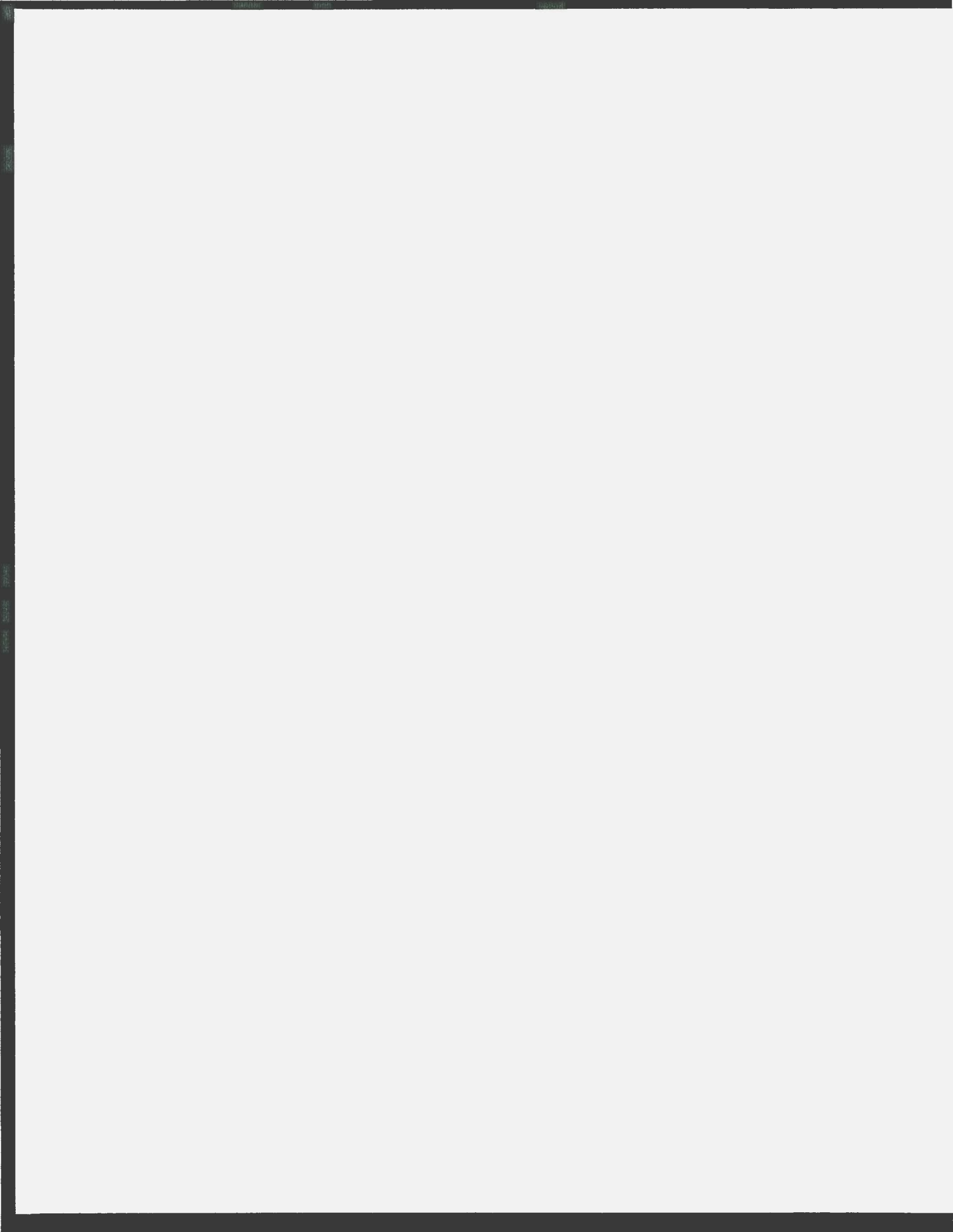A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES
OF STUDENTS WITH IDENTIFIED LEARNING DISABILITIES
ON THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH NEWFOUNDLAND &
LABRADOR'S Pathways FRAMEWORK

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A Phenomenological Study of the Perspectives of Students with

Identified Learning Disabilities on Their Experiences with

Newfoundland & Labrador's *Pathways* Framework

by

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Abstract

A phenomenological research method was used to explore the perspectives of Memorial University of Newfoundland students with reading/writing related learning disabilities regarding their senior high school experiences. In particular, their opinions regarding the effectiveness of the *Pathways* framework were examined. Six individuals participated in the study. All: had successfully completed the provincial high school program; were diagnosed with reading/writing related learning disabilities; received services via the *Pathways* framework during high school; and pursued studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Participants articulated their senior high school experiences including their academic and personal struggles. They also relayed their perspectives and recommendations regarding the *Pathways* framework. Through qualitative research analysis, themes emerged in the following areas:

Understanding of the *Pathways* Framework: Overall, participants lacked a thorough understanding of the framework.

Inclusion: Despite the challenges faced by many participants in the regular classroom, overall, participants supported inclusion of students with learning disabilities.

Meeting Students' Needs: Numerous participants reported issues/problems with services/ supports received during high school.

Stigma: Participants' perspectives on the severity of stigma associated with having a learning disability varied significantly.

Parental support/support of significant person(s): Participants identified that the support of a significant person was instrumental to personal successes.

Self-awareness: Overall, participants effectively communicated personal strengths and needs. However, some participants struggled to identify and describe specific diagnoses.

Work ethic/determination: The majority of participants expressed that, in order to overcome the challenges posed by their learning disabilities, strong work ethics were developed.

Adjusting to Memorial University: Participants articulated that academic challenges were a normal part of the transition process from high school to university schooling. As such, these challenges should not be discouraging to students with learning disabilities.

Advice/Recommendations: Participants had varying advice for students with learning disabilities intending to pursue university studies. As well, participants made numerous recommendations regarding improving the services provided to high school students with learning disabilities.

The research findings increase our understanding of the high school experiences of students with reading/writing related learning disabilities. The findings clearly indicate that, according to students with reading/writing related learning disabilities, there is much room for improvement in terms of the provision of services at the high school level. As well, the findings identify factors that increase the chances of academic success for students with learning disabilities.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the six individuals who participated in this study. Their willingness to share their stories made my research possible. Their honesty and fortitude were admirable.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Newfoundland and Labrador's delivery of special education services to students with learning disabilities (LDs) has evolved over time. The Newfoundland and Labrador education system has now shifted its focus to inclusion which is "the process of integrating students with disabilities into general education classes" (Younghusband, 1999, para. 1).

The inclusion movement has been a focus of much debate, particularly since the 1996 expansion of *Pathways to Programming and Graduation* to the province's entire K-12 system. During the last 10-12 years, this "framework that enables teachers to tailor curriculum to meet the individual strengths and needs of all students," (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n. d., para. 4,) has resulted in many discussions and questions. In recent years, it has also generated controversy and media attention. Mamlin points out that, "inclusion has been strongly supported by research, professional organizations and parents advocacy groups, who hold the view that students with special needs will blend into and become a part of the general education community" (as cited in Younghusband, 1999, para. 2). However in order to receive supports/accommodations from special services personnel via the Pathways framework, a student requires the diagnosis of an identified exceptionality (Government of Newfoundland & Labrador, 2010C). Some would argue that the requirement of a diagnosis, in and of itself, interferes with inclusionary practices.

Pathway is used to "describe how we plan educational programs to meet the individual needs of all students" (Pathways Working Group of the Department of Education and the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association, n. d., p. 1). The

pathways consist of: Pathway 1 – provincially prescribed curriculum; Pathway 2 – provincially prescribed curriculum with supports; Pathway 3 – modified courses; Pathway 4 – alternate courses; and Pathway 5 – a totally individualized and alternate curriculum designed for students with severe cognitive delays (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2010).

Since beginning my teaching career in 2001, I have heard many teachers voice their opinions that the Pathways framework does not effectively meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. In fact, the Pathways framework has come under such intense scrutiny that, in 2006, the province's Minister of Education (Joan Burke) announced that a commission had been established to review the Individual Student Support Plan/Pathways Model. Burke stated that, "the process associated with the ISSP/Pathways Model is burdensome and needs to be improved for the benefit of both students and teachers" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006, para. 2).

In June of 2007, *Focusing on Students: The Report on the ISSP & Pathways Commission,* was released by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. It affirmed that, "The ISSP and Pathways models remain the subject of controversy a full decade after their implementation" (p. 9). The report outlined numerous recommendations for improving the implementation of the Pathways framework including: Recommendation 15 - the Department of Education develop an online resource site of alternate courses and alternate curriculum, including suggested resources; Recommendation 20 - the Department of Education develop clear guidelines to promote early assessment and identification; and Recommendation 29 - the Department of Education develop "a clear articulation of 'inclusive education'" (p. 69). While some of

the recommendations outlined by the commission have been implemented, others have not.

If students with LDs are to achieve academic success and personal independence at the post-secondary level, effective supports must be provided at the high school level. Effective supports are those which facilitate a student's learning while fostering independence.

In my experience, effectively providing supports/services for students with LDs, specifically those that affect reading and/or writing, is challenging. My research involves determining from students with reading/writing related LDs how well they believe the Pathways framework met their needs and prepared them for their post-secondary academic endeavours. Specifically, I am seeking to determine if current post-secondary students with reading/writing related LDs believe that the services provided at the high school level effectively prepared them for the demands of university studies at Memorial University.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of my research is to investigate and describe the senior high school experiences of students with reading/writing related LDs as well as their opinions regarding the effectiveness of the Pathways framework in their educational careers. I am seeking to determine if Memorial University students with diagnosed reading/writing related LDs believe that the Pathways framework effectively prepared them for the demands of university studies.

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A major focus of Pathways is the increased integration of students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom. However, students' perceptions about inclusion are largely unknown. Exploring the experiences and perspectives of students with LDs regarding the use of the Pathways framework will result in new information and insights about the effectiveness of Pathways. Findings should prove significant to policy makers, educators, parents, students and other shareholders who are interested in and concerned about the Pathways framework, how well it meets the needs of students with disabilities (specifically reading/writing related LDs) who are pursuing university studies and how the framework can be improved.

Research questions used to guide my research include:

1. How do Newfoundland students with reading/writing related LDs describe their high school experiences in relation to the Pathways framework? What supports/ modifications/alternate courses did they receive? Were the services/ supports effective?

2. What are the students' opinions regarding inclusion? Do they believe that being included in 'regular classes' met their unique needs?

3. Do the students believe that the high school programming provided effectively prepared them for the demands of Memorial University? If not, what would have better prepared them?

4. What recommendations would the students make in regards to programming for students with reading/writing related LDs at the high school level?

The answers to these questions provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of the delivery of services to high school students with reading/writing related LDs and how to improve these services. In turn, this would increase their chances of success at the university level.

Significance of the Study

This study, conducted at the St. John's, Newfoundland campus of Memorial University, provides basic research on the personal perspectives of students with reading/writing related LDs regarding the effectiveness of the Pathways framework during their senior high schooling.

The research investigates the first-hand experiences of students with reading/writing related LDs in order to gain a true reflection of the effectiveness of the services they received during senior high. As well, the research questions how well those services prepared the students for the rigours of studies at Memorial University.

This study may serve to influence the development and design of future curricular supports and services for students with reading/writing related learning LDs. The students interviewed have achieved success at both the high school and post-secondary levels. Thus, their insight is a valuable tool in educational decision-making and programming.

Overall, this study identifies strengths and needs of the Pathways framework as related by students with reading/writing related LDs. As well, it makes recommendations regarding how to improve the services provided at the senior high level and, thus, better prepare high school students with reading/writing related LDs for the demands of studies at Memorial University.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

While substantial literature exists regarding the field of special education and specifically inclusion, there is surprisingly little literature available that focuses on students' perspectives or personal experiences. In fact, "it is rare for researchers even to consider students' views in their studies" (Miller, 2008, p. 389). When writing his article, *What Do Students Think About Inclusion?*, Miller experienced difficulty locating studies that asked students with disabilities about their views of and preferences regarding inclusion.

Miller's 2008 findings showed that, "young people today consider it right and natural for students with learning . . . difficulties to be in their classes" (p. 391). It appears that students accept peers with disabilities/exceptionalities despite the fact that, "children with profound and complex learning difficulties pose challenges to inclusion" (Whitehurst, 2006, p. 56).

Moving Towards Inclusion

In 1979, Memorial University of Newfoundland expanded its existing special education diploma program to full degree status (Philpott, 2002). Not only were the training requirements for special education teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador changing, the field of special education itself was changing.

Until the mid 1970's, the only Newfoundland and Labrador students with disabilities receiving services were those who were blind and/or deaf. These students attended residential schools in Nova Scotia via government funding (Philpott, 2002).

"Parental pressure in the late 1960s resulted in the Schools Act stating that school boards 'may' accept students with disabilities, giving boards the right to refuse a child with special needs" (Philpott, 2002, Disabilities Services Section, para. 1). In 1979 – the same year that Memorial University expanded its special education diploma program to full degree status – the Minister of Education amended the Schools Act and made education of children with disabilities in Newfoundland and Labrador school mandatory (Philpott, 2002).

Over the last 25 years, inclusion of students with special needs in regular classroom settings has been gaining momentum (Morgan & Byers, 2008). "The notion of inclusion and inclusive education carries with it an assumption of entitlement for all those included in the education system" (Crombie & McColl, 2001, p. 54).

Generally, as reported by Philpott & Dibbon, teachers agreed with the philosophy of inclusion but pointed out that additional resources, extra preparatory/collaboration time and additional training are required (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007). Research indicated that two-thirds of regular classroom teachers support the concept of inclusion and are willing to accept a student with a disability in their classes (Ornelles, Cook & Jenkins, 2007). However, "only 29% felt they had sufficient expertise in relation to teaching students with disabilities" (Ornelles, Cook & Jenkins, 2007, p. 145).

Younghusband's research reflected that Newfoundland and Labrador's teachers also felt ill equipped to meet the varying and sometimes severe needs of students in their classrooms. She reported that "many of these teachers . . . support some inclusion but feel unskilled, untrained and lacking in the expertise to work with mild-moderate (and

sometimes severe) disabilities" (Younghusband, 1999, para. 3). The frustration of teachers attempting to meet the diverse needs of students was evident; Philpott & Dibbon cite Younghusband's finding that " ' impossible' was a frequently used adjective to describe the delivery of Pathways as the teachers tried to live up to the demands placed upon them in this regard (Government of Newfoundland & Labrador, 2007, p. 206).

Concerns have been raised about the effects of inclusion on students with LDs. "Proponents of inclusion argue that among the potential benefits for learners with learning disabilities within the inclusive environment are increases in self-esteem and self-worth, as learners within the inclusive environment are believed to be less likely to be stigmatized and perceived as being less able by their peers" (Ntshangase, Mdikana & Cronk, 2008, p.76). However, "the emotional well-being of some students with learning disabilities in mainstream settings has been a cause for concern" (Morgan & Byers, 2008, Background Section, para. 2).

Some research indicates that students with LDs, included in regular classroom settings, are at risk for low self-esteem associated with the difficulties they experience both academically and socially (Ntshangase, Mdikana & Cronk, 2008). Damage to self-esteem can have a long-lasting and significant detrimental effect on the lives of students with LDs.

Overview of Pathways

Pathways is a way to describe how educators deliver education programs to meet the individual strengths and needs of all students. A student must have an exceptionality to access Pathway 2, 3, 4 or 5. Programming decisions are made by the student's program planning team (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2010c, What is Pathways? Section, para. 1).

The Department of Education provides a brief, but concise, summary of the

various Pathways to graduation/school leaving:

Pathway 1 refers to the provincial curriculum for a course or subject. The majority of students in the province follow Pathway 1 for most subject areas.

Pathway 2 follows the provincial curriculum, but the student receives accommodations or supports to meet the required outcomes for each course/subject. The curriculum may be presented and/or evaluated in a slightly different manner for students receiving Pathway 2.

Pathway 3 refers to modifying the provincial curriculum. The general intent of the course remains the same, but some outcomes are:

- changed; and/or
- removed; or
- added.

Parents and students should clearly understand the implications of Pathway 3 modifications on graduation and post secondary options.

Pathway 4 refers to an individualized alternate course or program. The intent of an academic/non-academic alternate course or program is to develop specific skills and/or knowledge.

Parents and students should clearly understand the implications of Pathway 4 courses on graduation and post secondary options.

Pathway 5 refers to a program which does not follow the provincial curriculum. The main focus of the Pathway 5 Functional Curriculum is the development of daily living skills such as personal care, social skills, money identification and management, communication skills, food preparation, recreation and leisure. (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2010a, What Are the Pathways? Section, para. 2)

Definition of Learning Disabilities

In 1963, a group of parents held a conference, *Exploration into the Problems of the Perceptually Handicapped Child*, in Chicago. Participants included individuals from a variety of professions. It was during this conference that a name reflecting the

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characteristics of the children was reached – "learning disabilities" (Learning Disabilities

Association of America, 2005, Defining a Need Section, para. 2). During the past four

decades, the overall understanding of LDs has changed as knowledge has increased.

However, as pointed out by Roffman (2007), "there is no universal definition of a

learning disability" (p. 15).

Newfoundland and Labrador's Department of Education website currently lists

the following detailed definition of a learning disability:

> According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2002), learning disabilities refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.
>
> Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing; phonological processing; visual spatial processing; processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions (e.g., planning and decision-making).
>
> Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:
>
> - oral language (e.g., listening, speaking, understanding)
> - reading (e.g., decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
> - written language (e.g., spelling and written expression)
> - mathematics (e.g., computation, problem solving)
>
> Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking.

Specific learning disabilities include:

- Reading Disorder
- Disorder of Written Expression
- Mathematics Disorder
- Nonverbal Learning Disability

(Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2010b, Definition Section, para. 1-5)

A student's overall program may consist of a combination of Pathways. For example, a student may complete the prescribed English course with accommodations/ supports (Pathway 2), a modified Mathematics course (Pathway 3) and an enabling alternate course focusing on Math pre-requisite skills (Pathway 4).

Students with Learning Disabilities and Post-Secondary Education

The number of students with LDs enrolling in colleges/universities is increasing yearly (Hadley, 2007). In fact, of all students with disabilities attending college in the United States, students with LDs are the largest sub-group (Connor, 2009). In 2000, more than 40% of college freshmen with diagnosed disabilities were students with learning disabilities and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Sparks & Lovett, 2009). The increase is due, in part, to the fact that colleges now offer a wide range of services to students with LDs (Sparks & Lovett, 2009)

Despite the increases, students with LDs are enrolling in college and post-secondary training at a rate only 1/10 of the general population (Gregg, 2007). Gregg presents three reasons for the low enrollment: lack of academic skills; lack of documentation; and lack of transitional options. Sparks and Lovett (2009) also outline barriers for students with LDs: (1) students with LDs are less likely to have completed college preparatory courses resulting in less content knowledge and fewer skills; (2) little

available research to assist students with LDs choose programs where they are likely to succeed; and (3) some students who receive services (for LDs) in high school do not qualify for services at the post-secondary level.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) believes that, "many students with LDs should select postsecondary education options and that they can succeed in their pursuit of them . . . " (1994, Introduction Section, para. 1). The NJCLD maintains that many students with LDs fail to consider post-secondary programs because of lack of encouragement, assistance and preparation to do so.

Many students with LDs who enroll in post-secondary programs do not succeed during their first year largely due to difficulties with transitioning from high school to college (Connor, 2009). Gregg (2007) asserts that, "the adolescent and adult population with learning disabilities continues to be underserved and underprepared to meet the demands of postsecondary education" (p. 219).

Not only are students with LDs less likely than their non-disabled peers to attend university, they are also less likely to graduate from high school. Gregg (2007) asserts that students with LDs are two to three times more likely to drop out of school than non-disabled peers.

Gregg argues that there is a "professional practice of setting lower academic expectations for these students" (p. 221). He further posits that it, "should be our goal to provide students with learning disabilities the tools ... to meet academic standards with rigor equal to that expected from their peers" (p. 221).

Factors Contributing to Success

The support of a parent or other significant person can be vital to the success of a student with an LD. Case studies of high-ability students who have been successful despite having LDs indicated that having a supportive person was a major factor in their successes (Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997).

The primary goal of parents during transition planning is to support students in planning and achieving their educational goals (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1994). Parental support and involvement should "encourage students to develop independent decision-making and self-advocacy skills" (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1994, Parent Roles and Responsibilities Section, para. 1). As pointed out by Roffman (2007), a parent is the "key expert," (p. 86) on the child and can provide valuable information regarding the supports required by the child.

Despite the potential positive impact a parent can have on the success of a child with an LD, parental roles in important educational decisions are sometimes limited. As cited by Vaughn, Bos, Harrell & Lasky, parents often assume a, "passive and minimal role in meetings" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007, p. 198).

Rock (2000), stated that, "barriers to parental involvement are complex, numerous and varied" (p. 3). As cited in *Focusing on Students: The report on the ISSP and Pathways Commission,* Turnbull and Turnbull categorized four impediments to parental participation: psychological; attitudinal; cultural/ideological; and logistical (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2007).

Roffman (2007) encouraged parents to:

develop the (child's) self-awareness . . . he must understand her own learning style and be closely familiar with her academic and personal strengths and

weaknesses. She needs to know how she learns best, be aware of the circumstances under which she does not learn well ... and be familiar with the compensatory learning strategies, accommodations and modifications that make it possible for her to succeed in a classroom. (p. 170)

Self-awareness, which is arguably a pre-requisite for self-advocacy, is key to academic success for students with LDs. According to Ryan and Price (1992), "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" (p.10). Despite the importance of self-awareness, Hitchings, Luzzaro, Retish & Horvath reported that "a sample of college students with learning disabilities could describe their learning disabilities only in vague and incomplete terms, and demonstrated a general lack of awareness regarding the precise nature of their disabilities" (cited in Madaus, 2006, p. 86). Madaus' research also indicated that, "college students with learning disabilities access career services at a lower rate than other students and have lower levels of career awareness and maturity than other students" (p. 87).

In order for an individual with n LD to obtain and, if necessary, advocate for effective supports and accommodations, (s)he must have a high level of personal insight and self-understanding of strengths and needs. Understanding one's LD is not only key to success in the academic arena but also in other areas of life including social, family and vocational (Ryan & Price, 1992).

High-ability students with LDs often require guidance in order to understand personal strengths and weaknesses as well as to utilize appropriate strategies and advocate for academic accommodation. "Self-advocacy involves the recognition of these strengths and weaknesses and the students' skills in presenting their abilities, as well as weaknesses, in their communication with faculty" (Reis, Neu & McGuire, 2000, p. 125).

Respondents in Madaus' 2006 research "underscored the importance of recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses and being able to use this knowledge to one's advantage" (p. 89). Madaus' subjects "recommended using this knowledge to set personal goals" (p. 89). Without acute self-understanding, a student with an LD may set unrealistic and unattainable academic and professional goals.

Students with LDs face numerous challenges at the post-secondary level. "Students with learning disabilities have greater difficulty handling academic demands, adjusting to change, dealing with criticism and adjusting to university life" (Heiman & Precel, 2003, p. 249). In addition to increased workload at the post-secondary level, studies have shown that students with LDs also face higher levels of anxiety in addition to feelings of lower self-efficacy (Heiman & Precel, 2003).

In order to attain academic success, particularly at the post-secondary level, students with LDs must develop strong work ethics. As one individual with a learning disability stated, one must, "just 'get on the horse and hold on tight.' Do the best you can with the opportunity given you!" (Madaus, 2006, p. 89).

Transition

Transitions are a normal part of life. Significant transitions exist in the lives of all students. During transitions, students experience change; they need to make adjustments and adaptations (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006b).

As pointed out by Roffman (2007), all students transitioning from high school to post-secondary institutions must, "adapt to the many differences and encounter new challenges (but) entering students with LD often face unique additional hurdles related to

their disability" (p. 183). "Transitions from high school to postsecondary education and employment can be particularly challenging for students with disabilities" (Bangser, 2008, p. 5).

Several Canadian universities offer transition programs designed specifically for students with LDs. York University offers Project Advance, a summer institute which prepares students with LDs for success in university studies (Learning Disabilities Services, 2007). The program offers students with LDs the opportunity to, learn about academic strategies, study and life skills, assistive technologies, and the availability of campus support. As well, students have the opportunity to examine areas of academic strength and weakness as they relate to the challenges of university studies.

The University of Guelph's transition program is, "modeled on a typical week at university, Pre-Flight is presented in a workshop-type format that is educational, interactive, experiential and fun. Pre-Flight students will gain an understanding of how their learning disability may affect them in the university setting, and learn study strategies as well as adaptive technology which will help them succeed in the post-secondary setting" (Centre for Students with Disabilities, 2007, Curriculum Overview and Content section, para. 1). The Pre-Flight Program also includes a parent session. It focuses on such topics as: support services available at the university; differences between high school and university; a parent's changing role as an advocate; and supporting from a distance.

Queen's University offers an online course designed for students with LDs. It offers each student the opportunity to learn about: his/her LD; self-advocacy skills;

assistive technology; and learning strategies. It also consists of a parent session (Queen's University, 2005).

Carleton University offers Make the CUT (College/University Transition). It "is a transition program designed to assist students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder make a successful transition from secondary school to college or university" (Carleton University, 2010, Make the CUT section), PARA.1. Prospective students are provided with an orientation. As well, the resources available – to students with LDS and ADHD – are a focus of the session.

Chapter 3: Design of the Study

Strategy and Rationale

This is a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach. With qualitative research, the "researcher seeks to understand the ways in which participants in the setting under study make meaning of – and so understand – their experiences" (Whitt, 1991, p. 407). "Phenomenological inquiry, or qualitative research, uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings," (Hoepfl, 1997). Since the goal of this research is to understand students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Pathways framework, it is well suited to a qualitative approach, in general, and to a phenomenological approach, in particular.

Data collection focused on collecting, "insiders' perspectives of reality" (Whitt, 1991, p. 407). The research conducted focused on understanding how Memorial University students with reading/writing related LDs interpret their senior high experiences. Perspectives of teachers, administrators, policy makers or parents were not a focus of research; only the perspectives of students were examined.

Interviews were conducted with six Memorial University students (in at least their second year of studies) who have been diagnosed with reading/writing related LDs. All participants received special education services via the Pathways framework at the senior high level.

There have been numerous media reports regarding Pathways and its effectiveness. However, there has been little focus on the perceptions of students who receive(d) services/supports via the Pathways framework. This research project attempted to fill that gap to some extent.

Site/Participant Selection

    This research project examined the opinions of students with reading/writing related LDs. All participants had successfully graduated from Level III (academic programs) and had completed at least one year of studies at Memorial University.

    Typical case sampling was used to select participants. The goal was to determine and examine the experiences of a typical senior high student with a reading/writing related LD whose goal was to attend Memorial University.

    Potential participants were identified with the assistance of the Glenn Roy Blundon Center; the center is directly involved with providing services/supports to Memorial University students with LDs. "The mission of the Blundon Centre is to provide and co-ordinate programs and services that enable students with disabilities to maximize their educational potential and to increase awareness of inclusive values among all members of the university community" (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2010, About the Centre section, para. 2).

    An e-mail, composed by the researcher and containing a brief explanation of the research project, was sent to The Blundon Center. On behalf of the researcher, it was then distributed to students receiving services via the Blundon Center; a copy of the letter of introduction and the consent form for participants was attached to the e-mail.

    An e-mail was also sent to a staff member of the Learning Disabilities Association of Newfoundland. The e-mail, outlining the research, was then forwarded to LDANL members.

"The Learning Disabilities Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Inc. (LDANL) acts as the provincial voice for individuals with learning disabilities and those who support them, and offers programs to build social competence and independence skills" (Learning Disabilities Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006, Welcome to LDANL section, para. 1). Programs and services offered by the LDANL include: a parent support group; a youth mentoring group; an assistive technology orientation; and community presentations.

Individuals interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the researcher via e-mail. Further information was then provided to potential participants. If an interested individual met the selection criteria and was willing to participate in the study, an interview was arranged at the participant's convenience. Initially, seven students were selected to participate in the study. However, one participant failed to meet the selection criteria as she had attended senior high school in mainland Canada.

Interviews occurred at the Queen Elizabeth Library on the Memorial University campus. This site was selected because it contained study rooms that allowed for quiet and uninterrupted interview locations. As well, since most participants were enrolled in on- campus classes, the library was a convenient and logical location to meet; participants were familiar with the location.

On the day of the interview, prior to the interview being conducted, each participant was given a brief verbal introduction to the study. As well, the consent form and letter of introduction were verbally reviewed and the participant given the opportunity to ask questions.

Data collection involved open-ended interviews guided by research questions. The use of open–ended interviews allowed participants to express their opinions in their own words. It also allowed the interviewer the flexibility to further explore topics generated during the interview. Interviews were recorded and notes taken by the interviewer.

Each interview was transcribed and a copy e-mailed to the participant. (S)he was asked to review the transcription and advise the researcher regarding any corrections or changes required. All participants indicated that transcriptions were accurate.

Data was collected only from students at Memorial University who had successfully completed at least one year of studies; first-year students were excluded. Many first year students, both with and without lLDs, struggle to adjust to the demands of post-secondary education. Students beyond their first year of studies have had sufficient time to adjust to university demands and develop strategies for success. As well, by the second year of studies, students are more aware of whether the supports provided at the high school level adequately prepared them for university life.

Limitations

Findings, based on information gathered from participants in this study, should not be generalized to all students with reading/writing related LDs. Each participant's recollection was subjective and unique. Information gathered was dependent on the participants' memories and interpretations of their high school educational experiences.

Participants included only students who have successfully completed at least one year of study at St. John's campus of Memorial University. Thus, findings are not

generalizable to first year students. Nor are the findings intended to be generalized to post-secondary students enrolled at other institutions but, instead, are specific to students at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

My research focused, specifically, on students with reading/writing related LDs. Therefore the results should not be interpreted as applying to student with LDs affecting other skill areas.

Ethical Considerations

Various measures were taken to ensure that potential ethical issues were addressed. The consent form was reviewed with each participant prior to the interview. A verbal summary was given and participants were provided the opportunity to ask questions before written consent was obtained. Participation in the research project was voluntary. Students were assured that the research project would in no way affect university grades or academic standing.

Written permission to tape record interviews was obtained prior to interviews being conducted. Tapes were securely stored; they will be destroyed two years after the final copy of this thesis is released. The anonymity of the participants was protected. The names of the participants were not referenced. Instead, each participant was assigned a 'tag' and this 'tag' was used to reference each specific student.

Due to the researcher's experience as a special education teacher, there is an element of subjectivity involved. It was necessary for the researcher to maintain an open mind during the interview process and ensure that each participant felt comfortable

expressing his/her personal perceptions and opinions. It was important that the data collected was not skewed by the researcher's subjectivity.

The Researcher's Role

To the greatest extent possible, potential interpersonal and technical issues were identified prior to data collection. This allowed the researcher to quickly and effectively deal with problems that arose during the interview process.

Consultation with personnel who have existing relationships with students with LDs at Memorial University was necessary to gain access to potential participants. This involved: meeting with personnel who work directly with students with LDs at the university level; identifying possible participants with their assistance; contacting possible participants; and obtaining consent from the students identified. It also involved obtaining consent from Memorial University's Ethical Review Committee.

Reciprocity was addressed by maintaining close contact with the participants and making them an active part of the research process. Upon completion of the interviews, transcribed copies of the interviews were distributed to participants; they were asked to advise the researcher of any changes or corrections needed. A draft of the final report will be presented to each participant for review.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred primarily via one-on-one interviews. Each participant was informed that a follow-up interview or e-mail might be necessary; no follow-up interviews were required. However, in one case, a follow-up e-mail was required due to a problem with the tape of the recorded interview.

Each interview focused on the participant's perceptions of their senior high years. Specifically, information regarding supports/accommodations, modified courses and/or alternate courses was obtained. The participants' opinions regarding the effectiveness of the services/supports provided was solicited.

Each participant was questioned regarding inclusion. Specifically, participants' opinions regarding whether students with LDs should be included in the regular classroom were sought. Each student was asked whether (s)he had been adequately prepared for university demands. If the student felt that preparation was inadequate, (s)he was questioned regarding what could have been done, at the senior high level, to better equip him/her.

Each participant was asked to identify changes required at the senior high level to better meet the needs of students with reading/writing related LDs. Specifically, (s)he was asked how students could be better prepared to meet the rigours of Memorial University.

In addition to the information gathered during the interview stage, relevant academic documents were examined. Documents included: high school report cards; Individual Support Services Plans (ISSPs); assessment results/recommendations; and records of university grades.

Data Analysis

Before detailed data analysis occurred, it was necessary to organize (e.g., tag by date) each interview. A transcribed copy of each interview was then created using a word processing program. Upon receiving e-mail confirmation from each participant regarding the accuracy of the transcription, a final copy of each interview was prepared.

Transcripts of the interviews were reviewed and relevant statements coded and highlighted. Each participant's statements were then used to compile a list of significant statements. The significant statements were then organized and used to create an overall description of each student's experiences. This was repeated for each participant.

Once overall descriptions were created for all participants, individual descriptions were used to create a composite regarding the experiences of students with reading/writing related LDs in regards to the Pathways framework. This composite reflected the shared characteristics of the students' experiences as well as the differences in their senior high schooling and perceptions.

Chapter 4: Articulating the Experience

In order to adequately address the interpretation and discussing of findings, it is necessary to introduce each participant:

The Participants

Students will be referred to using 'tags'. The first component of the tag indicates the student's gender: M=male; F=female. The second component of the tag is numerical and is used to distinguish between participants of the same gender.

M1 completed Level III in 2007. He was initially assessed during grade two; difficulties with spelling were noted at that time. During grade four, **M1** was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, "one of a distinct group of neurological conditions characterized by a greater or lesser degree of impairment in language and communication skills, as well as repetitive or restrictive patterns of thought and behavior" (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2009, What is Asperger Syndrome? section, para. 2).

M1 was re-assessed during his final year of high school. His assessment indicated significant difficulties with handwriting as well as deficits in processing speed. The assessor concluded a "a non-verbal learning disability" impacting his "reading decoding skills, spelling and written expression." **M1** is currently studying geology and has yet to decide his exact career plans.

M2 completed Level III in 2004. During his Level II year he was diagnosed with a visual convergence/tracking problem which caused reading difficulties. Despite

experiencing difficulties throughout his schooling, an LD was not diagnosed until the completion of his first year of university studies.

M2's assessment reflected weak expressive language and phonological processing skills; these deficits were attributed to dyslexia. **M2** had completed a Business degree during the semester prior to his interview. At the time of the interview, he was actively seeking employment in the field of marketing.

M3 graduated in 2006. He was originally assessed at age 13, during his grade eight year, and was re-assessed during his final year of high school. His assessment showed a "specific learning disability related to auditory short-term memory and visual-perceptual deficits," resulting in weak handwriting and spelling skills. In his own words, the "quality of writing was pretty low."

M3 is currently completing a double major in History and Russian. He is planning to apply to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police upon completion of his degree; he is also interested in future employment in the area of foreign affairs.

M4 completed his Level III year in 2006. He experienced difficulty with reading and writing tasks from an early age; school records indicate difficulties during elementary school. He was assessed during his grade nine year, a few months before his fifteenth birthday, and the assessment showed significant difficulties in the area of written output. When **M4** was re-assessed at age 16 the findings supported "the previous diagnosis of a learning disability in the area of written output." **M4** experiences significant difficulty writing thoughts/ideas/information in a timely fashion.

M4 is currently completing a degree in psychology. When he began his university studies, he planned to pursue organizational psychology but is now considering other options in the field of psychology.

F1 graduated in 2003. She repeated grade one and was assessed during her second year in that grade; an LD was diagnosed. An assessment completed during her Level II year specified her LD as dyseidetic type dyslexia. **F1**'s LD results in significant difficulty with: remembering factual knowledge; reading; spelling; and mathematics. Visual testing also showed mild visual tracking and convergence issues.

F1 is currently completing a Bachelor of Arts degree. Upon completion of this degree, she intends to apply to the Faculty of Education. Eventually, she plans to complete a Masters' degree in the area of special education.

F2 completed her Level III studies in 2004. She was originally assessed during her grade two year; results showed "difficulties in the areas of reading, written output and organizational skills," which were "typical of a learning disability." When **F2** was re-assessed during her Level II year, results indicated that she continued "to fall within the dysphonetic pattern of readers."

At the time of the interview, **F2** was completing her final term toward a degree in Marine Biology (Honours). Her future plans include pursuing a Masters degree.

The most common supports received by participants, during their senior high years, were extra time and alternate setting (for tests/exams); all participants received these accommodations. Other supports received by some, but not all participants, were: use of word processor during tests/exams (**M1**); tests/exams read aloud (**F1** and **F2**); copies of class notes (**M3**); and use of a tape recorder to record answers due to poor

handwriting (**M2**). **F2** was also entitled to scribing but did not avail of the accommodation.

All six participants shared certain characteristics. All had: completed their senior high schooling (academic program) within the same school district; completed their Level III studies (final year of high school) between 2003 and 2007, well after the 1996 expansion of Pathways to the entire kindergarten to Level III (grade 12) system; been diagnosed with LDs having a direct effect on reading/writing; and attended large schools (several hundred students) during their senior high years.

All participants willingly answered the interview questions and did so in an open and articulate manner. They discussed their personal experiences and described, in detail, the effects that having a reading/writing LD had on their lives. They were candid about, not only their experiences, but the challenges they faced – and continue to face – in their academic pursuits.

The Findings

Theme One: Understanding of the Pathways Framework

Participants' responses regarding their understanding of the Pathways framework varied. However no participant was able to give an accurate and detailed description of the Pathways framework:

When asked his understanding of the Pathways framework, **M1** responded:

From what I can gather, it's just a way around mild to moderate learning disabilities.

When asked, "What does Pathways mean to you,?" **M2** responded:

I know that there's different levels. I know, when I was in high school, I was put in Pathway 2 . . . but I wouldn't be able to tell you much more than that.

When questioned about his understanding of the Pathways framework, **M3** stated:

The Pathways framework, what I know is, Pathway 1 is academic. That's what I know about it. It's the academic stream. Pathway 2 is, ah, they need more help, get more help in the core subjects such as Math, English and Sciences . . . Pathway 3 – this is what I was told – is, like, that's people with, like, more severe problems in those core subjects and, then from there, Pathway 4 – what I was told – what I thought of it was that there was a complete mental disability.

M4 indicated a minimal understanding of the Pathways framework. In fact, he was unsure as to whether he had actually received services via the Pathways framework:

Ah . . . I'm not completely sure. It was mentioned. Like, when I was going through school, they never told me that I was in Pathways but I guess I was.

F1 was unsure as to whether she had received Pathway 4 services (alternate courses) during her schooling:

So, I don't think it was Pathway 4. But I'm not sure.

She also expressed that, during high school, she:

was kind of afraid of going to the Pathways just for the simple fact that you want to get into university and I don't know what the rules are with that.

F2's response when asked, "What is Pathways,?" was:

Well, I don't understand a whole pile about it. I know that's just like, ah, I guess more help provided, small class sizes, maybe slightly easier material depending on what Pathway you're in.

F2 was somewhat confused regarding the framework. She was unsure as to the number of actual pathways to graduation (five); she was also unsure of what the numerical value assigned to each pathway indicated.

There's Pathway 4, Pathway 3 and, is there a 2 as well? That's where you're almost getting into challenging needs, isn't it?

There were varying levels of understanding among participants regarding the Pathways framework. While each participant willingly communicated his/her understanding of the Pathways framework, none described the framework accurately.

The lack of understanding about the framework was reinforced when **F1** related the negative experience of a friend:

. . . their parents didn't push for it and they went into Pathways. There was a Math pathway that was below . . . like it seems like it's a regular one but it's not and you can't get into university with it and, like, one of my best friends ended up in that and she thought, okay, that's fine, I can still get into university with that . . . She was on a different Pathway and she didn't realize about the Pathways and her parents didn't really get involved. She never graduated with a diploma significant enough to get into university.

Theme Two: Inclusion

All participants expressed that they were included in regular classes with non-disabled peers. Overall, their views regarding their inclusion in the regular classroom were positive.

M1 expressed that inclusion in the regular class worked well for him. He stated:

I think you should be in a class with your classmates if you're doing that course.

When asked if, in his opinion, the regular classroom is the best setting for students with learning disabilities, **M2** responded:

I think, for the most part, it is.

He also stated:

I'm still able to do most things that everyone else can do so ... Why make other people think I'm different?

He also indicated that removal from the regular classroom has social disadvantages. This is reflected by his statements:

Like, you don't get the same kind of – joking around, you know, gossip, I guess. If you're not (in the regular classroom) *. . . The social aspect of being in class if you're segregated by going out . . . I would definitely recommend that anybody with a learning disability stay in the regular class.*

When asked if he had difficulty coping with the demands of inclusion in the regular class, **M3** stated:

I found I was pretty fine, you know . . . If I just didn't get something, I was pretty keen. If I ever had a problem with anything, I'd go to the teacher.

M4 did sometimes experience difficulty keeping up with notes in the regular classroom:

I'd write it down first but it would be pretty sloppy so I'd go through and re-write it again after.

F1 expressed that she experienced difficulty in the regular classroom setting:

I can't learn it fast enough in class . . . so my mom would have to re-teach me at home.

She (her mother) *had to re-teach me everything.*

But, all of my subjects, I know Mom re-taught me almost everything. Except, for some reason, English.

I did struggle (with keeping up in the regular classroom).

F1 did express some doubts regarding the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom:

If you leave them in the class and they're doing the same program then I don't know if the students are getting what they need . . . Socially they're gonna feel better. But I don't know if they're gonna have their requirements met.

F1 raised another point regarding the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom – increased demands faced by the classroom teacher:

The teacher is bombarded with having to teach 10 different ways in one classroom and writing up 10 ISSPs and not being able to do all those lectures and stuff like that, so it is challenging.

F2 expressed that remaining in the regular classroom was also challenging for her. While she did well academically, she worked hard to attain good grades:

Well, I found it a lot of work and it was really challenging . . . Like, I did well. I came out of high school with an 85 average. Got an entrance scholarship into MUN . . .

All participants expressed that, overall, they had achieved academic success while being included in the regular classroom. However, they also identified potential challenges associated with the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom.

Theme Three: Meeting Students' Needs

While all participants received supports/accommodations during high school, some expressed that they had not received the accommodations needed to do their best. Numerous participants expressed that, during their senior high years, there had been issues/problems; issues encountered by participants varied from failing to receive appropriate supports to an LD remaining undiagnosed.

While **M1** believed that he received the accommodations necessary for academic success in high school, in his opinion, he was not challenged by the program. When asked if, during high school, he had received the services he required, he responded:

Except for challenge, yes.

When **M2** was asked whether his needs were met in senior high, he responded:

No, not really.

In his opinion, a quiet room would have been advantageous. As well:

A reader would've been a big help.

M2 did receive extra time during assessments. However:

What they were doing was I would write in the gym with everyone else and when, when everyone else was finished and I was the last one, they'd take me and put

me in another room. So, I was kind of, I was interrupted – pretty much – in mid thought.

M2's experience of graduating from high school without his LD having been diagnosed resulted in him feeling that he was not as well prepared for MUN as he should have been.

Maybe if I was diagnosed beforehand successfully . . .

When asked if he had received adequate supports during high school, **M3** stated:

(I) *got what I needed.*

In his opinion, he received the supports required in order to succeed in his high school course of studies. However, he expressed that he did not receive enough instruction and practice in the area of writing skills:

But when it comes to writing . . . There wasn't enough. It was on the back burner really. There wasn't enough . . . I wish I worked on the spelling and grammar. . .
Or be able to organize your thoughts. It's not done enough.

According to **M3**, having the ability to:

organize your thoughts and put them down in a coherent way . . . it's so vital. It's just vital.

When **M3** decided to move from a basic to an academic stream, he did not feel that his teachers fully supported his decision:

I believe some did and some never.
A lot of them . . . I heard the word a lot of times – you don't have the 'foundation', you don't have the 'foundation', you're gonna have trouble . . . felt

a lot of times . . . It's not that they . . . The teachers didn't want you to succeed

but they didn't want to rock the boat or anything . . .

When I wanted to go to the academic stream, they weren't like, they didn't say,

"Oh, that's a good idea." They were, like, let's keep comfortable here . . .

Overall, **M3** felt that his decision was questioned and his abilities doubted. However:

If you told me I couldn't do it, I was gonna do it, you know. It didn't bother me. If

anything I thrived on it.

M3 also raised the issue of effective teaching styles. When discussing a specific

Science class, in which he was unable to keep up with notes, he commented:

Our teacher, I'd say his main teaching style was just, like, get up in front of class,

notes, explain the two boards of notes and erase it, like, constantly . . . it was a lot

of information to take in.

This style of teaching caused particular difficulty for M3 due to the large amount of

writing required.

M4 revealed that, in high school, the extra time he required to complete

assessments was not always provided. This caused him significant anxiety:

I can remember when I used to do tests without things (extra time) *. . . I stressed –*

having anxiety – I'd even cry sometimes.

F1 expressed that she had received the supports she needed to attain academic

success during high school:

The high school did a good job with me.

However, there had been major concerns during her grade nine year:

The special education teacher . . . he didn't really want to be teaching and he ended up missing classes or just giving us stuff . . . My mother actually fought with the school system . . .

A support **F1** received during senior high was extra time during tests/exams. In fact, during exams, she received unlimited time:

Actually, in high school, I was given as much time as I wanted. And that's one thing I think they should change although I loved it then. My final English exam that I did – that was the public – it took me five hours. I was there all day, non-stop . . . But the thing is, I was so used to getting as much time as I needed, that when I came into university – you're only allowed time and a half . . . It was a struggle that first year.

F1 referenced that some teachers seemed to have low expectations due to her LD:

And teachers, I think they assume that you're not gonna go on. I know, a lot of times throughout my schooling, my parents were told (student's name) *is not going to get anywhere. She's going to, you know, she likes to do her hair . . . Maybe she can become a hairdresser or something . . . Because I kept saying that I want to go to university and they were trying to steer me, steer me away. . . . it was just assumed that they* (students with LDs) *couldn't go on . . .*

F2 indicated that, during high school, she was not introduced to the use of assistive technology. In her opinion, this would have been beneficial:

It would have been, definitely, advantageous to have some of the programs – like Kurzweil – but, at that point, I hadn't even heard of them . . . Maybe even having,

like, some sort of recorder while I was there 'cause often times I would usually look at my friends' notes and we'd compare notes and stuff like that . . . 'Cause I'd write it down and then I'd have to go look through my book and try and find it 'cause I spelled it wrong.

Most participants expressed that they were satisfied with the academic supports provided during senior high – that the supports provided had enabled them to succeed academically. However, participants identified numerous issues and concerns related to high school programming and teacher attitudes.

Theme Four: Stigma

Participants expressed varying opinions about the extent to which they felt stigmatized during high school. One participant expressed that he had experienced no stigma in high school. Other participants felt stigmatized to varying degrees.

M1 reported that:

There was no stigma in high school.

M2 expressed that he felt more stigmatized as a child than during his senior high years. When asked if he felt stigmatized and/or treated differently by students or teachers, he responded:

In the earlier grades . . . Probably differently. You know, in grade two my vice principal wanted to take me out, said I wouldn't amount to anything – that I wouldn't amount to anything, that I'd never do good in Math but I ended up in advanced Math in high school.

Comments by **M3** reflect that stigma was more pronounced at the junior high than at the senior high level:

Junior high was . . . a little rough at the start . . . They used word . . . "sped," "romper," "romp," . . . I didn't want any trouble but some of the guys got pretty vicious.

M4 felt minimal stigma during his high school years:

I don't make it a problem; it's not a problem for me.

I really don't think there was a label.

I played a lot of sports too so I don't think that people would label me as 'the kid with the learning disability.'

F1 made numerous statements reflecting that her LD diagnosis had resulted in stigmatization during high school:

I'll just say it straight up. Student just look at you . . . 'cause they don't understand at all.

They do look at you differently and stuff like that.

It was hard going out for tests because . . . people knew. And that was a big thing.

She also expressed that her friends were, for the most part, peers with learning issues. She experienced difficulty connecting with non-disabled peers:

But, in terms of socially – I think – I ended up connecting with other people . . . My group of friends were the other people who had disabilities.

She recollected a specific incident:

I remember, one time, one of my friends she didn't try at all – she didn't study at all. And then she'd come out and she'd say she was stupid because a dyslexic girl

did better than she did. That was kinda, you know, hard . . . You get that, you know.

F2 also felt the effects of stigmatization:

Kids pick on you. Especially when you're out in separate classes and stuff. It's like, "Oh, this is the sped class, or the "dumb class."

She reported that she felt the effects of stigmatization more acutely when she was younger:

I was dealing with it a lot better by the time I got to high school.

There was no overall consensus regarding stigmatization at the senior high level. While some participants were of the opinion that stigmatization was significant at the high school level, others expressed that this was not the case.

Theme Five: Parental Support/Support of Significant Person(s)

Each participant, when asked if parental support played a role in his/her academic success, responded affirmatively. A number of participants identified parental support as being a major factor in their high school academic success and, ultimately, in their pursuit of post-secondary education . Other participants identified other significant person(s) - e.g., guidance counselors, teachers - as playing supportive roles in their academic pursuits.

When **M1** was asked if parental support had been a factor in his success, he responded:

Yeah. It's helped. Sometimes I think that, earlier on especially, I think that they weren't given as much credit for what they were saying as they should have been.

Because, from what I can gather, earlier on – junior high, elementary, primary –

the schools made a lot of mistakes; my parents told them that any more mistakes

wouldn't be ignored.

M2 revealed that, despite the fact that his LD was not diagnosed until after

completion of high school, his mother had suspected an LD at a young age:

Mom was always at it. I mean, grade three, she was trying to get me tested for

dyslexia; she got me tested for something . . . She was always there trying to give

me a hand and trying to give me techniques to try to adapt to my style.

When questioned regarding whether parental support had been a factor in his

success, **M3** responded:

Definitely. . . It would be much, much harder if my parents weren't there to help

me out . . . Especially reading over my work and stuff like that.

In a follow up e-mail, **M4** emphasized the importance his mother had played in

his education:

My mother especially had a huge influence . . . Always talking to all the teachers

in the parent teacher conferences and letting them know what was up. She always

encouraged me to ask questions when I was confused on something in class . . .

Always stressed that I was not stupid or dumb because of my learning disability

but that I was just a little different and needed a little more time, etc. but she knew

that my plan was to go to university and she expected nothing less from me so she

helped me . . .

F1 identified her mother as playing an instrumental role in her education. Her

parents, particularly her mother, provided a tremendous amount of home support. She was also influential in ensuring that appropriate academic programming was put in place. This is reflected by numerous statements:

. . . my mother actually fought with the school system.

But we (student and her mother) *did a ridiculous amount of work in English and stuff like that so I would be able to get into the regular program.*

I think I got what I needed to get because my parents worked really hard at it.

I had parents who were . . . interested in school and could help me and I think that's what made my circumstance better and why I'm in university today.

F1's mother continues to provide academic support with her university courses:

But I do get my mom to edit all my work for spelling and stuff.

F2's mother requested that she be assessed at an early age (**F2**'s brother was diagnosed with an LD and her mother suspected that **F2** might also have an LD). When asked about parental support, **F2** responded:

She is a really good advocate. She did some work with the Learning Disabilities Association and she was always there - like with the different guidance counselors and stuff – so she was really good.

F2 acknowledged that her mother's support had been a major factor in her academic success:

It made a big difference. She used to sit with us when we were working on our homework, me and my brother. She used to sit down and, when we started, she started and, when we finished, she finished.

F1 also identified her high school guidance counselor as playing a role in her success:

The guidance counselor, he's incredible! He's still there today. He's the best person I ever met! He's really . . . He knew where I wanted to go. He knew I had a dream to go to university. And he was gonna make it possible for me.

M1 commented that his high school guidance counselor:

was really great about setting up a meeting with (coordinator at the Blundon Centre) *and it was really great . . .*

Some participants identified that supportive teachers had played a role in their success. **M1** felt that, overall, his teachers were supportive of his plans to attend university:

They expected me . . . to do something else besides high school . . . But thinking back, I think that more of my teachers saw me as, like, an academic type person who could do well in university as opposed to a trade.

M3 identified a teacher who had sparked his interest in the area of history and the possibility of pursuing the study of history at the post-secondary level:

One of my teachers kind of sparked me in history. He was my Consumer Studies teacher . . . and I kind of got an interest in it and . . . it snowballed from there. I'll do history.

While some participants' parents were more actively involved in their childrens' educations than others, all participants agreed that their parents were supportive of their educational goals. Some participants also recognized the influence of other supportive person(s) in attaining their academic goals.

Theme Six: Self-awareness

Overall, participants demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding personal learning styles. Participants were able to identify personal strengths and needs.

When **M1** was asked about specific difficulties caused by his LD, he responded:

For me, it's mostly fine motor skills and spelling. My handwriting is really bad and I cannot spell to save my life.

M2 explained his reading difficulties:

I had tracking problems. I had visual convergence problems so, when I try to look at something – say a piece of paper or especially a list – sometimes I miss lines. So, basically, there's a jump in my eye so, when I'm reading, I skip lines or I read the same line over again . . . I miss the middle sometimes in lists or on my tests.

When asked what specific difficulties his LD disability cause, **M3** indicated that:

. . . reading and writing are the main part of it. And a bit of . . . short term memory sometimes. Like I would have to . . . I get class notes because I wouldn't be able to write everything down and I wouldn't be able to process it all.

M4 emphasized:

It just takes me a bit longer to write things . . . I'm not slower cognitively . . . I understand it the same rate as anyone else does but, in terms of getting it on paper . . . A written output problem is what I was diagnosed with.

F1, when asked about the difficulties caused by her LD disability, stated:

. . . Visual memory loss. 'Cause that affects my spelling – big time – and reading.

She also expressed that her LD had, in the past, caused difficulty with organizational skills. However, she has learned to compensate for these organizational difficulties:

It used to affect organization but I've kind of learned a way around it. Now I'm over organized . . . I write lots of notes. And I have, like, a big chart so I just write, like, write everything out that I need to get done and stuff like that.

She expressed that, despite her spelling difficulties, she is a strong writer.

Yes, I can write, it's just that sometimes spelling is an issue.

F2 demonstrated an awareness of her personal strengths and needs. She explained:

I find it much easier if something is read out loud. Even, sometimes, if I read it out loud (as opposed to someone reading it to her)*, it's not so bad. But, often times, I'll pronounce words wrong . . . But my writing is quite neat . . . I can write neat but I spell things wrong all the time.*

She had discovered her best studying strategy:

I find that the easiest way for me to learn is to write everything down, like, repeatedly.

I have to write it down and just keep writing it and, maybe making it shorter and shorter each time.

Despite having an awareness of personal strengths and needs, several participants were unable to explain their learning difficulties in specific terms.

When asked about his specific diagnosis, **M1** responded:

Asperger's Syndrome with some sort of pervasive something or other.

When **M1** was asked when and how his LD was diagnosed, he was unsure:

Oh gosh. It's in the paperwork if you look around for it.

M3 was diagnosed with an LD during his grade eight year. However, the results of the assessment were not well understood by him at the time:

They also used words like 'visual' and 'spatial' and stuff like that at the time . . .

F2 was unsure of her exact diagnosis. When discussing the fact that both her and her brother have LDs, she stated:

Like, I think they say he is (pause) dysgraphic and I'm dysphonic. I get 'em confused.

Theme Seven: Work ethic/Determination

Most participants expressed that, in order to compensate for their reading and writing difficulties, they developed strong work ethics. Academic achievement was not easily attained and much time and effort were required in order for participants to attain their academic goals; several participants overcame significant obstacles to academic success.

M2 was diagnosed with a visual convergence problem during his Level II year. An optometrist prescribed visual exercises in order to improve his visual skills. However, these exercises proved to be very difficult:

I had tears coming down because it bothered me. It took so much. It was just so painful.

M3 indicated that changing to the academic stream at the beginning of his Level II year was challenging:

But I remember, within the second month, I was like, I bit off more than I can

chew but I kinda just put my head to the grindstone and went at it.

M4 experienced significant difficulty taking notes during class; he re-wrote all class notes at home – a time consuming task. This commitment to his work resulted in legible notes for review and study.

F1 maintained her good grades by spending large amounts of time reviewing class material at home with her mother:

She had to re-teach me everything.

F2 dedicated a tremendous amount of time to her schoolwork in order to attain good grades. This is reflected by several of her statements:

But the thing about it is I'd get home in the afternoon and I'd probably take 20

minutes for supper and I'd study 'til I went to bed. So, you know, it's not much of

a life like that . . .

I used to spend hours and hours every night just trying to sift through everything

we had to go through.

All participants met with academic success during senior high school, enabling them to pursue post-secondary studies at Memorial University. However, in the majority of cases, their academic success was largely due to a willingness to sacrifice leisure time to focus on their studies.

Theme Eight: Adjusting to Memorial University

Participants identified several issues that made the transition from high school to Memorial University particularly challenging. Increased workload was identified by

several participants as being a major difference between high school and Memorial University:

M3 expressed that:

The main difference (between high school and university*) – time management. No doubt. Staying on top of it.*

That's the biggest thing, is time management. Definitely.

M4 reiterated this point:

The workload is definitely heavier . . . Managing your time is another thing that's really important.

When asked her opinion regarding the major difference between being a high school student and being a Memorial University student, **F1** responded:

The workload.

F2 also referenced the demands of an increased workload:

There's very little time to actually study . . . Every little break I got at MUN, I was studying. As soon as I got home, I was studying. Til quite late most nights.

Several students reported difficulty adjusting to the pace of university classes. **M3** referenced a specific Mathematics class, in which:

It was just, go, go, go, go, go!

F2 experienced difficulty keeping up with the pace of class notes. She expressed that it was a challenge:

Adjusting to the speed of the classes. Writing notes was a big thing.

Adjusting to larger class sizes and, as a result, less intimate relationships with instructors also caused difficulty for some participants. When asked his opinion regarding what had been the most difficult adjustment when beginning his studies at Memorial University, **M2** responded:

I guess it would be the class sizes here. I guess, in the first year moreso than afterwards, there was less of a connection with the professor – my prof and I then I'd had with my teachers.

M4 also referenced the relationship between student and instructor:

. . . not knowing your teacher as well as you would in high school also played a role ... because, usually, you know the teacher . . . They took more interest in you. Up here, it's kinda like, here's a form, this is where I'm gonna be to write my test and that's all.

F2 stated:

You get in there and there's the professor and the class with, like, 300 students and the professors don't know you . . . Being in the classroom with the same person the entire year is completely different than being in a class with 300 people for two and a half months, three months.

F1 found the process required to obtain supports at Memorial University problematic. She stated:

One of the biggest things I can think of off the top of my head is going and talking to all your professors and going to the Blundon Center and getting all their paperwork and, here you were, trying to get your textbooks and, I guess, a lot of extra work and a lot of extra stress you don't really want to have to deal with on

the first day of school . . . And you've got to get everything signed by your

teachers and sign it yourself and bring it back so it's a lot of running around . . .

F2 also identified this as a stressor:

I mean, you're so stressed out as it is then you're running around trying to do all

these errands . . .

M4 remarked that:

The red tape is always the worst part.

When asked their opinions on whether a transition program would be beneficial

for students with LDs transitioning from high school to Memorial University, the

consensus was that a transition program would be useful.

M1 responded:

It probably would be. I mean, personally, (his high school guidance counselor)

was really great about setting up a meeting . . . it was done on a one to one level

but, for a student coming from away, that might not be that great.

M2 expressed that he thought that a transition program, of some sort, would be

helpful for students with LDs. He believed that students should experience:

Maybe something like an orientation where they sit in on a class and go to the

Blundon Centre and find out all the services that are available.

When asked if he thought that a transition program for students with LDs would

be beneficial, **M3** responded:

Definitely. Anything, you know, that could make things easier would be awesome.

M4's response, when asked if he thought a transition program would be beneficial

for students with LDs, was:

Absolutely.

F1's response, when asked if a transition program would be useful for students with LDs coming to Memorial University, was:

Definitely . . . I mean you're so stressed out as it is then you're running around trying to do all these errands so, yeah, definitely knowing your campus and knowing who to talk to and who to come see, especially if you're having issues with your professors.

F2 also thought that a transition program would be beneficial:

I think it would be a good idea.

Theme Nine: Advice/Recommendations

A piece of advice offered by several participants was the importance of recognizing that there is a transition period upon beginning studies at Memorial University. According to participants, in all likelihood, difficulties would be encountered during this transition period.

M2 stated:

That there is a transition period between . . . getting used to university. So, just hang in there . . . Find out what works best for you, what doesn't work for you. And keep on truckin'.

This sentiment was echoed by **M3**:

Honestly, as cliché as it sounds, just work hard. You're gonna have to work hard. Work hard and don't give up on it. You know, just because – your first semester – you get's 50s . . . You'll get into the groove . . .

Another piece of advice repeated involved completing a reduced course load at Memorial University. **F1** stated:

And, if you find things are too difficult, don't feel ashamed to have to drop a course. I had to drop one my first time. I started off doing fine ... doing a reduced course load ... is very helpful. Don't be ashamed of it. It takes you a little longer.

F2 also advised consideration of a reduced course load:

Take a lower course load; don't do five courses ... Don't do the full course load ... And people with learning disabilities need to take more time to do things. Apparently, it takes me twice the time to three times the amount of time as it takes the average person to do my work. So I think that's what I would say. I would say, "Just don't do the regular course load ... "

M1 recommended that first year students with LDs keep their options open:

But just keep an open mind. Be ready to completely trash what you want to do right now because you might try it and it might not be for you. Have a backup plan.

When asked to identify changes that need to be made in order to better meet the needs of students with LDs, **M2** stated:

I think there has to be more proactive in trying to identify a student with a learning disability. Maybe if I was diagnosed in grade three instead of grade 11, it would have helped me out a lot.

This sentiment was echoed by **M4**:

I would like to see it be more thorough when identifying kids with disabilities. I feel that there are a lot of kids that slip through the cracks and do not function well in the school system because of it.

Based on his high school experiences, **M3** expressed that the continuity of having the same teacher over a period of time was helpful:

What I found good was teachers . . . Was being able to have . . . If you were able to keep a teacher there . . . Like a teacher would show up for a couple of months and leave again – stuff like that.

He expressed that, when a teacher remained in a position for a longer period of time, a better teacher-student relationship was established:

And we were able to . . . I guess kind of a respect thing . . . You kind of respect them more . . . They didn't just kinda, you know, go away.

F1 recommended that students with LDs take advantage of on campus services available to Memorial University students:

Don't be nervous about using places like the Writing Center – getting help there.

M4 also recommended that students with LDs:

Get educated and know your options. Get to know the tools and structures and facilities that are available to help you and try to utilize them as much as possible.

In regards to recommended changes to the Pathways framework, **F1**'s main concern was that students be placed on the appropriate pathways:

As long as students are put on the right pathway . . . as close as possible to the

regular.

She also recommended that, in order to ease the transition from high school to Memorial University, students with LDs become familiar with the services available via the Blundon Center:

Going back to advice, I was just thinking. Getting to know the Blundon Center

before . . . Because if you come in the first week and you kind of struggle to get

everything organized and it doesn't work. So kind of getting familiarized with it if

you can.

F2 advised that students with LDs be self-confident:

Be comfortable with it. Be comfortable with yourself. You know, as far as I'm

concerned, wear it on you like a banner.

She also referenced the importance of being an advocate by:

Getting students comfortable enough with it (LD) *to be able to go up and talk to*

people is a really big thing . . . I think there should be some way of getting the

students, like, comfortable with it themselves so they can talk to their fellow

classmates and say, "Listen, can I get a copy of your class notes,?" . . . Generally

talking to other students, to their teachers . . .

F2 believed that a focus on assistive technology, at the high school level, would be beneficial:

There should be something based on, like, the technologies that are available

especially if you're coming to university . . . The Adaptive Tech room down there

has the Kurzweil and Dragon . . . Things like that. I've never used it . . . Have

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someone go through all that – teach you how to use it – instead of having to learn

it all on your own while you're doing courses.

F2 also emphasized the importance of students with LDs finding out about various grants that could be of assistance:

I'd definitely tell them about the different grants – about the Canada Study Grant and things like that. Like, I got my computer, my Kurzweil, my Dragon, all through that grant . . . So look into all these things and who to talk to . . .

Based on their personal experiences, participants offered numerous pieces of advice and recommendations. Advice/Recommendations covered a range of topics. Some recommendations focused on areas within the loci of students' control; other recommendations were directed toward decision makers in the educational system.

Introduction

        This study undertook an investigation of a specific component of the special

education system of Newfoundland and Labrador – the Pathways framework - and its

perceived effectiveness based on the experiences of students with reading/writing related

LDs. The perceptions of students were examined to determine if, in their opinions, the

Pathways framework had effectively prepared them for the rigours of university studies.

        The experiences of six participants were examined to determine commonalities

and differences in their experiences. Upon completion of the interviews and analysis, it

was apparent that, while each participant's experience and perceptions was unique, there

were numerous common 'themes' in the participants' perspectives.

Theme One: Understanding of the Pathways Framework

        All participants were aware that the Pathways framework is a component of

special education delivery in the Newfoundland and Labrador school system. Most were

aware that there are various pathways to graduation, numbered one through five.

However, despite having received special education services via Pathways, there was a

definite lack of understanding regarding the framework.

        While some participants correctly identified that there are various pathways to

school leaving and that these pathways are assigned numerical values, participants'

knowledge of the meaning and ramifications of the various pathways was weak. The

overall lack of understanding of the Pathways framework is concerning. It raises

numerous questions. Are high school students with LDs properly informed about

programming options and the possible ramifications? Are they directly involved in discussions and decisions regarding programming? Are students' post-secondary options being compromised because they are not fully informed of the ramifications of programming?

It appears that some students with LDs have the misconception that Pathway 4 (an alternate course) automatically has a negative impact on eligibility for post-secondary studies; this is untrue. Alternate courses that focus on such areas as pre-requisite or compensatory skills do not negatively impact post-secondary acceptance. In fact, such alternate courses often teach students with LDs valuable compensatory skills to facilitate academic success; these are often referred to as "enabling courses."

The participants' lack of knowledge about the Pathways framework indicates that senior high students require more information and education about the various pathways to graduation and the implications of those pathways. Better education in this area will facilitate more informed and direct engagement of students in the educational decision-making process.

Based on the results of this research, it is recommended that students with LDs (and their parents or guardians) be educated about the Pathways framework, the meaning of the various pathways (1, 2, 3 . . .) and the implications of the various pathways on both high school graduation and post-secondary options. A variety of personnel can be involved in ensuring that students and their families receive accurate information regarding the Pathways framework: special education teachers; guidance counselors; educational psychologists.

Theme Two: Inclusion

All six participants had been included in the regular classroom. Participants had remained in the regular classroom during instructional time and were removed only for assessment purposes (to receive accommodations such as writing in a small group setting or having tests read aloud). Overall, participants supported inclusion in the regular classroom for students with LDs.

The responses of the participants suggest that they recognize both academic and social advantages to remaining in the regular classroom. Despite having faced academic challenges in the regular classroom, the participants identify that setting as being the most appropriate setting. Overall, participants displayed a willingness to put forth the extra effort required to attain academic success in the regular classroom. In **M3**'s case, this meant approaching the classroom teacher when he was experiencing difficulty. In the case of **M4**, notes taken during class were re-written at home – a time consuming process. **F1** received extensive re-teaching at home (her mother was a teacher). In the case of **F2**, an exorbitant amount of home study was required on her part. The experiences of these participants suggest that students with reading/writing related LDs can experience academic success in a regular classroom setting. The experiences of participants suggest that, in order to achieve academic success, students with reading/writing related LDs must devote more – sometimes much more – time and effort into their studies than non-disabled peers.

It is not only students but also regular classroom teachers who may struggle with the inclusion of students with LDs in the regular classroom. Many regular classroom teachers have not received formal training regarding meeting the needs of students with

LDs. This, combined with the everyday demands of teaching and (often) large class sizes, makes meeting the needs of students with LDs difficult for regular classroom teachers. It is not merely the students themselves who require significant support; regular classroom teachers also require support and training if they are to effectively meet the needs of students with LDs in their classes.

The information presented by the participants, combined with the findings of previous research, warrant several recommendations: consistent implementation of effective and appropriate supports; increased collaboration between classroom and special education teachers; increased education of classroom teachers regarding learning disabilities; use of varied teaching and evaluation strategies; and increased support for classroom teachers.

In order for students with LDs to be successfully included in the regular classroom, it is vital that appropriate supports be utilized. Many students with reading/ writing disabilities struggle with everyday classroom tasks such as writing notes and reading assigned material. In order for students with difficulties in these areas to meet with academic success in the regular classroom, creative and effective methods of compensating for these difficulties must be developed and put into practice.

In order for such supports to occur, increased collaboration between regular classroom teachers and special education teachers must occur. Classroom teachers are curriculum experts. However, in some cases, they have limited knowledge regarding the field of LDs. Conversely, special education teachers are knowledgeable in the field of LDs but do not have the same level of curriculum expertise as classroom teachers. Collaboration between classroom and special education teachers must occur in order for

appropriate and effective supports to be developed and implemented. In the current school system, with its many demands on teachers' time, opportunities for collaboration are less than ideal. Efforts to combat this issue must be made.

While, as research indicates, many classroom teachers are willing to accept students with LDs into their classrooms, unfortunately, many are ill-equipped to effectively meet their needs. Classroom teachers require further education in the area of LDs. It is vital that classroom teachers realize that, while an LD may interfere with a student's processing of information, it does not diminish a student's intelligence.

Old school teaching methods – traditional chalk and talk instruction and pencil and paper evaluations – are, in the majority of cases, not well suited to students with reading/writing related LDs. Teachers must recognize that such assessments do not reflect the abilities of students with learning LDs. Alternate assessment methods must be encouraged, explored and used. It is vital that teachers expand their repertoire of both instruction and evaluation methodologies in order to allow students with reading/writing related LDs to express their true knowledge and understanding. Training and support in this area are needed.

There are many demands on classroom teachers. In order to meet the range of needs of students in their classes, much support is required. Classroom teachers require consultative support from individuals such as special education teachers, educational psychologists, speech language pathologists, guidance counselors and others with relevant expertise. As well, effective in-class support is required. The role of special education teachers must be re-evaluated and steps taken to optimize support. Increased

involvement of special education teachers in curriculum planning is highly recommended.

Theme Three: Meeting Students' Needs

Despite participants' overall positive reports of high school experiences, a number of participants indicated that there were programming issues/concerns during their high school years. There was no typical response regarding the effectiveness of the services provided at the senior high level. While some participants felt, overall, that their needs had been met, others felt that this was not the case.

M1 expressed that, for a period of time, he received social skills training at lunchtime. In his opinion, this was ineffective as it restricted his opportunities to actually socialize with his peers.

M2's visual convergence issues remained undiagnosed until Level II; his LD remained undiagnosed during his high school years. As a result, during his Level I and Level II years, he received minimal services. Upon the diagnosis of his visual convergence issues, he received extra time to complete tests/exams. However, as his LD remained undiagnosed, the services provided during Level III were not adequate. At Memorial University **M2**'s assessments are read aloud. This is a logical accommodation given the fact that he has been diagnosed with dyslexia. It is likely that **M2**'s academic performance during high school was negatively affected by the fact that he was not properly diagnosed. His experience raises questions regarding whether assessment provided at the high school level is consistently adequate and timely.

M3 completed basic courses during his Level I year. In order to pursue university studies following high school graduation, he switched to the academic stream in Level II. While, overall, he felt that the academic supports provided during his senior high schooling met his needs, he did not feel supported in his decision to move into the academic stream. **M3** reported that some teachers questioned/doubted his ability to succeed in the academic stream.

F1 also felt that her academic abilities and suitability for university studies were doubted. Some of her teachers suggested that she was better suited for a career in a profession such as hairstyling as opposed to a career requiring university studies.

Both **M3** and **F1** felt that some senior high teachers had doubted their academic abilities and, ultimately, their chances of success at the post-secondary level. However, both participants are now successfully pursuing their courses of studies at Memorial University.

While the learning styles of students with LDs may present challenges, students' intelligence is not compromised. It is important that educators encourage students with LDs to pursue their dreams. Students with LDs need educators to assist them in finding ways to accommodate for their difficulties – not doubt their abilities.

The experiences of **M2** and **M4** reflect inconsistency in the provision of academic supports. In each case – **M2** being interrupted during assessment and **M4** inconsistently receiving extra time – students did not receive effective and consistent supports. As a result, not only was their academic performance most likely compromised, but anxiety levels were elevated.

F2 expressed that there was room for improvement in terms of supports she received during high school. She was not exposed to assistive technology but, in her opinion, would have benefitted from it.

It is vital, for students with LDs to be academically successful, that appropriate supports be put in place in a timely, effective and consistent manner. Participants' experiences reflect that this is not always the case. It is the responsibility of regular classroom teachers, special education teachers, special services teams and, ultimately, administration to ensure that students with LDs within a school receive the accommodations to which they are entitled and that the accommodations are provided in an efficient manner. All parties involved must do their parts to ensure that student needs are met.

The participants' responses to questions regarding the effectiveness of services provided during high school are somewhat alarming; numerous participants disputed whether the services received had sufficiently met their needs. The participants' experiences indicate that services received at the senior high level warrant close examination and evaluation. Not only do the services received at the high school level affect high school academic performance, there are long-term implications as well. Poor academic decisions at the high school level may jeopardize a student's chances of meeting post-secondary entrance requirements. As well, students who meet the requirements may be ill-equipped to meet the demands of post-secondary studies.

None of the participants received Pathway 4 services (alternate courses) during their senior high schooling; Pathway 4 is an individualized alternate course or program. Its intent is to develop specific skills and/or knowledge (Government of Newfoundland

Labrador, 2010a). Alternate courses, for students with LDs, often focus on such areas as assistive technology, self-awareness, compensatory strategies and organizational skills. It is surprising, and concerning, that no participants received alternate courses. Well developed alternate courses may have provided participants with key skills and strategies to compensate for their difficulties. The development and delivery of alternate courses is an area which requires attention and examination.

Several participants expressed that, while they are currently using assistive technology (e.g., Kurzweil, Dragon Naturally Speaking) at the university level, assistive technology training was not provided during their high school years. Access to assistive technology has the potential to promote post-secondary academic and career outcomes for students with disabilities (Burgstahler, 2003); it is often an effective compensatory tool for students with learning disabilities. An introduction to and experimentation with various assistive tools during their high school years, in order to determine what best suits their needs, would be of great benefit to students with LDs particularly those pursuing post-secondary studies.

Unfortunately, many programs that work well for students with reading/writing related LDs are costly. Kurzweil 3000 – text to voice software – currently retails (black and white version) for slightly less than $2000.00 (Kurzweil Education Systems, 2005). This is not within the financial means of many families. While schools can apply for assistive technology for students (e.g., Kurzweil), the process is often a time consuming one. Months may pass from the time of application submission until the technology is available to the student. The process is one in need of improvement.

A further issue with assistive technology is the lack of training on the part of many special education teachers. While assistive technology can be an extremely useful tool for students with LDs, it is an area in which many special education teachers have minimal training or experience. Special education teachers cannot be expected to train students in the use of assistive technology when they have received little or no training themselves. In order for students with LDs to receive training at the high school level in the use of assistive technology, efforts must be made to train special education teachers.

Theme Four: Stigma

The current Pathways framework places emphasis on the diagnosis of exceptionalities. As a result, all students receiving Pathways services must have diagnosed exceptionalities. This, in some cases, can lead to students feeling stigmatized. Overall, participants' experiences suggest that stigmatization is present at the senior high level. However, it is less severe than at lower grade levels.

"Students with learning disabilities may be ridiculed by their peers; they are often the victims of overt bias, ignorance and outright hostility from peers (and, even in this day age, from some teachers)" (Bender, 2008, p. xi). Participants' experiences suggest that, at some point during their educational careers, students with LDs will encounter stigmatization.

It would be beneficial for students with LDs to receive instruction and counselling at a young age. It must be clearly communicated to students with LDs that their intelligence is not compromised – that, in actuality, they are of average (or above average) intelligence. Work must be done to develop a positive self-concept, self-

confidence and advocacy skills in students with LDs. Without strong personal self-understanding, students with LDs will be ill equipped to handle the incidents of teasing and bullying that will almost certainly occur at some point(s) during their educational careers.

In addition to developing positive self-image, students with LDs must learn strategies for coping with teasing and bullying. Counseling and instruction in this area would be beneficial. Students with LDs would benefit from learning to handle such situations in an assertive but unaggressive manner.

Such services would assist students with LDs to effectively deal with stigmatization. Without proper education regarding learning disabilities and without effective strategies to combat teasing and/or bulling, students with IDs will be likely to suffer damage to their self-esteem and self-image.

Theme Five: Parental Support/Support of a Significant Person(s)

Literature indicates that parental support is key to student success. Parents can be the most effective people in the prevention and remediation of learning problems (Hart-Johns & Johns, 1982). This finding is supported by my research. Parental supports were identified, repeatedly, as a factor in participants' academic successes.

Without exception, each participant responded affirmatively when asked if parental support played a role in his/her academic success. A number of participants identified parental support as being a major factor in their high school academic success and, ultimately, in their pursuit of post-secondary education.

It is vital that parental involvement in the decision-making process be encouraged and supported. While, in some cases, parents might not have high levels of formal education, they remain experts on their children and the importance of this knowledge – and of the importance of parental expertise – must be recognized. Educational personnel – classroom teachers, special education teacher, guidance counselors. – must not only seek to involve parents but ensure that parents are equal partners in the decision making process.

Unfortunately, not all students with LDs have vocal and/or forceful parents. In fact, some students (e.g., those in foster care) may not have a true parental figure to fight for their educational needs. In such cases, other members of the decision-making process must make special efforts to ensure that the best interests of the students are the focal point of the process.

As well, it is vital that parental demands and requests be taken seriously. As was proven by the case of the participant whose LD remained undiagnosed until following high school (but whose mother suspected an LD from an early age), parental instinct is not always acknowledged. As a result, in this particular case, a participant completed 13 years of schooling without proper diagnosis.

Some participants identified another significant person as playing supportive roles in their academic pursuits. It is apparent, from the participants' views of their experiences, that school personnel such as guidance counselors and teachers can play an influential role in student motivation and success. It is imperative that school personnel recognize that, to some students, they are very important and influential role models. The

support of a significant person, such as a guidance counselor or teacher, can play a key role in both the self-image and the academic goals of students with LDs.

As stated by Roffman (2007), "It's crucial that (parents) and the rest of your teen's IEP transition team believe in (the) child's potential to continue learning at some level after high school – and that you convey that lifelong learning is a realistic goal" (p. 169). In order for students with LDs to believe in their own academic abilities, they must feel that others believe in their abilities. Perhaps, most importantly, this belief in the student's abilities must be communicated to the student.

Theme Six: Self-Awareness

The majority of participants displayed a strong understanding of personal strengths and needs. However, some participants experiences difficulty identifying and explaining their personal diagnoses.

If students are to be actively and effectively involved in educational decision-making, there must be a strong awareness of personal strengths, needs and learning styles. It is of great importance that students, from an early age, be educated about LDs. It is especially important that students learn about personal strengths, areas of need and how to compensate for difficulties caused by their LDs.

Without high levels of self-awareness, it is unlikely that students will become effective self-advocates. In the early years of a student's educations, parents/caregivers play key roles in ensuring that the educational needs of the student are met. However, as students transition to higher levels of education, and eventually to the working world, it is imperative that they be able to advocate for their own needs. In order to perform

optimally, both academically and professionally, individuals must be able to identify, communicate and compensate for areas of difficulty.

Students' roles as self-advocates must be encouraged and facilitated. This may occur in a variety of ways including counseling/discussion with the school guidance counselor and the implementation of alternate courses in the areas of self-awareness/self-advocacy.

Theme Seven: Work Ethic/Determination

In order to compensate for their reading and writing difficulties, participants demonstrated strong work ethics. Academic achievement did not come easily and much time and effort were needed in order to attain their academic goals. Overall, students invested significant time, effort and energy into their studies.

The participants' experiences suggest that, in order for students with reading/ writing related LDs to perform well academically, they must demonstrate a strong work ethic and high levels of motivation and determination. It is, arguably, inevitable that students with reading/writing related LDs must work harder than non-disabled peers in order to achieve. Thus, unless students demonstrate a willingness to invest time and effort into their pursuit of academic goals, it is likely that they will not attain success at the post-secondary level. In fact, it is likely that they will not achieve to the level necessary to meet university eligibility requirements.

All participants reported experiencing difficulties adjusting to the demands of university studies. However, many of these difficulties are also faced by students without LDs. For example, several of the participants noted that the workload associated with being a Memorial University student is significantly heavier than that of a high school student.

As a general rule, college students spend three to four hours of out-of-class time for every hour spent in class. However, "for students with learning disabilities, this rule of thumb should be doubled, given the time needed for rewriting lecture notes, reading, listening to audio textbooks or integrating course materials from a variety of sources" (Roffman, 2007, p. 185). If students with LDs are to succeed at the post-secondary level, it is imperative that they have well-developed time management skills. Without these skills, students with LDs will, undoubtedly, struggle to meet academic demands. A focus on time management skills at the senior high level, perhaps as a component of alternate courses provided to students with LDs, would be beneficial.

A factor identified by some participants as a stressor during the transition period was the process of completing the necessary paperwork required to receive accommodations at Memorial University; this is a stressor unique to students with LDs. The experiences of these students suggest that the possibility of streamlining the procedure associated with receiving services at Memorial University warrants consideration.

Two of the participants indicated that, during their senior high schooling, they had been given unlimited time to complete assessments. However, Department of Education

policy now dictates that extra time is limited to time and a half. Both participants who had received unlimited time during high school reported having difficulty adjusting to the time and a half restriction upon arriving at university. Inconsistency, at the high school level, in the administration of board or department policies regarding provision of accommodations can result in increased difficulty at the post-secondary level. Thus, it is important that – to the greatest extent possible – schools follow such policies.

All participants expressed that a transition program – focusing on assisting students with LDs transition from high school to Memorial University of Newfoundland – would be beneficial. Currently, such a program does not exist. The development of a transition program, designed for students with LDs, would be worthy of further examination and consideration. Such a program could serve to familiarize prospective students with the campus, services offered by the Glenn Roy Blundon Center, with various other services available (e.g., the Writing Centre).

Theme Nine: Advice/Recommendations

Participants' advice for Level III students with LDs was varied. A piece of advice offered by more than one participant was that students recognize that there is a transition period and that difficulties during that transition period are to be expected.

For many students, with and without LDs, the first few weeks and months at Memorial University are overwhelming and intimidating. Many students struggle to adapt to larger class sizes, less intimate relationships with instructors and increased workload. It is important that students with LDs recognize that struggling to

adapt to university expectations is normal, not a reflection of lack of ability or lack of suitability.

At the high school level, students with LDs should be informed of the challenges likely to be encountered during the initial adjustment period at Memorial University. Thus, the students will be better prepared for these challenges. As well, it would be advantageous for students with LDs to be made aware of the Glenn Roy Blundon Centre, its location and the services it provides for students with exceptionalities. Students should also be informed of the process required in order to receive services at Memorial University. As indicated by some participants, the process can be somewhat overwhelming and stressful.

As pointed out by **F2**, it typically takes longer for students with LDs to complete work than non-disabled peers. As a result, for many students with LDs, maintaining a full course load of five courses may be challenging. Thus, for some students with LDs, it is advisable to complete a reduced courseload. Students with LDs should be advised to consider this possibility as well as advised of the consequences (in terms of student loans and scholarship eligibility).

M1 emphasized the importance of keeping one's options open. This is true of both students with and without LDs. Many first-year students become confused when the courses and programs they intended to pursue are no longer appealing. Counseling at the high school level, regarding potential career choices and secondary options, is important. As well, in the cases of students with LDs, it would be wise for university personnel to meet with them prior to the first semester and/or year of studies to re-evaluate and, perhaps, re-consider post-secondary options.

Based on his experiences, **M2** recognized the importance of maintaining a proactive as opposed to a reactive approach to dealing with issues surrounding students with LDs. Students experiencing academic difficulties should be assessed at an early age to identify or, in some cases, rule out possible LDs. Early and correct diagnosis of learning issues is key to effectively and proactively dealing with potential issues as well as to making appropriate programming decisions.

M3 expressed that, when a teacher remained in a position for an extended period of time, this helped build a more respectful and productive relationship. For various reasons, a special education teacher may remain in a position short-term (due to moving from a part-time to a full-time position, moving from a replacement to a permanent position, moving to a different school). Efforts must be made to support special education teachers in their jobs and, when possible, maintain consistency.

Memorial University's Glenn Roy Blundon Center provides many services to students with LDs. Effectively communicating information to students with LDs, as well as to school personnel (e.g., guidance counselors) about the existence of the Blundon Center, its location and services provided is important.

Finding out about the availability of financial assistance to students with LDs was mentioned (by **F2**) as being of importance. Financial assistance can allow students to access assistive technology, as well as prevent students from seeking out part-time jobs (and decreasing the time available to focus on academic studies). Guidance counselors are key players in making students aware of available funding. Efforts must be made to ensure that counselors remain up-to-date on funding availability and that this information is relayed to eligible students.

Conclusion

The author has been privileged to share the experiences of six intelligent and insightful individuals with LDs. All participants were eager to share their stories and are hopeful that their experiences and insights might prove helpful to other students with LDs.

There are numerous obstacles to success for students with LDs. However, all participants in this research have overcome the obstacles resulting from their LDs and experienced success at both the high school and post-secondary levels. They have developed strategies to compensate for their areas of need and accentuate their strengths.

The author has worked with many students with LDs since beginning her teaching career. Unfortunately, many of the students did not attain the same level of academic success as the participants in this research study. It is the hope of the author that, as a result of this study – and, specifically, as a result of the presentation of the accounts of students with LDs who have attained academic success – that other students with LDs will realize that academic success is possible at both the senior high and the post-secondary level.

Findings have numerous ramifications for students with LDs. The research results indicate that, while academic success is attainable for students with LDs, it does not come easily; academic success, for students with LDs, often requires considerable sacrifice. Spending extra time with teachers, extensive home support/tutoring, re-writing class notes, devoting large amounts of time to study and review are some steps taken by participants to attain academic success. For students who are unwilling to devote extra effort to their academic pursuits, high levels of academic success are unlikely.

Findings may affect the views of teachers and other school personnel. As identified by participants, teachers and other school personnel can be a source of significant support for students with LDs. When school personnel express doubts about the abilities of students with LDs, it can have negative and long-lasting effects on the students.

Administrators and other decision makers in the education system would be wise to consider the study's findings. As identified by participants, appropriate supports and educational programming is key to the success of students with LDs. Without such, the struggles of a student with an LD are intensified.

Parents should take special note of this study's findings. The influential role of parents was a point underscored by all participants in this study. Parents, as reflected by other studies in addition to this one, are key in the academic success of their children.

Perhaps most importantly, this study provided individuals with LDs with something that, to date, has been lacking in the literature available regarding inclusion and Pathways: a voice – a personal perspective on the difficulties associated with having an LD and how they can be overcome.

It is encouraging that a review of the Pathways framework has now occurred and steps to improve the framework are being taken. However, it is key to remember that the perspectives from which we can learn the most are those of the students themselves.

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APPENDIX A

Letter of Introduction

Lori-Ann Ash
Masters Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
c/o 9 Eagle Street
Paradise, NL
A1L 1G8

October 19, 2008

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a Masters student in the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Studies Program of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Currently, I am conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Wayne Nesbit as part of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education. The purpose of this letter is to provide information regarding my research project: <u>A phenomenological study of current Memorial University students diagnosed with learning disabilities affecting reading</u>.

I am seeking to gain a greater understanding of the senior high experiences of Newfoundland students with learning disabilities (affecting reading), as well as their personal perceptions of their senior high schooling and the effectiveness of the services received. I believe that the results of this study will provide important data which can be used by teachers, policy makers, teachers, students and other educational shareholders in order to improve the services available to students with reading-related learning disabilities.

Should you choose to participate in the study, I would like to meet with you and discuss your high school experiences. I will arrange a personal interview at your convenience at a mutually agreed upon location. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will be recorded; the recording and all information collected will be considered confidential. In addition, at this time, I will collect pertinent documents relevant to the study including ISSP(s) and transcript(s). Upon review of the information collected, a second interview may be scheduled if further information or clarification is required.

During the interview, you will have the right to refuse to answer questions, stop the interview or withdraw your participation in the project. Every effort will be made to maintain a calm and comfortable setting. However, should recollection of your high school experiences cause you emotional upset, I will direct you to appropriate counseling services. As well, with your permission, I will contact you the day following the interview to ensure that you are not experiencing undue or unexpected anxiety as a result of the interview.

Information will be collected to ensure anonymity. Each audiotape and transcribed notes will be coded and stored in a locked cabinet. The coding information will be stored in a separate cabinet. The information will be destroyed two years after publication of my final report. No identifying information will be included in the report; participants shall remain anonymous.

The results of the study will be made available to you – free of charge – upon request.

Should you have further questions, please feel free to contact me via telephone 782-1606 or via e-mail at loriannash@esdnl.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Wayne Nesbit, via telephone at 734- e-mail at wnesbit@mun.ca.

Two copies of the consent form are provided. If you decide to participate in the study, I ask that you sign both copies of the consent form provided. Please return one copy to me and keep the other for your personal records.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Lori-Ann Ash

APPENDIX B

Consent for Research Project Participation

My name is Lori-Ann Ash and I am a Masters student in the Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Studies Program of Memorial University's Faculty of Education. I am currently conducting research regarding students' perceptions of senior high experiences and how well these experiences prepared them for the academic demands of Memorial University. Specifically, I am focusing on the perceptions of students who have reading-based learning disabilities. I am requesting your consent to participate in my research; I would like to meet with you and discuss your senior high school experiences.

Your contribution to the research will consist of a taped interview. The time and location of the interview is flexible and is to be mutually decided. The interview will be approximately 45 minutes in duration. For clarification purposes, a brief second interview or follow up via telephone/e-mail may be required.

In addition, you will be asked to provide documents relevant to your senior high and university education. These include but may not be restricted to: ISSP's; high school transcript(s); university transcript(s); and assessment reports.

Anonymity will be maintained. All information – written and other – will be destroyed upon completion of the project (as described in the letter of introduction). Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the project at any time.

This research project has been approved by Memorial University of Newfoundland's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research. Should you have ethical concerns, please contact the ICEHR at 737-8368. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 782-1606 or my supervisor, Dr. Wayne Nesbit, at 737-8606.

Your signature on this consent form indicates that you have read/been read the letter of introduction and that you understand the project's purpose, as well as potential harms and benefits. You also have been informed of the steps that will be taken to protect your rights and anonymity.

Please sign below and indicate your preferred method of communication (mailing address, telephone, e-mail) and necessary information in the space provided.

□ Mail (Please provide mailing address). _____

_____

□ E-mail (Please provide e-mail address). _____

_____

□ Telephone (Please provide telephone number(s) and preferred time to call).

_____

_____

_____   _____
Participant's signature   Date

_____   _____
Investigator's signature   Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

1. When and how was your learning disability discovered? *(age at diagnosis; early difficulties; how it was explained to the student, etc.).*

2. What specific difficulties does your learning disability cause? How does it affect you?

3. Describe the school that you attended during your senior high years. *(number of students, location, grades, etc.)*

4. What academic challenges did you experience during your senior high years?

5. What services did you receive at senior high? Did they effectively meet your needs?

6. What challenges did you face when you were in the regular classroom?

7. What is your opinion on including students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom?

8. Do you think that having a learning disability stigmatized you during senior high? Now?

9. What is Pathways?

10. What challenges did you face, because of your learning disability, when you made the transition to MUN? Describe your transition.

11. In your opinion, what is the major difference between being a senior high student and being a MUN student?

12. What services/supports do you receive at MUN?

13. What can be done, at the high school level, to better help students with LD's prepare for MUN?

14. In your opinion, did the services you received during high school prepare you for the demands of MUN?

15. Some universities offer a transition program for students. Do you think that a summer program focusing on transition to MUN be beneficial for students with LD's?

16. What are your career plans?

17. What advice would you give a L3 student with an LD who plans to attend MUN this fall?

18. The Pathways system is currently being 'tweaked'. What recommendations would you make? What changes should be made?