exhibited awareness, self-advocacy, and control were best able to negotiate with professors and receive the accommodations they needed. When these factors were not present, the difficulty with faculty was often not overcome. Struggles continued, and success was not as evident for these students. Students reported that proper technology was not available to them during class times. Professors did not want students using recording devices or laptop computers during classes. As a result of these restrictions, students felt that they were not having the success they deserved.

All students reported that they received supports from the Centre for Students with Disabilities. This, for the most part, included access to quiet rooms for test taking, access to technology, scribes, tape recordings, and readers. Vogel and Adelman (1992) stated that there is a dire need for supports once learning-disabled students attend college in order for them to stay in college. Reports by the students in this study coincide with this finding. Students reported that without adequate supports they would not have been able to stay at post-secondary. The Centre for Students with Disabilities provided the students with a staff member who co-ordinated the support services for those students.

Even though these supports were available, the students still expressed a concern about the staff who directed the programs at the centre. Students expected staff to have a broader understanding of learning disabilities.

One area emphasized by the students was the need for individual differences to be recognized. Students found that they were being grouped together and expected to fit into a 'mold'. They saw the need for more adjustments to be made when the student's individual learning needs do not fall within the general categories of recommended supports. Students reported these adjustments could be made only if more student-directed, individualised assessments were carried out related to the curriculum at the post-secondary level. Students reported that they were often left to their own devices to advocate for themselves once the necessary documentation was sent out to the professors. Students felt this was good in theory; however, many were unable to take control and advocate for themselves at this level. A number of studies indicate that adults living with learning disabilities need assistive technology if they are to compensate for their weaknesses (Brown, 1987; Cutler, 1990; Gerber, 1991; Primus, 1990; and Vogel, 1987). Students reported that the Centre for Students with Disabilities provided them with these supports.

Participants also said that the degree of confidentiality that protects students with learning disabilities at the post-secondary level prevents them from meeting others with similar disabilities. Many saw this as detrimental to those who wished to meet others with the same problems. Students reported that meeting others with learning disabilities would be beneficial in that they could find out how others were facing hurdles. Such

collaboration could be beneficial. At the same time, students reported limited opportunity for meeting other learning-disabled students when they registered at the Centre for Students with Disabilities. One student reported that he often volunteered his services if others needed support.

The study found evidence to support the claim that students with learning disabilities need to develop a clear understanding of their disabilities. Without this knowledge, students have difficulty communicating their needs and abilities to others. The students who had no difficulty in asking for supports were acutely aware of their disabilities. They talked at length about their disabilities, using terms to describe exactly how they had been diagnosed. Commonly, students who were less likely to ask for supports and communicate their needs and abilities were never given the appropriate terminology to describe their diagnosed disabilities.

This study offers evidence that early diagnosis is beneficial to the success of students with learning disabilities. The students reported that, as a result of becoming aware of their learning disability at an early age, they became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and, as a result, now find it easier to self-advocate at the post-secondary level. Evidence also suggests that, even when a student is not equipped with a proper diagnosis, a student possessing a good knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses can succeed. Based on the findings of this study the researcher concludes that post-secondary students with learning disabilities can benefit greatly from receiving an early diagnosis and clear understanding of their learning disabilities. Students reported that diagnosis followed up with awareness sessions had contributed to their level of

understanding.

This study concludes that students with learning disabilities need to be taught self-advocacy skills at the secondary and post-secondary levels. The students in this study were not taught advocacy skills directly. Those students who felt they were good advocates learned this skill through others, particularly parents. Students who did not receive this kind of direction and who did not develop self-advocacy skills were struggling to have success at the post-secondary level.

The study also concludes that students with learning disabilities studying at the post-secondary level need to have a great deal of determination in order to have success. Students named determination as a pre-requisite for success at the post-secondary level. The characteristic of determination, coupled with awareness of their learning disability and ability to self-advocate, contributed greatly to their success academically.

The study further concludes that awareness of a learning disability is closely related to retaining and sustaining control at the post-secondary level. Students who were lacking awareness of their learning disability found it more difficult to advocate and thus felt themselves to be lacking in the area of control.

The researcher found that support from faculty, significant others, and the Centre for Students with Disabilities were important factors for experiencing success at the post-secondary level. Students who exhibited awareness, self-advocacy skills, and control did receive the supports needed to have success. The findings indicated that access to technology was not always allowed because of lack of awareness by faculty members and that the supports provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities are necessary for

students to be successful at the post-secondary level. Students reported being satisfied with the supports provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities. Significant others continued to play a major role for some students. Others were able to advocate for themselves in receiving the proper supports.

CHAPTER 5: OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter outlines both the author's and students' recommendations for achieving academic success at the secondary and post-secondary level. Recommendations are then made for future studies of students with learning disabilities at the post-secondary level.

Author's Recommendations

It is not surprising to discover that the profiles of post-secondary students with learning disabilities are rather varied. The major themes of awareness, self-advocacy, supports and control outlined in "Chapter Four Literature Review" provide a framework for understanding adjustment at the post-secondary level. The insights and understandings that emerge as a result of this study have tremendous potential for use at a personal, professional, and societal level.

The author recommends:

(a) that learning-disabled students be made aware of their strengths and weaknesses if they are to experience success at the post- secondary level;

(b) that diagnosis of a learning disability should take place at an early age;

(c) that, following diagnosis of a learning disability, students be given a full description of their disability, providing them with the proper language to describe their disability, their strengths, and their weaknesses;

(d) that, following diagnosis, learning-disabled students receive sessions of awareness

concerning their learning disability;

(e) that sessions of awareness be provided by a professional knowledgeable in the area of learning disabilities;

(f) that self-advocacy training be offered to learning-disabled students at the secondary level and post-secondary levels;

(g) that awareness sessions about learning disabilities be a required curriculum outcome at the secondary level;

(h) that, as a prerequisite for teaching at the post-secondary level, professors at the post-secondary level be required to complete sessions of awareness on learning disabilities;

(i) that program developers evaluate the secondary curriculum content for learning-disabled students at the secondary level, at the provincial department of education, at the local school boards, and within the local schools; and

(j) that a course in learning disabilities be required for **all** teachers during their teacher training program.

Students' Recommendations

During the interviews the researcher asked the learning-disabled students if they had recommendations for educators who work with learning disabilities. All students stated that having to do one required course at the post-secondary level where their weaknesses would be emphasized was not relevant or did not contribute to their present or future educational plans. The students were outspoken about many of their high school

teachers who lacked awareness in the area of learning disabilities; this deficiency contributed negatively to students' feelings regarding self-esteem and hope for the future. Learning-disabled students also concluded that the skills required for success were not being taught in the public schools. There were no programs that had prepared them for the obstacles that they encountered at the post-secondary level. The level of awareness and knowledge the students had about their learning disabilities was certainly not a result of any helpers within the school system. Instead, the students saw their parents or significant others as being the main supporters. The students rated the professionals who were supposed to be qualified to diagnose their learning disabilities as incompetent in that, following diagnosis, they failed to explain their learning disability to them. Therefore, the students did not learn from the professionals the proper language to explain their learning disabilities. Below is a consensus of the recommendations made by these six learning-disabled post-secondary students.

Students recommended:

1. Every school should have a pamphlet to hand out to every teacher, every year. In this way the teachers would be made more aware of learning disabilities and would recognize their presence in their students.
2. Students with writing disabilities should not be required to complete language courses at the post-secondary level. Those students with writing disabilities tended to enrol in programs that involved courses with factual information. The language courses slowed them down, caused anxiety, and brought down their overall average.

3. The Centre for Students with Disabilities should adopt a broader view in the provision of support that will meet each student's needs more specifically. Students expect to have a more individualized evaluation of their needs. This evaluation could take place with the staff at the centre speaking directly with the students. Meetings would determine the type of supports students needed.
4. The teaching of self-advocacy skills should be a part of the support program provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities.
5. There should be a student support program provided by the Centre for Students with Disabilities. This program would give students with learning disabilities the opportunity to meet other students with learning disabilities. As a result, there would be a greater awareness of the extent of learning disabilities on campus. This should promote greater openness rather than the isolation which has a tendency to disguise the disability.
6. After a learning disability has been diagnosed, an outside program should be made available all the way through school. Such a program would foster awareness of a disability. Students who had participated in such a program found it helpful for both student and parent.
7. More emphasis be placed on a student's strengths of the student completing the school curriculum. Students would then be able to obtain supports for areas of weakness rather than trying to correct these weaknesses.
8. Students who benefit from the use of computers and tape recorders should be allowed to use these tools in class in order to get all the information being

presented by the professors.

9. More general information on the area of learning disabilities should be made available to students diagnosed with a learning disability. In particular, students believe that the need to hear stories of success would give them hope and better prepare them for the future.
10. Parents should be provided with more support while their children are in school. Five of the six students who received parental support realized that, without such support they would not have been so successful.
11. Students should be given opportunities at the post-secondary level to receive supports from other learning-disabled students.
12. Individual differences should determine the kind of accommodations to be made. For example, to be able to complete orally the material for a course evaluation would be a suitable accommodation for a student with a writing disability.

Recommendations for Further Studies

Based on the result and conclusions of this study, the author makes the following recommendations for further studies:

1. Further research could be conducted to determine the population of learning-disabled students registering for post-secondary studies. A follow-up study could then be carried out to determine the percentage of these students who graduate from their respective post-secondary programs.
2. Further research could be conducted with parents of learning-disabled students to

understand how parental influence and guidance has contributed to children's success. This would provide valuable information for other parents who are seeking support in this area.

3. Further research could be conducted with teachers at the secondary level to ascertain their level of awareness in the area of learning disabilities. Results of this study would determine whether or not there is a need to evaluate the teacher training programs at the post-secondary level.
4. Further research could be conducted with professors at the post-secondary level to determine how much awareness they have or still need concerning learning disabilities.

Conclusion

The author has been privileged to enter the world of six complex individuals. They all believed that the telling of their experiences might be able to help others with learning disabilities. All of them have suffered mainly because they felt guilty about having to approach learning in different ways from the supposedly uniform way the rest of us learn. The adult students with learning disabilities in this study offer convincing evidence that learning disabilities do not prevent learning from taking place, that learning disabilities are with a person for life, and that there are many different types of learning disabilities.

The obstacles to success presented by learning disabilities would deter many of us. Instead, these students have found ways to accentuate their abilities and compensate for their weaknesses. Over the past fifteen years, the author has been privileged to work with more than one hundred individuals with learning disabilities. The author's desire to leave this population of individuals with hope and knowledge that they, and others like them, can be successful academically, has motivated this research.

There is still a significant gap between what is known about the challenges facing this population of learning-disabled students and what needs to be known. An important step often not considered is to determine students' views regarding their own learning disabilities; the students can often tell what they need in order to acquire success. This study has allowed students to speak for themselves.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Consent Form – Interview

Participant Consent Form – Interview

My name is Gladys Burke, and I am a candidate for the Master of Education degree at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am currently conducting research in the area of learning disabilities and the adult learner at the post-secondary level. The purpose of this research is to understand and describe your experiences, and learn from your methods of overcoming the obstacles associated with learning disabilities. I am requesting your permission to meet with and talk to you about your experiences. In particular I wish to learn how you manage your learning disability while studying at the university level.

Information you provide will be kept confidential in that neither your name nor community will be used. The study will involve one or more audio-taped interviews. I seek your permission to have the information included in the final draft of my thesis. I will destroy tapes or give them to you at the end of the study.

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent at any time or refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer. The study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education's Ethics Review Committee. The results of my research will be made available to you upon request.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please sign below and return one copy to me. The other is for you. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at 579-3042. If you wish to speak to my supervisor, you may do so by calling Dr. Tim Seifert at Memorial, 737-4470. If at any time you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, please contact Dr. Bruce Sheppard, Associate Dean, Research and Graduate Program.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Gladys Burke

I, _____, hereby give consent to participation in the study "Managing a Learning Disability at the Post-Secondary Level," undertaken by Gladys Burke. I understand information I provide is confidential in that I will not be identified by name or community. I understand also that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and I can withdraw at any time.

_____	_____	_____
Participant	**Researcher**	**Date**

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Questions for Participants

Preliminary Questions for Participants

Today's Date
Place:
Time:
Interviewer's Name:

Subject's Name:

Birth (Maiden) Name:

Sex:

Birth Date:

Age:

Birth Place:

Marital Status:

Brothers:

Sisters:

Occupation of mother:

Occupation of father:

Education:

highest level:

emphasis/specialty (if any):

Children: (ages and gender)

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

The following interview guide was used to guide each of the six interviews:

Category 1: Awareness:

a) **Can you explain your disability to others?**
b) **What are your strengths and weaknesses?**
c) **Do you feel comfortable talking about your learning disability?**
d) **Has this always been the case?**

Category 2: Self- Advocacy:

a) **Do you feel you are a good advocate for yourself?**
b) **Did you receive instruction in learning to self-advocate before attending post-secondary?**
c) **Can you describe specific times when you were able to self-advocate?**
d) **Is it possible to learn this skill independently or does it require direct teaching?**

Category 3: Supports:

a) **What kind of supports do you require in order to continue studies at the post-secondary level?**
b) **Are the supports available to you when you need them?**
c) **Are these supports sufficient for you to have success?**
d) **Do you feel comfortable asking for supports?**

Category 4: Control:

a) **Is it difficult for you to have control here at the post-secondary level?**
b) **Do you feel that you have control?**
c) **How have you been able to obtain control?**