


2003

# Perceived Attributes to the Development of a Positive Self-concept from the Experiences of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities

Charles P. Bernacchio

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), and the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Bernacchio, Charles P., "Perceived Attributes to the Development of a Positive Self-concept from the Experiences of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities" (2003). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 511.  
<http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/511>

This Open-Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine.

PERCEIVED ATTRIBUTES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A POSITIVE SELF-  
CONCEPT FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENTS WITH LEARNING  
DISABILITIES

By

Charles P. Bernacchio

B.A. Boston University, 1973

M.Ed. Boston College, 1980

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education (Individualized Program)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2003

Advisory Committee:

William E. Davis, Professor of Education, Advisor

Walter J. Harris, Professor of Education

Dorothy T. Breen, Associate Professor of Counselor Education

A. James Artesani, Associate Professor of Special Education

Stephen T. Murphy, Professor of Counselor Education

PERCEIVED ATTRIBUTES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A POSITIVE SELF-  
CONCEPT FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENTS WITH LEARNING  
DISABILITIES

By Charles P. Bernacchio

Thesis Advisor: Dr. William E. Davis

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Education (Individualized Program)  
May, 2003

The Perceived Attributes to Positive Self-Concept Study examined the experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities to determine the ways in which living with a disability may have shaped their development of a positive self-concept. This study considered the perceptions held by adolescents themselves, their parents, and their teachers as valuably contributing to their own development of a positive self-concept. The research questions for the study included:

- ◆ "How does the experience of living with a disability affect the perceptions of adolescents with learning disabilities held by themselves, their parents and their teachers?"
- ◆ "How do the experiences of living with a disability influence the self-concept development of adolescents with learning disabilities?"
- ◆ "Which of the experiences of living with a disability do these adolescents, their parents and their teachers perceive as influencing positive self-concept development?"
- ◆ "What other factors (for example, personal support or perceived control) contribute to the development of positive self-concept in adolescents with learning disabilities?"
- ◆ "How are perceptions of self-concept among these special needs youth, their parents and their teachers different from the standard definition of global self-concept?"

The research sample included 6 adolescent males with learning disabilities between the ages of 16 and 19 who had received special education services during high school. Both self-selected criteria along with the results of a standard self-concept scale were used to

substantiate the presence of a positive self-concept in these individuals. This study employed a multi-case study design and used a range of data collection techniques including in-depth interviewing, case records, field notes, and anecdotal reporting.

Among the major findings were a number of factors involved in the developmental processes reflected in dimensions deemed critical to self-evaluations of youth with learning disabilities at this stage of their lives. Three factors that were perceived to have the strongest impact on their positive self-concepts: determination to become adults; confidence in reaching their personal goals; and encouragement, support and love from parents. The range of forces identified as influences on self-concept for this group of youth with learning disabilities include several closely linked factors to self-efficacy beliefs, perceived control and outcome expectations which are associated with motivation to learn and self-determination in youth with cognitive disabilities.

## DEDICATION

To my godchild, Nicholas Evans-Case,  
to my wife and daughter, Catherine and Michaela  
and  
to my parents, Regina and Italo

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At this point I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness and gratitude to the many individuals who have encouraged and supported me throughout my doctoral education. A special word of thanks is expressed to Dr. William E. Davis, Committee Chair, for his extraordinary guidance and advice towards pursuing my research and conducting a valuable, qualitative study and for his enormous commitment of time, energy and wisdom in thoroughly reviewing this manuscript for content, format and style. I am also very grateful to Dr. Dorothy T. Breen, Dr. Walter J. Harris, and Dr. A. James Artesani for their assistance and valuable insights during the design and process of conducting the thesis study and for their support, feedback and high expectations in serving as members of my doctoral committee. I also wish to especially express appreciation to Dr. Stephen T. Murphy as my external committee member, who provided consultation and feedback on my research methods and thesis drafts for which I am indebted.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues at the College of Education and Human Development, University of Southern Maine, particularly faculty and staff in the Department of Human Resource Development for their consistent encouragement and support to me. My sincere gratitude goes to Dr. John M. Sutton for his supervision and mentoring through my practicum fieldwork. A special word of thanks also is given to Dr. E. Michael Brady, Dr. Michael P. O'Donnell and Dr. Deborah H. Larson for their consistent inspiration, counsel and interest in my progress.

Finally, I want to especially convey my appreciation and thanks to my wife, Catherine and daughter, Michaela without whose cooperation, patience and loving support I could never have completed this study and doctoral program.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	viii

### Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Statement of the Problem .....	3
1.2 Need for the Study.....	5
1.3 Research Questions .....	7
1.4 Research Objective and Methodology.....	8
1.5 Overview of the Study .....	10
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	13
2.1 Overview .....	13
2.2 Dimensions of Self-Concept .....	13
2.2.1 Self-Concept in Learning Disabled Youth .....	16
2.2.2 Psychosocial Adjustment in Youth with Disabilities .....	20
2.3 Developmental Aspects of Adolescence .....	23
2.3.1 Social-Emotional Development .....	25
2.3.2 Pursuit of Independence and Work .....	28
2.4 Self-Determination .....	32
2.5 Perspectives on Self-Concept from People with Disabilities .....	37
2.6 Summary .....	39

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS .....	42
3.1 Overview .....	42
3.2 Methodological Framework .....	43
3.3 Research Contributions and Limitations .....	46
3.4 Methods and Procedures .....	48
3.4.1 Subject Sample .....	52
3.4.2 Participant Demographics .....	55
3.4.3 Data Processing and Management .....	59
3.5 Role of the Researcher .....	62
4. ANALYSIS OF YOUTH DATA .....	66
4.1 Overview of Findings .....	66
4.2 Context of Youth Experiences .....	67
4.3 Presence of Supportive Relationships .....	79
4.4 Opportunities for Growth and Encouragement .....	89
4.5 Summary of Key Findings .....	94
5. ANALYSIS OF PARENT DATA .....	102
5.1 Overview of Findings .....	102
5.2 Context of Parents' Perceptions of Youth Experiences .....	102
5.3 Bridging from Adolescence to Adulthood .....	115
5.4 A Nurturing Family Environment .....	122
5.5 Creating Success for the Future .....	129
5.6 Summary of Key Findings .....	135
6. ANALYSIS OF TEACHER DATA .....	145



6.1 Overview of Findings .....	145
6.2 Context of Teachers' Perceptions of Youth Experiences .....	146
6.3 Recognizing Students' Capabilities .....	156
6.4 The Pivotal Role of Parents with LD Adolescents .....	164
6.5 Future Aspirations and Visions of LD Students as Adults .....	176
6.6 Summary of Key Findings .....	181
7. DISCUSSION: PERCEIVED ATTRIBUTES FROM LIFE EXPERIENCES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN LD YOUTH .....	194
7.1 Overview .....	194
7.2 Dynamic Forces of Self-Concept Development .....	195
7.3 Research Inquiry into Self-Concept .....	203
7.4 Theory, Research and Practice Implications .....	208
7.5 Summary .....	213
8. REFERENCES .....	216
9. APPENDICES .....	222
Appendix A: Positive Self-Concept Criteria .....	223
Appendix B: Participant Information Form .....	226
Appendix C: Interview Guidelines for Adolescents, Parents and Teachers .....	229
Appendix D: Overview of Study, Criteria for Selection, and Disclosure of Researcher .....	233
Appendix E: Student Assent Script .....	235

Appendix F: Consent/Release Forms .....	238
Appendix G: Reference Coding of Participant Sources .....	245
BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR .....	247

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Dynamic Forces of Self Concept Development . . . . .	44
Table 2: Multidimensional Self Concept Scale Results . . . . .	55
Table 3: Age and Education of Participants . . . . .	56
Table 4: Type of Educational Program . . . . .	57
Table 5: Employment of Participants . . . . .	57
Table 6: Education and Income of Parents . . . . .	58
Table 7: School Setting, College Educated Parents and Family Income . . . . .	67

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As with most adolescents, youth with disabilities face the same developmental tasks including the adjustment to physical and emotional changes accompanying puberty. Certain bodily changes associated with puberty are particularly significant to one's overall self-image, and they can have a profound psychological effect on youth. Any undesirable physical characteristics evident from a disability may make the adolescent susceptible to teasing, ridicule and exclusion and even result in rejection of self (Blum, 1988; Davis, Anderson, Linkowski, Berger & Feinstein, 1985). Additionally, adolescent psychosocial adjustment is marked by increasing peer pressures, sexual activity and self-discovery. Foremost in the minds of adolescents is their need for acceptance and "fitting in" with peers. Frequently, this becomes more difficult for youth already diagnosed and labeled in school as students with special needs.

The definition of disability has varied from the World Health Organization's (1980) general description of being a "restriction or lack of ability to do activities in the manner or within the range thought to be normal for a human being" to the detailed explanation of disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) that requires the presence of a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits the person in a major life activity. Also, the ADA definition continues by including those who have a record of a physical or mental impairment or may be regarded to have an impairment, and hence, experience discrimination based on that record or belief.

For the purposes of this study, disability is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA) which identifies children with disabilities to be "students (ages 5-20 years) who were appropriately evaluated to have one or more of

eleven disabling conditions (including learning disability, emotional disability, and other health impairment), that are defined under the federal statute." Under IDEA, a specific learning disability is defined as "a disorder in one or more basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not apply to children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage" (CFR Title 34, IDEA, 1991).

The development of adolescence is especially challenging for youth with disabilities and their families. When youth have acquired a congenital disability or become disabled during childhood, the adolescent and his/her family often have faced years of being labeled as "different", living with the social stigma of disability and having limited opportunities in school and in the community. For those having an onset of disability during adolescence, youth and their families typically have begun to experience feeling initial grief along with guilt and fears about the future, negative socio-cultural attitudes towards disability, and frustration from inaccessible service systems. The impact of disability on adolescents and their families at this stage in life can be overwhelming.

The advancing development of adolescents with disabilities accentuates their emerging identity coupled with their limited opportunity for socialization, independence and vocational aspirations as they encounter adult life. The first identity figures for youth

are their parents, and as youth mature, their identification is extended to family and others in society. How one sees himself/herself in relationship to society's perception is extremely important (Strax & Wolfson, 1984). Strongly linked to the development of identity is acceptance, including one's self-acceptance, in addition to the acceptance of family, peers and others. Adolescents who are accepted and validated by others in their environment are generally believed to hold a positive self-image (McAnarney, 1985; Strax & Wolfson, 1984).

Despite the substantial influence of full inclusion efforts within public schools today, there is considerable stigma complicating the psychosocial adjustment of youth with disabilities. Emerging from the impact of inclusion policies and practices is the question of whether or not adolescents with disabilities are adequately supported and able to adjust to learning, developing, and interacting in a regular classroom setting. Few researchers have examined whether and how inclusion into mainstream education influences the development of a positive self-identity among youth with disabilities (Stainback, Stainback, East & Sapon-Shevin, 1994).

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The preponderance of research on adolescents with disabilities has focused on coping with the disability's impact and the associated stigma (Blum, 1988; Davis, et al. 1985; Elkind, 1985; Kronick, 1981; Seigel, Golden, Gough, Lashley & Sacker, 1990; Strax & Wolfson, 1984). Special needs adolescents with the support of parents must address many developmental issues while coping with a disabling condition (Davis et al. 1985). Parents, especially mothers, face the particular burden that disability places on families (Blum, 1988). Although studies have found some youth with disabilities have

well-developed identities despite their conditions, as well as the ability to compensate for their disabilities (Hagborg, 1996; Offer, Ostrov & Howard, 1985; Silverman & Zigmond, 1983) this research has not considered the perceptions of self-concept which adolescents' with disabilities and their parents hold. To date there has been no study attempting to directly investigate the experiences of special needs youth in addressing or coming to terms with disability as it relates to their development of self-concept.

Acceptance and social support, particularly from parents and family members of special needs adolescents, is considered critical to adolescent development (Hagborg, 1996; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; McAnarney, 1985; Morningstar, Turnbull & Turnbull, 1995; Strax & Wolfson, 1984). Adolescents with disabilities who are encouraged to actively participate in decisions and who are included in the process will feel a sense of belonging according to the perceptions of, and relationships with, family and peers. However, few studies have closely examined such perceptions and relationships, and none have explored the perceived effects of social support on the development of self-concept in youth with disabilities.

A related area of study is self-determination which recognizes the importance for youth with disabilities to believe in their ability to direct their lives by making choices and having control over the activities and environments in their lives. This perspective also presumes that people with disabilities are able to become active agents on their own behalf, rather than merely being passive recipients of the actions and policies of others. Most of the self-determination research has focused on whether or not relationships exist between variables of control, autonomy, academic achievement and self-efficacy that pertain to the self-determination of youth with disabilities (Nowak, Laitinen, Stowitschek

& Affleck, 1995; Wehmeyer & Kelchner 1996; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Some studies stress the importance of personal and family supports in the post school transition process of youth with disabilities (Morningstar et al. 1995; Nowak, et al. 1995).

Wehmeyer (1994) also has indicated that further study must start to parcel out various factors that contribute to perceptions of psychological empowerment. More research is needed to determine whether these factors are thought to be influencing self-concept development.

## 1.2 Need for the Study

The aforementioned absence of special needs youth' perceptions regarding their experiences involved in the complexity of identity development supports this research which inquires into the everyday experiences of youth living with disabilities, including how they perceive themselves and how they come to terms with their conditions in order to examine their acquired resilience and persistence to get on with their lives. This study examines the daily coping strategies which youth with disabilities use and the relationships between them and their families, teachers, friends and significant others. It also considers what Charmaz (1991) deemed are the "significant events" and "turning points" that affect one's feelings about oneself and that afford opportunities to gain new perspectives about one's self-identity.

The experience of disability and its implications, coupled with adolescent development, adds to the complexity of acquiring a positive self-concept. Families and youth coping with disability recognize and find ways to meet the challenge of advancing biological growth, social-emotional development, preferred independence and emerging identity in adolescence. The post-school transition of youth with disabilities into



adulthood continues to be the proving ground for self-concept development, and it is a critical period through which all people with and without disabilities must struggle.

This study focuses on this complex developmental period and explores the meanings which youth with learning disabilities, their parents and others have assigned to the experience of disability and self-concept during this stage. In addition, this research also adds to our knowledge of the social construction of disability and its context for understanding the lives of youth with disabilities which are intimately bound to the societal response to their conditions (Gliedman & Roth, 1980; Resnick, 1984).

The developed subject's view of disability and self-concept from such research helps illustrate how youth, their parents and others feel that they've come to terms with their condition or how it has changed them in their own and others' eyes. Critical questions about disability, self-perceptions and self worth are confronted. The insider's view draws from the sociological perspectives of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and phenomenology (Schutz, 1971). The relevant theoretical assumptions of this approach define the natural social world as dynamic and comprised of meanings created by persons as they interact. Social analysts in this approach face the complex and shifting meanings within a contextual setting whenever they study social life.

This theoretical approach to research expects to preserve and accurately reveal these patterns of meaning. This study seeks to do more than to describe. It also helps construct reality by giving sociological meaning to the data (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) that produce a new understanding of disability in light of self-concept development without distorting what is being reported by the study subjects. Research needs to explore the perceptions and interpretations of youth, their parents and teachers relative to

their experience with learning disabilities in order to help explain the significance of the internal and external factors believed to be shaping self-concept development. Hence, my research explores how youth, their parents and their teachers assign meaning to their experience of living with learning disabilities pertinent to their development of a positive self-concept.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This study focuses on the development of self-concept in adolescents with learning disabilities. It is unclear whether or not certain persons with disabilities learn to identify positively with their disability. Whether or not they learn to accept or reconcile their disabilities in the development of a positive self-concept is unknown. To learn about the perceived attributes contributing to self-concept development from the experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities I asked the following research questions:

1. How does the experience of living with a disability affect the perceptions of adolescents with learning disabilities held by themselves, their parents and teachers?
2. How do the experiences of living with a disability influence the self-concept development of adolescents with learning disabilities?
3. Which of the experiences of living with a disability do these adolescents, their parents, and teachers perceive as influencing positive self-concept development?
4. What other factors (for example, personal support or perceived control) influence the development of positive self-concept in adolescents with learning disabilities? and
5. "How are perceptions of self-concept among these special needs youth, different from the standard definition of global self-concept?

These questions are in direct response to gaps that currently exist in the disability and special education literature regarding self-identity development (Stainback et al. 1994) and the exploration of the individual, interpersonal and institutional forces influencing self-concept development in adolescents with learning disabilities (McPhail & Stone, 1995). It should be noted that throughout this thesis for the sake of brevity, the terms

adolescents with learning disabilities (LD), LD adolescents and LD youth are used interchangeably as often reported in the literature.

#### 1.4 Research Objective and Methodology

The purpose of this research is to explore and examine influences on the development of self-concept in adolescents with LD based on their experiences and using several sources including the perceptions of adolescents with LD, their parents and other significant professionals. It identifies the meaning they have given to experiences of living with learning disabilities and their evolving self-concept. This study investigates the perceptions and experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities in school, at home and in the community to ascertain whether or not and how their experiences may contribute to their positive identity development.

Some studies have shown that the negative attitudes and stigma that are associated with disability have a considerable effect on self-concept (Harris, 1995; Lawrence, 1991). Yet, Charmaz, (1991) suggests that people with disabilities can learn to grow from negative experiences due to attitude or stigma that have diminished self-image and to assign significance to positive experiences which serve as turning points. Such experiences help to mirror the growth and resiliency of self in people with disabilities. Irving Zola (1982) underscored the importance of context when he explained that it was difficult enough to integrate his experiences of living with a disability into his own reality, without communicating it to others to avoid being seen as a “complainer”. He stressed that people with disabilities do not have a common positive identity with disability and inhabit not one, but many, different worlds.

This inquiry considers adolescent self-concept development within the broad social and cultural context of living with a disability. It examines the significance being assigned to experiences of youth with learning disabilities by themselves and by significant others. The research seeks to understand their perceptions of self-concept as part of their adolescent development. The study also helps to explore resiliency in these special needs adolescents and the extent to which they can come to terms with, accept, or integrate their disabilities within their self-identity.

Since little is known about the relationship between disability and self-concept development, it is logical to use a constructivist approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) engaging in a hermeneutic methodological process. I employed the use of a case study method of inquiry (Patton, 1987; Yin, 1989), which calls for exploratory research. This approach used in-depth interviews, field notes, self-assessment and anecdotal reporting. It examined perceived attributes and experiences of LD adolescents that are associated with self-identity.

Between March 2001 and December 2001, I gathered data for this study using the above-stated strategies and techniques. The study sample (n=6) was primarily drawn from southern and central Maine with one participant selected from Maine's "Downeast" region. Three subjects were residing close to a major metropolitan area and three were living in rural locations. I interviewed the parents of most of the subjects, five mothers and three fathers. One participant refused to allow a parent interview. Seven teachers also were interviewed: three public secondary education teachers, two private school secondary education teachers, one special education tutor and one university professor. I selected the sample based on two specific criteria: 1) they were identified to be LD as

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Overview

The following review discusses the complexity of self-concept relative to the effects of disability, including definitions and the global dimensions identified in the literature. I present the research that has been conducted on self-concept in youth with learning disabilities and explain the role of psychosocial adjustment in the self-concept formation in youth with disabilities. In addition, the review reports on the developmental aspects of adolescence discussing social-emotional development in this population and the importance of pursuing independence and work.

I also explore issues particular to self-determination for youth with disabilities. I examine the issues germane to their perceived capability to affect change in their lives. The review concludes with a discussion of the gaps in the literature in reporting perspectives of persons with disabilities regarding their self-concept development and summarizes key findings, thus indicating the potential contributions from this type of research.

#### 2.2 Dimensions of Self-Concept

The theoretical definition and model of self-concept provided by Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton (1976) has had considerable influence on recent self-concept research. They defined self-concept to be a person's self-perceptions formed through experiences with and interpretations of one's environment. Byrne (1984) denoted that these self-perceptions involve our attitudes, feelings, and knowledge about our skills, abilities, appearance and social acceptability. Such self-evaluations are influenced

especially from reinforcements and attributions for one's behavior, as well as by the evaluations of significant others.

Research based on this model has lead to the development of a multifaceted construct of "global self-concept" which encompasses academic and non-academic domains (Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Hattie, 1996). In this study I accept this construct which subsumes other more descriptive elements of self-concept, such as self-esteem or self-image. It must be noted that I am using the terms self-worth, self-identity, and self-concept interchangeably which are more often reported as evaluative in the literature.

The self-perceptions of adolescents with disabilities appear to be affected by their condition, as well as by their experiences of living with a disability, their interactions and interpretations of environments, and feedback of themselves given by significant others. For instance, confronting stigma is an influential factor in the lives of adolescents with disabilities, particularly those with mental illness or mental retardation who experience negative, sociocultural attitudes toward a disability. Yet, recent self-concept research (Marsh & Hattie, 1996; Marsh & Yeung, 1997) also would support the idea that youth with disabilities, just as non-disabled youth, are not merely passive recipients to external forces if given the opportunity to become active agents who are able to succeed in determining their future outcomes. Otherwise, as the authors suggest, all persons with disabilities only would be seen as victims and as miserable failures.

The impact and severity of a disabling condition, in light of our American cultural norms of being healthy, beautiful, and productive youth . . . coupled with the lack of exposure to appropriate, well adjusted role models . . . can foster negative feelings about oneself (Blum, 1988; Strax & Wolfson, 1984). Conversely, Seigel, Golden and Gough

(1990) suggested that low self-esteem and depression in the chronically ill adolescents whom they studied was primarily associated with the disease and not from experiencing negative life events. Yet, these authors never discuss how inaccessibility or any lack of opportunities in the home, school and community may have affected their self-images.

Other recent literature on the self-concept of individuals with communication or language related disabilities has emphasized the significance of not just the loss of speech or impaired aural language, but also the societal reactions to that group. Finn (1995) attributed the negative self-concepts found within persons with deafness to their hearing parents' negative reactions to deafness, the excessive restraint of the deaf in activities, and their difficulty with communication. Similarly, in a review of literature on the psychological adjustment to aphasia, Brumfit (1993) indicated many aphasic people expressed difficulty coping with both a loss of speech as well as others' reactions to their communication difficulties due to aphasia's subtle effects. The combination of these two factors were felt to have a major negative impact on self-image.

However, the research into the self-concept of youth with disabilities is by no means definitive. Though some studies of adolescents with chronic illnesses and physical disabilities have revealed the presence of underlying psychological conflicts affecting self-concepts in some groups, this finding was not present in other groups (Offer, Ostrov & Howard, 1985; Viberg, Blennow & Polski, 1987). Researchers found adolescents with multiple sclerosis and cystic fibrosis revealed major difficulties with their developing self-concepts though youth with asthma and cancer managed to cope with their conditions and exhibit more positive self-images. Blum (1988) contends that the impact of certain conditions may be more destructive to one's body image. Yet, there

is no reason to believe all adolescents with chronic illness or disabilities sustain such poor body images.

### 2.2.1 Self-Concept in Learning Disabled Youth

Beliefs differ as to whether or not the presence of a disability equates with a poor self-concept, which can also depend on factors such as age, gender, parental involvement, supportive relationships, socioeconomic status and the disability itself. In a study done on adolescents with epilepsy, Viberg, Blennow and Polski (1987) suggested that the lack of their ability to have full control over their bodies was so problematic and anxiety provoking during adolescence that it influenced ego development. Yet, another study that focused on the self-concept of adolescents with learning disabilities revealed that their learning disabilities had no association with a poor self-concept and further that there was “no empirical support for the assumption that adolescents who are learning disabled see themselves as incompetent” (Silverman & Zigmond, 1983, p. 480).

A considerable amount of research on self-concept has focused on students with learning disabilities (LD). In the majority of studies on self-concept in LD students, the results suggest that academic domains are not strong predictors of self-concept in these students. Chapman's (1988) review of forty-one self-concept studies, which examined general and academic self-concept in school-age children (though few included secondary age youth), found evidence that many students with learning disabilities are able to maintain a sense of self-worth in alternative non-academic areas. This review preceded the advent of national inclusion efforts and interestingly found that placements in mainstream settings were not associated with higher (more positive) self-concepts any more than segregated placements. However, it was found that any placement for



remedial assistance had a greater effect on self-concept than no placement at all (Chapman, 1988).

A more recent review of the literature which focused on the use of a validated self-concept measure and involved a discrete sample of adolescents with learning disabilities in sixth grade or above, was performed by McPhail and Stone (1995). In their review of seventeen studies, there were twelve more studies involving secondary age youth than those studies included in Chapman's (1988) review, which reported on learning disabled adolescents. Based upon their review, McPhail and Stone (1995) offered two major conclusions. First, largely consistent evidence suggests the presence of a more negative academic self-concept in learning disabled adolescents than their average-achieving peers, which is consistent with Chapman's report on research involving younger learning disabled children. Second, a globally negative self-concept of lowered self-esteem does not appear to inevitably accompany a learning disability, even in the adolescent years, when the cumulative toll of academic difficulties and frustrations would be expected to influence other aspects of one's self-perceptions.

As in Chapman's (1988) review, the McPhail & Stone (1995) review similarly indicated the need to distinguish between academic and general self-concept. Most of the empirical studies over time also have argued for measures that assess separate domains of self-concept (Chapman, 1989; Harter Whitesell & Junkin, 1998; Marsh, 1990). Also, it is clear from the literature that it is important that self-concept be conceptualized as multi-dimensional (McPhail & Stone, 1995). Yet, debate also exists within the field regarding a distinct number of domains, and whether or not that number increases with one's developmental level. Some researchers also are taking issue with the idea that self-

concept is a relatively stable "trait" and suggest considering it as a "state" that is highly variable across situations (McPhail & Stone, 1995). This argument seems to place considerable importance on understanding the processes in which individuals with learning disabilities are engaged as they evaluate themselves. In essence, this perspective has not been advanced by the research to date (McPhail & Stone, 1995).

A meta-analysis of research conducted on studies of school-based, non-clinical interventions conducted between 1975-1997 assessing their impact on LD students examined 36 interventions in 31 separate studies (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999). Their results showed that school-based interventions, even those typically lasting less than 12 weeks, did lead to beneficial changes in the self-perception of LD students. A key feature in many of the successful academic interventions was an emphasis on students working collaboratively with classmates and getting feedback from their classmates on their progress. The greatest effects were evident with middle school students with learning disabilities.

Compensatory strengths in other out-of-school self-concept domains along with internal locus of control for academic success and positive school attitude to a greater degree contributed to an overall higher (positive) "global self-concept" for children with learning disabilities (Hagborg, 1996). The results of various studies suggest that the reason these LD children have exhibited a positive self-concept is due to their compensatory strengths in other personal domains (Chapman, 1988; Hagborg, 1996; McPhail & Stone, 1995; Silverman & Zigmond, 1983). In some instances, elementary age LD students, including minority children, who were reported to have low academic competencies (Kloomok & Cosdan, 1994), were still able to reflect a positive "global

self-concept". Despite acknowledging their weak academic competency, these children with learning disabilities perceived themselves as more intelligent and just as competent in other, valued non-academic areas as those students with high academic self-concepts.

Additionally, Harter, Whitesell and Junkin (1998) using the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents scale examined similarities and differences in domain-specific and global self-evaluations of over 500 adolescents (20 % with learning disabilities [LD] and 15 % with behavioral disorders [BD]). They reported that it is difficult to discount the importance of domains touted by peers, by parents and by society at large, such that "likability" or perceived acceptance by the wider peer group is more critical to perceptions of global self-worth. This pattern mirrored some of Harter's earlier findings that support from classmates is even more highly predictive of self-worth than support from close friends. Their findings indicated that among adolescents in the mainstream culture (including both LD and BD youth), dimensions of perceived social support appeal represent the most salient contributors to their sense of self-worth as a person, irrespective of their educational status (Harter et al. 1998).

Perceived social support, especially from parents, also was found to contribute significantly to the development of self-concept in LD children, as well as to developing academic competence (Hagborg, 1996; Kloomok & Cosdan, 1994; Rothman & Cosden, 1995). One study which examined students' perceptions of their LD condition among elementary school children with learning disabilities and its relationship with achievement, self-concept and social support, suggested that "perceived social skill and social support are key variables in helping students develop positive self-perceptions about themselves" (Rothman & Cosden, 1995, p.211). Although the directionality of the

effects is not clear, this research found a correlation between LD students having a less negative view of their condition and having higher general self-concepts. Other studies on adolescents with learning disabilities and other conditions also support this finding that high self-worth adolescents (both students with and without disabilities) are better able to discount the importance of weak performance areas as compared to low self-worth students (Harter, et al. 1998; McPhail & Stone, 1995).

### 2.2.2 Psychosocial Adjustment in Youth with Disabilities

The use of peer support group activities to help promote psychosocial adjustment for youth with disabilities has been an area of interest for some time (Ferguson & Asch, 1989; Hahn, 1985). It is still unclear how these group experiences foster positive self-concept or identity formation in youth with disabilities. Though “inclusionists” express concern that peer support group activities will promote segregation of special needs students, these activities suggest that people with disabilities benefit from their contact with other persons with disabilities, including adults who have had similar experiences, expressed needs and interests. Such activities could offer students with special needs opportunities to identify better with other role models, who have positive self-concepts. This premise is derived from the idea that significant involvement between children with disabilities and others with similar conditions, for example through adult-mentoring, will contribute to a well-developed sense of identity as adults with disabilities (Ferguson & Asch, 1989).

A study examining the effect of group therapy and support on adolescents with LD found that participants reported that these experiences enhanced their self-esteem, sense of competence, awareness and understanding of self and others, and the ability to

relate to peers (Mishna, 1996). This study followed eight LD adolescents (4 boys and 4 girls) in psychodynamic group therapy for approximately four months. The LD youth highlighted the advantages of being with others whom they saw as similar, and they described their relief and the positive effect of associating with other adolescents with LD and related concerns. The findings suggest that these students benefited from group therapy through mutual recognition in certain developmental aspects which LD youth typically find difficult including: safety and trust among members; a sense of connection, shared feelings and experiences with each other; and group support and understanding (Mishna, 1996).

The assumption of some people with disabilities serving as supports and role models for others underscores the importance for people with disabilities to actively incorporate their conditions into the development of a positive self-identity. Thus far, most of the literature related to this topic has focused on comparisons between "able-bodied" and "handicapped" adolescents and characterizes their experiences in the context of various developmental theories (Gliedman & Roth, 1980). This discussion raises several intriguing questions that need to be examined. For example, are people with disabilities too diverse a group to be encompassed by any one typology of personality development? and how does family life impact the optimal development of a specific adolescent with a specific disability at such a critical point in life? While there seems to be considerable support for the integration of a disability into one's self-concept, many persons with disabilities are apprehensive about accepting disability's devalued social status and the negative effect on self-concept from its perceived social and cultural stigma (Harris, 1995; Lawrence, 1991).

Other lines of thought regarding development of a positive self-concept in youth with disabilities pertain to psychosocial growth in adolescence. Shulman and Rubinroit (1987) explained how the incorporation of disability into the sense of self is very frustrating and how this might influence the separation/individuation process when youth distance themselves from the family, and often overprotective parents, in seeking greater independence. They argued that consolidation of the self is primarily shaped by the perceptions of family members, especially by parents who can facilitate a respectful, supportive environment.

However, when low intellectual functioning is evident (e.g., severe mental retardation) Shulman and Rubinroit (1987) have suggested that the adolescent may lack the ability to integrate one's disability into his/her self-concept. Since one's incorporation of the disability into the sense of self is a very frustrating experience, it is marked by low mood and even depression, although it links the adolescent with reality (Shulman & Rubinroit, 1987). Interestingly, related research on the future expectations of middle and secondary age students with mental retardation indicated that these students had significantly less adaptive and hence, less hopeful, expectations for the future than did peers with either learning disabilities or those students without disabilities (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 1998).

Nevertheless, if we assume as Wehmeyer and Kelchner (1996) have suggested, that special needs adolescents can learn to become active causal agents and can be psychologically empowered to shape their own lives, then perhaps developing a positive self-concept is a question of providing them with opportunities to access the knowledge, skills and environments that will support them in their aspirations. Can we determine

what adolescents with disabilities will need to come to terms with their disabilities and become more adaptive and hopeful about their expectations of the future during their transition towards adulthood?

Some researchers suggest that in order to study this crucial developmental stage in youth with disabilities, it is important to examine how they, themselves, perceive and cope with their condition and how they form their ego identity (Shulman & Rubinroit, 1987). Their ability to experience separation and to consolidate the sense of individuality, or self, is believed to be at a higher integrative processing level.

Adolescents with and without disabilities are expected to perceive themselves as separate and also to integrate the various aspects of the self. This crisis of identity, as well as the coping strategies used to adjust to and come to terms with disability, seems central to the maturational development of adolescents with disabilities (Shulman & Rubinroit, 1987).

### 2.3 Developmental Aspects of Adolescence

The transition through adolescence is characterized by biological, emotional and social changes. In early adolescence, youth often become preoccupied with their physical development in comparison with peers, and when narcissistic self-involvement more often occurs. By middle adolescence, independence and identity issues emerge, elevating conflict over autonomy, peer culture and sexual interests. Finally, late adolescence brings greater autonomy and further resolution over identity in conjunction with vocational or career aspirations (Rubenstein, 1991; Strax & Wolfson, 1984).

It is during mid to late adolescence that cognitive growth engenders youth to begin thinking abstractly and planning ahead. It is during this stage that they become better able to link present actions with future consequences, and eventually they take

responsibility for their actions with expectations of achieving individual goals (Elkind, 1985; Rubenstein, 1991). Adamson and Lyxell (1996) in their study of the characteristics of self-concept during late adolescence have indicated that a positive self-concept is correlated to four variables: (1) relationships with both parents; (2) belief of being able to realize one's future plans and shape one's life; (3) a sense of optimism toward becoming an adult; and (4) feeling a sense of belonging in a life context.

Most of the research that has examined adolescent development primarily has studied youth with physical disabilities or chronic conditions, and it has painted a considerably bleak picture for these youth (Blum, 1988; Davis et al. 1985; Elkind, 1985; Kronick, 1981; Seigel et al. 1990; Strax & Wolfson, 1984). Some of these researchers have suggested that adolescents with disabilities experience a significant disadvantage in dealing with the developmental demands of this period. Strax (1988) even has suggested that these youth experience a prolonged adolescence due to their overprotected, sheltered lives; their limited peer experience (with so much of their growth occurring within the family); and the dearth of appropriate role models influencing their identity crisis.

Adolescents with disabilities even may deny their conditions or dissociate from being identified with their disability for fear of being perceived as "different" as well as to avoid being rejected by peers. To cope with painful realities of rejection, scorn and embarrassment, they may resort to defenses, such as fantasy and denial, which are not considered pathological (Elkind, 1985; Strax & Wolfson, 1984). Some researchers even have expressed concern over the "spread" of the effects of disability beyond the functional areas in which youth with disabilities are actually limited (Davis et al. 1985).



It is believed that adolescents with disabilities need to understand their personal strengths and adopt values associated with acceptance of disability, increased self-worth and a sense of personal competence. Others also have suggested that these adolescents need opportunities to learn to work through conflicts in various capacities and to help establish an identity with the help of role models to become a self-accepting person with a disability (Davis et al. 1985; Ferguson & Asch, 1989; Strax & Wolfson, 1984).

### 2.3.1 Social-Emotional Development

Another related concept to identity formation is that of "social maturation" which occurs during the transition years in adolescents with disabilities. McAnarney (1985) describes social maturation as a part of the adolescent stage of development which is defined in the context of Pless and Pinkerton's (1975) integrated model of adjustment to disability. In this model a number of elements, e.g., family characteristics, social environment and intrinsic attributes interact dynamically to determine the coping style/strategies that adolescents use in response to a disabling condition. It suggests that the opportunity to maintain one's self-concept is relative to the extent that the person experiences acceptance, "good" self-esteem, independence, sexual relationships and a vocational future.

According to McAnarney (1985) social maturation implies that the adolescent with a disability is accepted by his/her family, peers and society, thereby creating a good feeling about oneself, an ability to move away from the family, an ability to have an intimate relationship outside the family, and an ability to find a job or career. She underscored the presence of low self-esteem problems in adolescents with disabilities and its implications, a finding that more recent studies also have supported (Davis and

McCaul, 1991; Seigel, Golden and Gough, 1990). In order for adolescents with disabilities to enhance their self-image they must feel supported by their families and feel validated by others in their environment so that they can take advantage of opportunities and choose to develop their own identity and independence (McAnarney, 1985).

Additionally, adolescence is viewed as a period of experimentation, which is crucial developmentally to cognitive growth. When the adolescent has a more restricted range of experiences, e.g., due to over-protectiveness, there are fewer resources upon which one can draw for problem solving and accessing social events. Such restrictions are common for adolescents with disabilities, and they result in reducing the experiential base for social maturation (Blum, 1988).

As with most adolescents, youth with disabilities are challenged by their evolving sexuality, concerns about dating, satisfactorily developing physically and psychosocially, having intimate peer relationships and being socially mature. For those adolescents with limited physical mobility or poor cognitive functioning, there may be more restricted opportunities to interact with peers. Social isolation and delayed maturation are common among the experiences of youth with physical disabilities (Davis et al. 1985; McAnarney, 1985; Strax & Wolfson, 1984).

Though their sexual aspirations and conflicts are similar to those of most adolescents, many of the sexual identity issues for youth with disabilities are deferred while non-disabled peers are starting to explore their new sexual capabilities (Blum, 1988). Youth with severe, chronic disabling conditions have decidedly fewer experiences than healthy peers have to broaden their socialization opportunities. In some instances, family, peers, health providers and personal beliefs conspire to increasingly

constrict their realm of experience (Blum, 1988). The fear and apprehension of parents, teachers and professionals that harm or rejection will occur if youth with severe disabilities are allowed to participate, may preclude them from socialization opportunities with peers. Consequently, the denial of new and varied experiences may influence the ability of youth with disabilities to establish personal boundaries, thus creating more difficulty for them in their efforts to distinguish reality from the desired outcomes.

A review of the literature on psychological adjustment in children with learning disabilities identified internalizing disorders involving anxiety, depression, withdrawal and low self-esteem as tending to predominate in approximately 50% of those youngsters who appear to have significant psychological adjustment problems (Brier, 1993). The researcher reported the severity of a youth's learning disability was found to be a key determinant in the likelihood of psychological adjustment difficulties within samples of children with learning disabilities in this review.

McPhail (1993) made an interesting discovery in her research involving the psychological development of adolescents with learning disabilities that was relative to their school experience. This study compared the subjective experiences regarding general affect, level of activity, and cognitive efficiency of LD high school adolescents with average and low average achieving peers. The results of this study suggested that the LD adolescents were feeling more positive and active than the two peer groups during school, while during after school hours their subjective patterns were quite similar. This finding was, in part, attributed to the adolescents' early identification of their LD conditions as well as other factors: positive school practices assuring individualized

attention in small classes, increased parent involvement and expectations commensurate with their abilities.

McPhail (1993) raises the importance of setting and opportunity relative to the developmental needs of LD youth during their high school experience. This study argues that these LD students had more opportunity in their special education settings for social interaction with other students, teachers and counselors than did their non-disabled peers. This work suggests that various kinds of classroom contexts should be viewed as dynamic sites in which students interact with significant others in different ways rather than as fixed environments (McPhail, 1993; McPhail & Stone, 1995). Given the importance which is placed on social acceptance and social relationships relative to the perceived global self-worth in LD adolescents (Harter et al. 1998), it is reasonable to expect that their experience in more informal, flexible, personal/scholastic relationships with peers and teachers in emotionally-supportive academic settings will result in more favorable self-evaluations than those of peers in more structured, less-supportive and content-mastery type classrooms.

### 2.3.2 Pursuit of Independence and Work

Another adolescent developmental task is pursuing greater autonomy. In addition to the nature and severity of the disability, one's independence from parents is contingent upon the parent-child relationship and the family's degree of acceptance of the disabling condition (Davis, et al. 1985; Strax, 1988). The need for more autonomy often is countered with familial over-protectiveness, strong parental ties and considerable dependency on the family. Blum (1988) suggests the pattern of conflict between youth with disabilities and their parents occurs chronologically later than for non-disabled

peers. External constraints including accessible transportation, parental supervision, medical regimens, or necessary adaptive equipment may serve to further extend and reinforce dependence.

According to research examining the coping styles of LD adolescents and their parents, results indicate that LD adolescents' coping was clearly related to their parents' coping, or more specifically, to their parents' difficulties in coping (Shulman, Carleton-Ford, Levian & Hed, 1995). This finding may, in part, help to explain the delayed autonomy and prolonged parental dependence in many LD youth. The study, which examined patterns in 50 sets of both LD and non-LD adolescents and their parents, showed the LD adolescents to have lower levels of coping behavior than the non-LD adolescents. In contrast, the study also reported that the LD adolescents sought social support and used social advice just as well as the non-LD adolescents did. In this study, the coping patterns of mothers of LD youth tended to be less useful (more pessimistic) and more often to turn for social help and accept support. Results also suggest that parents of LD adolescents do not cope any differently than do parents of non-LD adolescents (Shulman et al. 1995).

The degree to which parents can relinquish some control to their adolescents with disabilities in facing externally imposed restrictions generally will determine the level of independence and self-sufficiency that they can attain. It is widely held that parents who can commit to provide a supportive environment, encourage skill development, discriminate in their appropriate involvement, and be persistent advocates while, at the same time, fulfilling multiple active roles will promote autonomy in their teens (Blum, 1988; Davis, et al. 1985). The parents and families who fail to accept their adolescents

with disabilities as capable individuals who can be integrated into and live up to the expectations of society, likely will instill in their youth a continuous, regressive dependence as adults . . . always needing special protection in life (Davis et al. 1985; and Strax, 1988).

As noted earlier, the perceived parental support of youth with disabilities is crucial in their positive self-concept development. Stone's (1997) study comparing teachers', parents' and students' perceptions of LD adolescents' competencies, revealed the tendency of these parents to have more negative perceptions of their LD adolescents' capabilities than did their teachers and the adolescents themselves. This finding was suggested as a source of tension in these parent-adolescent relationships. Several explanations for this finding were cited, including: (1) the comparisons were made between different adolescent groups; (2) parent reactions exaggerated teacher input; or (3) parents operated with a global, negative halo effect from the LD label (Stone, 1997).

Gaining independence from the family requires that youth with disabilities experience some degree of peer acceptance and "fit in" at school. The opportunities for developing peer relationships in adolescence occur more frequently at school. This implies that adolescents need to be in attendance, avoid interruptions with school, participate in extra-curricular activities and make friends. Previous studies reveal that many adolescents with disabilities miss school more often than their non-disabled peers, have significantly fewer social skills, experience school disruption due to disability, are often more isolated, and make few friends at school (Davis et al. 1985; McAnarney, 1985).

The developmental period of adolescence also involves the discovery of work and choosing a career. Youth with chronic, severe disabilities are more restricted from opportunities, especially vocational training and work experiences than are non-disabled peers. This, in turn, further inhibits the development of their vocational interests, goals and skills (Davis et al. 1985). What becomes especially important is the impact that this may have on the adolescent's self-image of not being able to fulfill one's vocational aspirations. Given the high unemployment rates of post-school youth with disabilities (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996), it is interesting that some research on young adults has linked prolonged unemployment to a poorer self-consistency and diminished self-affection (Sheeran & Abraham, 1994).

Some researchers have found that employment at this age involves performing menial types of jobs and these are not viewed as accomplishments reflecting one's worth as a person (Harter et al. 1998). This research suggests that despite the importance placed on vocational competence by LD adolescents, employment serves more of an economic need than as a major source of pride, and hence, it does not bolster self-worth. Yet, this study overlooks the issue of whether LD youth can access the opportunities which lead to increasing work competence toward a desired career outcome and whether or not this might influence positive self-concept development. It still seems reasonable to expect that employment experiences that are linked with the career-related self-efficacy beliefs and work expectations of LD youth may have more of an influence on their self-concept than performing menial types of jobs that are not related.

In examining career self-efficacy development in LD adolescents, Panagos and Dubois, (1999, p.31) found the "lack of confidence regarding the ability to complete

relevant educational and training requirements is significant in limiting the interests of students with learning disabilities, even in pursuing those types of careers for which they have the greatest potential to be successful in terms of the level of objective aptitude." They argue that without outcome expectations to accompany an activity or task, LD adolescents' self-efficacy beliefs alone may not ensure career interests.

This study linked promoting career interests with successful vocational experiences that enhance the beliefs of LD youth in their own ability to complete relevant education and training in that occupational field (Panagos & DuBois, 1999). Hence, various career-relevant work experiences for LD youth leading to their expected job outcomes may bolster self-confidence and their perceived capabilities to successfully pursue careers in those areas.

It becomes clear that not only objective skills but also subjective factors (i.e., self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations) are important in the career development of LD youth. Similar subjective factors regarding self-determination in young adults with LD and mental retardation also were strongly correlated with better employment and other post-school outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

#### 2.4 Self-Determination

The multidimensional model previously discussed suggests that self-concept evolves as a mediating variable as well as an outcome through a process where individuals are being active agents, who are inner-directed and who are affected by their relationships and environments (Marsh & Hattie, 1996; Marsh & Yeung, 1997; Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976). "Self-determination refers to acting as the primary causal agent in one's life and making choices and decisions regarding one's quality of



life, free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996, p. 16). This area of study, which integrates both psychological and learning theories, is suggested to be especially pertinent to positive self-concept development in special needs adolescents. It recognizes the importance for youth with disabilities to believe in their efficacy to shape the course that their lives take by influencing their choice and in taking control over the activities and environments in which they participate (Schloss, Alper & Jayne, 1993; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

The research on self-determination underscores the significance of adolescent perceptions of their involvement and participation in school and in the community. It supports the idea that student involvement in transition and educational decision making, planning and implementation, along with increased self-determination, will engender positive perceptions of youth about themselves and their learning environment (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996). The advocacy of self-determination for youth with disabilities seems especially congruent with a recent definition of positive self-concept, that of “being well connected both to other people and to life in general, simultaneously a sense of autonomy exists together with a belief in one’s own resources and abilities” (Adamson & Lyxell, 1996, p. 577).

Wehmeyer (1994) has emphasized that attitudes associated with self-determination can represent the perceptions and beliefs both about oneself and one’s role as a causal agent. These perceptions include self-concepts and beliefs related to self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence. In addition to the growing research regarding self-concept, educational researchers who have proposed theories of learning, motivation and instruction that assume students are active processors of information are

now giving more attention to perceptions about the role of being a causal agent, e.g., perceptions of control, self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Schunk, 1992).

Given the role of perceptions about oneself and one's ability to actively participate in life decisions, Wehmeyer (1994) links cognitive processing with the idea of "psychological empowerment" based on positive perceptions of control. Psychological empowerment refers to multiple dimensions including the cognitive (personal efficacy), personality (locus of control) and motivational domains of perceived control (Zimmerman, 1990). It is through a process of learning and utilizing problem solving skills and achieving perceived or actual control that enables one to develop a sense of psychological empowerment. What is unclear is whether or not psychological empowerment promotes development of a positive self-concept? And if so, in what ways? What influence does increased participation and perceived control over the choices made in one's life, have on the development of a positive self-concept?

Learning theory suggests that beliefs of personal efficacy, which is a dimension of psychological empowerment, can shape the path one's life takes by influencing both choices of activities and environments. Schunk (1985) found that involving children with learning disabilities in goal setting enhanced their reported self-efficacy. People cultivate different competencies, interests and social networks according to their preferences, including choices of activity and setting which determines their direction in life. "Any factor that influences choice behavior can profoundly affect the direction of personal development" (Bandura, 1993, p. 135).

The results of one study which involved the perceptions of adolescents with mental retardation, adolescents with LD, and academically at-risk youth regarding self-

determination and psychological empowerment, suggested that youth with mental retardation experienced perceptions of psychological empowerment that were not conducive to becoming self-determined (Wehmeyer, 1994). This study indicated that their experiences precluded these youth from being the causal agents in their lives. This finding was attributed to the possibility that youth with mental retardation often do not have opportunities to experience control and choice, and are more often being compared with others who are disabled, not their non-disabled peers. Traditionally, the level of external control over decisions affecting the lives of people with mental retardation has raised uncertainty about the steps needed to help them to develop positive perceptions of control and choice? In contrast, youth with learning disabilities or youth identified as 'at-risk' for academic failure were found to be causal realists who were considered able to evaluate their efficacy and outcome expectations.

Does the development of positive self-concept in youth with disabilities imply a shift of influences from primarily being external to realizing more internal control in their lives? Some have questioned the ability of some special needs adolescents to be able to reconcile and possibly integrate their disability into their identity (Shulman & Rubinroit, 1987). Whether some adolescents with disabilities believe they can become competent enough to effect change in their lives is linked to their level of hopefulness (Wehmeyer, 1994). These important issues are intertwined with external factors including relationships with family and peers, supportive/adaptive environments, perceived stigma and individual access to opportunities for choice.

The self-determination of youth with disabilities underscores the role of psychological empowerment in helping individuals learn to utilize skills for influencing

life events and in gaining control and mastery over their lives (Zimmerman, 1990; Wehmeyer, 1994). Youth who have a positive self-concept logically might be expected to hold a perception of control and hopefulness in life, which are two crucial elements of psychological empowerment. Is psychological empowerment associated with a positive self-concept? If so, then does increased participation and perceived or actual control over the choices made in life influence the developing self-concept?

Special needs adolescents who learn to access more opportunities in order to strengthen their capabilities, to use supports and adaptive environments, to develop relationships, to build self-esteem, and to fulfill aspirations, also will become proactive causal change agents and become competent in gaining control over the future of their lives. Also, it seems likely that they will be better able to accept or come to terms with their disability in light of their self-concept development.

Although most of the research on the development of adolescents with disabilities has characterized the negative effects of having a disability, the results of some studies also have suggested that some youth with disabilities transcend those effects and that they are able to develop a positive self-image (Hagborg, 1996; Offer, Ostrov & Howard, 1985; Silverman & Zigmond, 1983). Also, evidence exists that suggests youth with cognitive disabilities and those who are determined to be academically “at-risk” have demonstrated perceived attributes of self-determination though probably not to the same extent as their non-disabled peers (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer, 1994). A question emerging from this body of research is “do the self-control experiences of youth with disabilities enable them to come to terms with their disability or influence their positive self-concept development?”

## 2.5 Perspectives on Self-Concept from People with Disabilities

The literature is nearly void of any studies that have examined the perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities regarding a positive self-concept. One exception is the self-assessment on developing a “concept of self” in which Finn (1995) described her own frustrations as a deaf person struggling with a hearing world, trying to communicate orally and the scars that this experience has left upon her. Finn reported a significant influence that learning the meaning of language through social interaction with peers had on her developing self-concept. It is her contention that the use of sign language to provide stimuli for the deaf individual’s mind offers a socio-cultural context for understanding the development of a positive self-concept among the deaf population.

Another exception is the autobiographical and ethnographic work by Charmaz (1991) which examined self-concept in people with chronic illness and disabilities. Her research contends that the evolving self is influenced by one’s struggle over control of the disabling condition and time. She asserts that although relationships are important, they develop at certain points in one’s life, or they may involve significant life events. Charmaz’s research further suggests that people with disabilities have ways of viewing and relating to time, which affects their emerging selves. “In short, the self is situated in time as well as in relationships” (Charmaz, 1991, p. 230).

Harris (1995) also included the self-report of individuals with disabilities in his research examining the self-concept of people with learning difficulties (who as individuals residing in the United States would be classified as persons with mental retardation). Harris stressed the impact of negatively valued perceptions, forcing those simply identified with a condition to be attached to the stigma and negative connotations

assigned to a disability. In contrast to the idea of integrating a disability into one's identity, people who had conditions with a devalued or stigmatized status, e.g., mental illness or mental retardation, were opposed to integrating their disability. Many of these individuals preferred not to disclose their disability or to be perceived as belonging to a devalued group for fear of social reaction and its effect on their self-image (Harris, 1995).

Finally, among the paucity of qualitative research involving the perceptions of people with disabilities are two in-depth studies which have explored and examined the participation of special needs youth in transition planning and the impact of their post-school transition. Though perceptions of self-concept were not examined, these studies investigated the post-school experiences of adolescents with disabilities with implications for self-determination as well as their perceptions of transitioning into adulthood (Liebert, Lutsky & Gottlieb, 1990; Morningstar, Turnbull & Turnbull, 1995).

The more recent study found that families of youth with disabilities, particularly parental support, played a significant role in post school choices (Morningstar et al. 1995). This study also reported that many youth in their sample who were able to make what they believed to be important decisions (e.g., regarding after school activities, attending parties, having sex, staying out late, moving away from home) felt that they possessed a level of responsibility which would be needed for adult life. Could their perceived competency in making these decisions have had a positive influence on self-concept?

The earlier study emphasized the frustration of youth with severe disabilities in segregated programs who were being precluded from having vocational options. Most of the youth reported preferences of being integrated with non-disabled peers and being less

sheltered in their adolescent experiences, including the opportunity to work (Liebert et al. 1990). These two studies illustrate the importance of youth preferences toward more preparation for adulthood as well as more involvement in decisions about their lives. Given their preferences, could experiences with inclusive programs currently have more of an effect on self-concept than mainstreaming practices have had in the past?

## 2.6 Summary

Research examining the developmental tasks and psychological processes that adolescents with disabilities, including adolescents with learning disabilities, go through primarily has viewed the impact of disability as dominant. As a result, considerable emphasis is placed on deficits and strategies to help these youth and their families adapt and adjust throughout adolescence into young adulthood (Davis et al. 1985; Kronick, 1981; Shulman & Rubinroit, 1987). Results of these studies suggest that either the adolescent with a disability must learn to adjust and cope with disability or, if they do not, they will become maladjusted (McAnarney, 1985; Shulman & Rubinroit, 1987; Strax & Wolfson, 1984).

Adolescents with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities who are struggling with developmental changes that could accentuate their being different, even more than their disability, have sought ways to minimize attention to their deficits. Charmaz, (1991) found that people with disabilities would avoid disclosing their condition and mask deficits due to the risk of losing status or self-esteem. Adolescents with disabilities, through their responses that are often diagnosed as maladaptive, may reveal a resilience which represents to an extent their effort to assess potential negative experiences, to help maintain control in their lives and to protect their fragile self-image.

Little attention has been paid to the changing perceptions of special needs adolescents, including those of LD adolescents, about their disability, self-concept and control in their lives. Research suggests that LD students learned to internalize academic successes and develop compensatory skills in other domains to mitigate their deficits in school (Hagborg, 1996; Silverman & Zigmond, 1983). These youth may use denial or avoidance as defense mechanisms in response to teasing, ridicule, exclusion and even self-rejection, which they often face. The experience of disability involves more than just its negative impact and one's reaction to it. Social reactions of others to the disability or its effects may cause these adolescents to develop different coping strategies. Current knowledge about acceptance or reconciling with disability among special needs adolescents and its meaning in their development of self-concept is limited (Lawrence, 1991; Offer et al. 1984; Rothman & Cosden, 1995; Shulman & Rubinroit, 1987; Stone, 1997; Viberg et al. 1987).

The perceived support experienced by youth with disabilities, including LD youth, seems to be a key factor in their psychological growth and hence, their self-concept development (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; McAnarney, 1985; Rothman & Cosden, 1995), especially the extent of parental support received (Morningstar et al. 1995; Stone, 1997). Special needs adolescents make use of their supports in their struggle to negotiate the challenges of adolescent development and the effects which labeling them with a disability has produced. Strong evidence also exists that show youth with disabilities who believe in their efficacy to make personal choices and to influence the activities and environments in which they participate feel more optimistic and self-



confident (Liebert et al. 1990; Morningstar et al. 1995; Schloss et al. 1993; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996) about their futures.

Several major influences on the developing self-concept in adolescents with disabilities, including LD adolescents, emerge from the literature. First, the impact of disability can have a profound effect on self-image, and it can impose considerable stigma that is associated with the disabling condition. Second, as youth with disabilities begin to form an identity during adolescence, they must face developmental hurdles, challenged by personal limitations and inaccessible opportunities. At this stage, it becomes important for them not only to learn to cope with their disability but also to come to terms with their condition. As part of the process and, to varying degrees, they begin to reconcile with their condition as it relates to self-identity while developing the competencies needed in order to make choices in life. Finally, special needs adolescents must have relationships with others that provide encouragement and support in adaptive settings so that they may feel optimistic about their future, capable of pursuing their aspirations, and a sense of belonging in their lives.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

#### 3.1 Overview

My interest in this area of study comes first as an educator and social science researcher to learn more about the “lived experiences” of youth with disabilities and their families. I believe it was important to understand the interpretations of adolescents, their parents and teachers of those experiences in the context of their evolving self-concept development. Secondly, as a person with a disability, I sought to gain firsthand, their perceptions of what living with a disability means to them and how it fits into to their self-identity.

The strategies and methodological design most effective in conducting this research are constructivist and phenomenological (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This is an appropriate framework because it advances the emergence of an inductive, contextual and interpretive perspective in exploring self-concept development in LD adolescents. Qualitative methods are most appropriate in understanding from an ecological context the experiences of LD youth, their perceived self-efficacy, control in decisions, supportive relationships and pursuit of individual aspirations.

Compelling reasons exist for conducting a qualitative study of adolescents with learning disabilities to determine how their positive self-concept or identity could be enhanced in the school and in the community. Little or no research of this nature has been conducted pertaining to special needs adolescents' self-identity (Stainback, Stainback, East & Sapon-Shevin, 1994) and more specifically, their perceptions as they relate to their learning disability (Stone, 1997). My study considers the meaning special needs adolescents have placed on their experiences as well as how parents and teachers view

the significance of youth experiences with disability and support a positive identity development in them.

In this study I am expecting to learn from the individual voices of LD adolescents and to develop an experience-based perspective. I designed research questions that targeted elements of global self-concept theory (Marsh & Hattie, 1996; Marsh & Yeung, 1997), learning theory (Schunk, 1992) and psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1990) to help generate phenomenological explanations. The research questions were broad and unrestricted enough to foster an inductive analysis of the data gathered, and yet still be sufficiently focused to elicit anecdotal information regarding the individual's family, personal relationships, and connections with schools and the community.

The nature of the research questions ascertained choice of this design and methodology. The multiple data collection strategies provided a rich description of how LD youth and other key informants view their self-concept development. They also bolstered an understanding of how LD adolescents' lives evolve in reconciling or integrating their disability and its role in their developmental process.

### 3.2 Methodological Framework

Marsh (1990) identified the standards in which judgements relative to self-concept are made, to be strongly evaluative and to emerge from an internal (self-comparison) and external (social comparison) frame of reference. This provides a context for grasping the dynamics of a multifaceted global self-concept, particularly the complexity regarding the individual importance of self-concept domains and relative to developmental circumstances (Harter, 1990). It follows that from their comprehensive

review of the literature on self-concept in adolescents with LD, McPhail & Stone (1995)

would report:

Findings of developmental and individual differences in the inter-relatedness of self-concept domains suggest the dynamic nature of the structure and content of self-concept. Once again, rather than being a “static” or trait-like entity, it appears that the construct of self-concept changes in transaction with experiences. In the case of developmental dynamics, societal demands central to developmental phases are reflected in the dimensions deemed critical to self-evaluation at any point in time. (p.214)

It is their premise that increasingly with age, the domains of self-concept seem to be determined in transaction with real life circumstances (McPhail & Stone, 1995).

Building upon this premise I have developed an investigative framework to explore, as they suggest, the individual, interpersonal and institutional forces shaping self-concept in several LD youth relative to the internal/external dynamics Marsh (1990) identified. This research, thereby, examines a number of factors as represented in Table 1 that are relative to the developmental processes and growth being experienced (individual level), the fundamental significance of supportive relationships (interpersonal level) and the various environmental contexts that foster access to opportunities engendered in these transactions (institutional level).

Table 1  
Dynamic Forces of Self Concept Development

Internal and External Factors	
Individual	Competence, perceived control, self-confidence, and reconciliation/transcendence of disability
Interpersonal	Acceptance, social connection, parental advocacy, support/coping and encouragement/autonomy
Institutional	Socioeconomic status, family values/beliefs, resources/opportunities, and adaptive settings

Research into self-concept development generally has overlooked the perceptions of special needs adolescents given their experience with disabilities. Studies have yet to examine the perceptions of adolescents with disabilities regarding their self-concept development and whether experiences with disability, for example inclusion or access to choice, has had an effect on it. No research has inquired into the process through which special needs youth accept or reconcile their disability in their self-concept development. Though few studies have closely examined the relationships of special needs youth with family and peers, only one study has inquired into the perceived effects of social support on their self-concept development (Harter et al. 1998).

Little research has been conducted to study numerous factors that may be relevant to the issues of accepting or reconciling with disability, or acquiring resilience from a disability, or exploring the perceptions, complexities and processes involved in the development of a positive self-concept in people with disabilities (Charmaz, 1991; Finn, 1995). My research entailed a close examination of personal relationships and supports, as well as perceptions of acceptance, belonging, personal efficacy and control, as they pertain to self-concept development in LD youth.

The fact that this research focused on individual experiences, perceptions, and outcomes called for the appropriate use of qualitative case study methods (Patton, 1987). A qualitative multi-case study approach that conducted analyses of individual experiences, views and interpretations of adolescents with learning disabilities, their parents and teachers efficiently gathers the in-depth data needed from a practical standpoint (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). My multi-case study design described and explored experiences, feelings, perceptions and relationships of LD adolescents. It also addressed

the ethical considerations for pursuing such personal information with greater sensitivity to and minimal intrusion into the subjects' lives.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1995) qualitative research is needed to understand both human behavior and the framework within which participants interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions. My use of this type of methodology allowed for the study of LD adolescents in various contexts. Hence, this case study inquiry has been conducted in settings such as the home and school in which all contextual variables are operating. The strength of qualitative studies lies in their ability to demonstrate descriptive and exploratory research that stresses the importance of context, setting and the participants' frame of reference (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; and Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

### 3.3 Research Contributions and Limitations

This study has contributed to an emerging body of research that validates the perspectives of youth with disabilities about their self-concept, individual experiences, and personal development. Little knowledge exists about the influence of social supports on self-concept based on the perceptions of adolescents with disabilities and those who know them. This research added to our understanding of self-concept in adolescents with learning disabilities and the effect their relationships with parents and significant others have had on their self-concept development. This study helped clarify how experiencing a learning disability contributes to self-concept development (Chapman, 1988; Harter et al, 1998; McPhail & Stone, 1995). It is suggested that this research also has implications for current knowledge about the self-esteem, inclusion, socialization, post-school

transition and self-determination of adolescents with disabilities (Morningstar et al. 1995; Schloss et al. 1993; Stainback et al. 1994; Weymeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

This study's approach was congruent with symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1969) related to understanding the "self" as a social construction such that we define ourselves based on the perceptions which others have of us and then develop a definition through the process of interaction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). It also helped to illustrate the extent to which having a positive self-concept relates to being psychologically empowered, such as being engaged or involved in making decisions and choices, which affect one's life (Schloss et al. 1993; Weymeyer, 1994). This is especially germane given some variables which Adamson and Lyxell (1996) found to strongly correlate with a positive self-concept during late adolescence. Those factors include having a belief of being able to realize one's future plans and shape one's life, having a sense of optimism toward becoming an adult, and having a sense of belonging in a life context. This study also heightened our understanding of self-determination variables, e.g., active participation in life decisions or outcome expectations and their influence on positive self-concept development in adolescents with disabilities.

This research study has a number of limitations. The study was confined primarily to southern and central Maine. Although it has contributed to developing a rich description of "lived experiences" of youth with learning disabilities, it does not necessarily represent the experiences of all adolescents with learning disabilities, especially those with different family, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. The study is limited to male adolescents with learning disabilities who were identified to have a positive self-concept, hence the findings do not necessarily reflect the perceived

attributes of self-concept development in other populations of youth with disabilities.

Severity of disability is an important issue that was not controlled within this sample, and it must be examined more closely in future research.

The sample was gender-biased though intended to be sensitive to racial and ethnic diversity. However, recruitment outreach efforts failed to identify prospective participants with minority backgrounds. Also, I had hoped to better control for socioeconomic status, which ranged in this study from lower-middle to upper-middle class. Nevertheless, one family came into a large inheritance, which I learned of while conducting the study. The adolescent participants in my study came from small families having well-educated parents with trade and professional occupations who live in suburban or rural communities in Maine. Thus, generalizations of the findings from this study must be interpreted with caution.

### 3.4 Methods and Procedures

The multi-case study design in this research used purposeful or purposive sampling for selecting subjects, based on their having a perceived positive self-concept (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Patton, 1987). This strategy ensured selecting a representative sample of special needs adolescents with a positive self-concept according to criteria that included a perceived positive self-concept and the results of a standard self-concept measure. This corroboration of sample selection helped correctly estimate a representative sample when using purposive sampling (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). Obtaining an accurate representative sample also allows examining individual cases over time and conducting cross-case comparisons (Yin, 1989). Additionally, this research advances the understanding of those cases, more likely to be information rich and helps



to identify any major individual, program or system concerns that can become targets of opportunity for improvement (Patton, 1987).

The study's approach employed a range of data collection techniques including in-depth interviewing, field notes, and anecdotal reporting along with a standard self-concept measure to profile individual case examples. Efforts were made throughout the study to review data collection and analytic strategies which increased confidence in the validity of data. This strategy involved checking, rechecking, as well as comparing and contrasting the various multiple sources and using purposeful examination of the data for consistencies and inconsistencies that considers all possible explanations of the results (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Steps were taken to carefully record data collection and management procedures, which help to insure internal consistency and to increase potential for replication. The procedures that were used in the study, in effect, confirm the findings and lead to the implications being reported. The triangulation of multiple sources of data has greatly strengthened the study's usefulness for other settings. Making data collection procedures operational increases the reliability of the research and improves the fit between what is being recorded and what actually occurs in the setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Yin, 1989).

Selected participants were identified to have developed a positive self-concept according to self-concept criteria (criteria listed in Appendix A) as identified by themselves, and their parent/guardian, or teacher. Each participant was then administered the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale (MSCS). This scale provided a standard measure of self-concept and corroborated the selection of subjects for the study. The

MSCS served as a guide for further substantiating a positive self-concept. It also was used as a means of comparison of subjects' perceptions of self-concept with any differences drawn from their MSCS results.

The MSCS is based on a hierarchical model of self-concept designed for both clinical and research purposes. Measurement reviews reveal that the instrument, which uses a multiple source format, has strong psychometric properties (Archambault & Willis, 1995). The MSCS assesses six domains of global self-concept development: social, competence, affect, academic, family and physical. It is norm referenced on a nationally, represented sample (ages 9-19 years).

The participant information form (provided in Appendix B) was completed during the visit or it was completed and returned in a stamped, self-addressed, envelop that all subjects received. The participant information form collected personal and family background information about subjects. This form recorded: 1) demographic information (youth name and address, telephone, age, gender, ethnicity, and disability information), special education services, work experience and 2) family data (family members in household, and parents' educational background, occupations and annual income).

In-depth interviews then were conducted with youth, parent(s) and teachers who know the youth. I began by conducting a semi-structured interview with each youth and then performed a semi-structured interview with their parent(s) to identify youth perceptions, attitudes, experiences, relationships, personal supports, peer interactions and perceived control that may influence self-concept development. These procedures ensured obtaining both youth and parental meaning from their perspectives, thus helping

to corroborate the accuracy of information (interview guideline for adolescents and parents included in Appendix C).

This strategy encourages convergent lines of inquiry by using multiple sources of evidence (Quinn Patton, 1987; Yin, 1989). In these instances in which youth were living with parents as in nearly all (5 of 6) cases, this also helped to clarify their differences and relationships. Lofland and Lofland (1984) underscore the complexity of understanding relationships which “vary in myriad ways: the positive or negative character of the emotions prevailing, the degree of interdependence, the amount of trust, the parties’ relative amount of power, the amount each knows about the other, and so forth” (p.83).

An additional in-depth interview also was conducted with those teachers, which these youth or their parent(s) identified as a teacher with whom the special needs adolescent has a strong relationship (teacher interview guidelines included in Appendix C). These semi-structured interviews helped to fill in any gaps and enriched data regarding adolescents' attitudes, behavior, decision making, personal supports and perceived control that influenced developing a positive self-concept.

Teachers also were asked to provide other supplemental data. Each teacher was invited to report on the academic performance and social interactions of these adolescents. Information was requested regarding the special needs adolescent's maturity, communication skills, peer interactions, relationships and academic performance observed in school. When appropriate, information was sought regarding youth' participation in vocational education or work experience.

All interviews were audiotaped with participant permission and fully transcribed for data analysis. This strategy helped to ensure accuracy in the statements and perceptions

being recorded. The transcription of responses also was coded and it was kept in a confidential file. After the study was completed, transcribed audiotapes were either erased or recorded over. Field notes also were taken routinely during the interviews to record pertinent observations and anecdotal information. This practice helped to explain the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of youth participants. Subsequent to each interview all notes were reviewed for clarification and completion. Individual files were developed for each youth recruited. Each file was numerically coded to give anonymity to each participant. The data collected on each participant were kept confidential and stored in a secured file, which was accessible only to myself at the University of Southern Maine. All the participant information collected, used, and reported in this study is void of any identifiable characteristics that can be traced back to the subjects.

#### 3.4.1 Subject Sample

Participants were recruited via a mailed formal notice to several key organizations. These included the Southern Maine Parent Awareness, Inc., and the Maine Parent Federation (both of which serve families of children and youth with special needs in Maine); the Learning Disabilities Association of Maine (which serves individuals with learning disabilities and their families); and the Southern Maine Advisory Council on Transition (which serves transition age youth with disabilities and their families in the region). All four of these organizations reach a broad audience of families and parents of children and youth with disabilities in Maine. Two of these organizations (Maine Parent Federation and the Learning Disabilities Association of Maine) serve constituents statewide. I also mailed a notice to several special education and learning disabilities support programs. My notice included a brief overview of the study, criteria for

prospective subjects and a disclosure statement of the researcher (sample notice included in Appendix D).

When after four months of correspondence, I failed to receive any inquiries, I then requested permission to offer a \$20 stipend to interested, qualified subjects. This request was granted to me by the IRB at the University of Maine in February 2001. Additional recruitment notices announcing the study and the available stipend for participants were then sent to the previously mentioned contacts. Within a month, the first participant volunteered. During the next nine months all of the six subjects, who eventually constituted the study sample, were successfully recruited.

Using the notice, interested parents and their special needs adolescents were able to contact me directly to obtain more information. Interested parents and prospective subjects contacted me by telephone and e-mail to inquire about the study. When they expressed interest, an information packet, which included a cover letter, stamped self-addressed envelope, participant information form (Appendix B), student assent script (Appendix E), and consent/release form (Appendix F) was mailed or given to them in person. A home or school visit then was scheduled to introduce myself, explain the study, address any questions, obtain the consent/ release authorization and to screen subject with self-concept criteria.

The sample includes six adolescent males between the ages of 16 and 19, identified as learning disabled, eligible for special education services and a recipient of these services during high school. This requirement verifies and documents the presence of a disability, as defined under CFR Title 34, IDEA (1991) for Learning Disabilities. Only one of the subjects has been identified as having a secondary diagnosis: Attention

Deficit Disorder. Hence, the study has ensured that these youth with learning disabilities are among the population of special needs youth in post-school transition to the community, and also it has confirmed the presence of an LD condition using existing formal diagnostic assessment results.

The rationale for choosing adolescents with learning disabilities for this study is well supported in the literature. The category of "Learning Disability" is one of the most prevalent in high school and includes secondary-age special needs students with moderate to severe disabilities (Reschly, 1996). The research on self-concept in adolescents with learning disabilities has raised questions about the association of poor self-concept with learning disabilities as well as the ability of children with learning disabilities to develop compensatory skills (Kloomok & Cosdan, 1994; Silverman & Zigmond, 1983). Perceived social support, especially from parents, also has been found to contribute significantly to the development of self-concept in children with learning disabilities, as well as toward developing academic competence (Hagborg, 1996; Harter et al, 1998; Kloomok & Cosdan, 1994; Rothman & Cosden, 1995). Other research also has suggested that perceptions of LD adolescents' capabilities are believed to be conducive toward becoming self-determined (Wehmeyer, 1994).

Purposive sampling was used for selection of the subjects in order to obtain a cross-section of adolescent males with learning disabilities between 16-19 years of age and who are considered to have a positive self-concept. Both, (1) the opinions of adolescents, their parents, or teachers and (2) the results of a self-concept scale administered to these youth substantiate the presence of a positive self-concept in these subjects. Using a set of self-concept criteria, the subjects were self-identified. Also they

were identified by their parent(s) or teacher(s) as someone who has a positive self-concept (set of self-concept criteria in Appendix A). In order to qualify as a participant in this study, each adolescent consistently must have met the criteria according to their own and an adult's perceptions. Each youth then was given a self-concept scale to determine their standard self-concept status and to screen them according to that standard measure.

### 3.4.2 Participant Demographics

As indicated in Table 2, Multidimensional Self Concept Scale Results, all of these subjects scored in the average or above range in their total self-concept scores on this measure. In the various domains measured by the six sub-tests on the MSCS, the majority of subjects falls into the average self-concept range, showing several of them scoring within the range from moderately positive to extremely positive self-concept. The only two sub-tests in which a subject recorded low moderately negative self-concept scores were on both the family and physical domains. Given the reported background information about the two subjects with these scores, it interesting that both youth report unresolved issues, particularly with their fathers which may help to explain these two weak sub-test scores.

Table 2  
Multidimensional Self Concept Scale Results

Domains	#Extreme Positive	#Very Positive	#Moderate Positive	#Average	#Moderate Negative
Social			2	4	
Competence		1		5	
Affect	1		1	4	
Academic			1	5	
Family			2	3	1
Physical			1	4	1
Total		1	1	4	

Race and ethnicity were considered in recruiting a representative sample, though none of those volunteering are from a racial or ethnic minority group. Most of the prospective subjects were living at home with their parents and some were still attending high school. As can be seen in Table 3, the subjects were evenly split between being 16 and 17 years of age and being between 18-19 years of age. A majority of these youth had between 11-12 grades of education, with two reaching the 9<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> grade level and one just having graduated from high school. Based on participant report, two subjects were officially in college taking courses (one was enrolled in an early start program while in high school). Another two subjects expect to attend college in the coming year, one having already been accepted and the other who is applying to a computer business school in the hope of eventually transferring to a four-year post-secondary program.

Table 3  
Age and Education of Participants

Age & Education Levels	Number	Per Cent	Unknown
16-17 Years Old	3	50	0
18-19 Years Old	3	50	0
9-10 Grades	2	33	0
11-12 Grades	3	50	0
>12 Grades	1	17	0

All six youth have attended, and two continue to attend, a public secondary school. Participant data from Table 4 show that all of the subjects received special education services, although just two of them received transition services in high school. These services assisted the youth in finding employment and with preparing for vocational or post-secondary education. Finally, two-thirds of the subjects reported



having enrolled, at some time, in private schools for students with LD and one-third of the subjects report attending college.

Table 4  
Type of Educational Program

Education Program Type	Number	Per Cent	Unknown
Public	6	100	0
Special Education	6	100	0
Transition	2	33	0
Private	4	66	0
College	2	33	0

Four of the youth participants were reported to have their drivers' license, which would make employment more accessible to them. Most of the subjects were not working or living independently in the community, although one had acquired his own apartment during the time period in which the study was being conducted. All of the youth report having had a paid work experience and each continues to have paid employment while going to school. As shown in Table 5, three of the subjects have worked two jobs and one of these LD teens has held three paid positions.

Table 5  
Employment of Participants

Employment	Number	Per Cent	Unknown
Work experience	6	100	0
Paid Job	6	100	0
1 Job	2	33	0
2 Jobs	3	50	0
>2 Jobs	1	20	0

These adolescents with LD fell into either a low-moderate or high socioeconomic status according to their household income and they also had vocational aspirations. Their vocational interests and aspirations could be a reflection of their parents'

occupations, particularly their fathers, since several have expressed interest in related career paths. For example, two youth participants whose dads had construction-related businesses or occupations expressed an interest in the construction trades. Two others who reported pursuing college have fathers with career backgrounds in law enforcement and telecommunications. Both stated that they plan to major in criminology and computer science respectively.

Table 6  
Education and Income of Parents

Education & Income Levels	Number	Per Cent	Unknown
< 9 Years of Education	0	0	0
9-12 Years of Education	3	25	0
13-16 Years of Education	6	50	0
>16 Years of Education	3	25	0
Family Income Not Reported	1	20	1
\$1-24,999 Family Income	0	0	0
\$25,000-49,999 Family Income	3	50	0
\$50,000-74,999 Family Income	0	0	0
\$75,000-99,999 Family Income	0	0	0
>\$100,000 Family Income	2	33	0

The data reported in Table 6 suggest that 75per cent of the subjects' parents have completed some post-secondary education and, in several cases, they have earned college degrees. Three parents were identified as continuing their education at the graduate level. The three parents of participants listed with a secondary education all report being high school graduates.

The income information contained in Table 6 is reported as family income. Hence both parents' wages/salaries were combined. Only one subject's family income was not given. This could not be ascertained after the subject requested that his parents not be involved in the study. Based on the participant information provided, three of the subjects' families are earning under \$50,000 (an estimate of the family's income which

was not reported based on their stated occupations would seem to place them also in this range). Of the remaining two families, one has reported earnings over \$100,000 and the other has earnings and assets (due to a recent inheritance) that provides over \$100,000 annually. It is interesting to note that two subjects receiving a private education came from families with incomes below \$50,000. Their parents reported having to advocate strongly with public school systems, challenging them at due process hearings to obtain the school funds necessary for their sons' placements within private school settings.

#### 3.4.3 Data Processing and Management

All taped and written participant documentation was collected, individually coded and confidentially secured in a separate filing cabinet. I compiled, sorted, coded and filed the data from consent and information forms and self-concept scale results. The field notes and anecdotal material were formatted, abstracted, coded and individually filed for ongoing analysis. I retained and stored the coding schemes, chronologies, write-ups and revised versions of processed materials. A record of the data analyses which were conducted has been kept throughout the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

All recording and data entry procedures were performed on an IBM personal computer 300GL. I used Folio Views 4.0 software, designed for text management and analysis and have entered information from each subject's file to construct individual profiles and to create an information database. Weitzman & Miles (1995) have rated the Folio Views software as exceptional in comparison to other programs for text-base managing, text retrieval, code and retrieve purposes and code-based theory building. I also integrated the in-depth interview transcriptions into the personalized database using this software for text analysis. Attention was given to cross-referencing text files and

indexing the evolving categories. These data were secured on my personal computer and on backup disks which were easily accessible for retrieval or queries.

Queries and data displays of retrieved information were tracked. Records can show any reflections and conceptual interpretation of data. I compiled initial drafts and revised versions of reporting. Documentation of the steps in the analysis of text and reporting the study and its findings also were preserved (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The study employed both descriptive and comparative analyses. These procedures enabled me to identify characteristics of subjects, variations relative to the domains of global self-concept, and patterns and themes pertinent to the perceptions of subjects, their parent(s) and teachers about their academic and non-academic competence, peer relationships, family, sense of belonging and focus in life.

During the initial stage of the study, I reviewed, coded and organized data, which helped provide a conceptual framework relative to the research questions being asked. Prior to the fieldwork, a start list of codes was created. Necessary code revisions, re-definitions or removals assured that all codes fit into a structure which they relate to, or are distinct from, others in meaningful, pertinent ways (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

After close scrutiny of the data, various categories, themes and patterns were generated. I examined regularities in subjects, the salient themes in the process, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief or perception that link people and settings together (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). I used pattern coding to help pull data into smaller, more analytical units. This strategy promotes a more focused analysis to provide an evolving, more integrated schema for understanding personal experiences and local events, incidents, and interactions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through the use of logical

reasoning, classification schemes were cross-referenced with one another to generate new insights or typologies for further exploration in the data.

Various analytic techniques have been used in organizing data that included results from the MSCS. Hence, I examined data from individual cases that were profiled in different displays or that were placed into various arrays. Another technique I used involved matching patterns across individual cases to compare differences within the sample (Yin, 1989), e.g., contrasting between participants' perceived social relationships and the measured self-concept ratings for that domain. This strategy also helped profile cases that reflected patterns and revealed themes across the sample, which potentially link with reported perceptions, experiences and observations.

The study used both within and across case profiles to explore and describe relationships being illustrated by the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were reviewed and scrutinized for informational adequacy, credibility, usefulness and centrality. The examination of data permitted me to address research questions and to help rationalize other, emerging patterns and themes. The research included identifying any plausible, alternative explanations, describing them and demonstrating how the explanation offered is the most plausible (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The study's reported results build a logical interrelationship among supported assertions where they exist, provide documented support for specific conclusions, and they present a summation of how the conclusions relate to any previous and future research. My study synthesized results from the perspectives of youth, their parents and selected professionals, reflecting their worldviews to form the structural framework for the report (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

### 3.5 Role of the Researcher

In accordance with the constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), I recognized the importance of examining the role of the researcher in collecting analyzing and interpreting data. In qualitative research a primary issue is that of addressing the concerns involving the subjectivity of this approach and maintaining a level of neutrality (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Quinn Patton, 1987). In essence, a qualitative inquiry searches for useful and balanced information in a fair and conscientious way that considers multiple perspectives, interests and possible explanations. Hence, I needed to take into consideration my relationships with participants, what and how I communicated to, and with them, along with my capability in obtaining and using the knowledge.

The initial contact with participants in the study developed out of the connections that I have had through professional associations and with community, school and/or family contacts. This study hinged on my potential to access these LD youth, their parents, and their teachers through already established contacts. It is important to recognize that such “connections” have greatly expedited contacting these young men and obtaining appropriate permission to participate. In this way it was likely that I could use pre-existing relations of trust to remove any access barriers (Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

This study focused on the participants’ thinking and perceptions about their lives, their experiences and particular situations. Thus, I modeled interviews similar to a conversation between two trusting parties rather than as a formal question and answer format. In this way “what is important in the minds of the participants” could be

captured. Yet, given my centrality to data collection and analysis without any codified procedures or measures, I had to be extremely self-conscious about my relationship to individuals and settings as well as about the evolution of the design and analysis.

If neutrality were to be achieved, the study had to guard against researcher bias by recording detailed field notes that included reflections on my subjectivity (Yin, 1989). A diligent effort was made to be self-reflective about inquiry methods, procedures and the evolving analysis. Also, I needed to be aware of my own mindset, needs for clarification as well as any ethical issues that became evident. It was my intention to interact with participants in a natural, unobtrusive and non-threatening manner (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Understanding my potential effect on these subjects through an intimate knowledge of the circumstances and using this understanding has generated additional insights into the nature of their experience.

Another critical issue relative to the role of the researcher involves the communication with and about participants. The study took precautions with all participants to be clear, straightforward and truthful about the purpose of the research and the intent for following the design procedures. My account explaining the study to participants deserved appropriate attention (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) and was developed to safeguard participants' privacy as well as to help me access the research sources.

I used primarily in-depth interviewing to obtain data in the participant's own words in order to help develop insights on how they interpreted their experiences. Much of this work involved establishing a rapport with participants, allowing us to get to know each other, and my helping to put the participants at ease. The study assured the integrity of confidentiality in what was being reported, and I made a concerted effort to remain

non-judgemental in gathering information and compiling data. While some participant interviews might not have generated as much data as others did, and while the same intensity may not have been obtained from every participant interviewed, even “a relatively poor interview” contributed something to the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Effective communication in qualitative research requires using a number of interpersonal skills. Foremost was my own ability to be an active listener and to carefully hear what people were saying when conducting the interviews (Quinn Patton, 1987). I made certain to carefully consider every word that participants spoke as a means of unlocking the mystery of their way of perceiving the world. If an answer seemed incomplete, I probed for more information. If the response was unclear, I asked for more clarification. I carefully tried to adhere to the advice that interviewers should not be trapped by their own preconceptions and should check for clarification when the participant’s orientation is unclear (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Yin, 1989).

Coupled with good listening skills, one also must be adaptive and flexible so that newly encountered situations can be seen as opportunities, not as threats (Yin, 1989). During the process I took steps to be sure to respond to the immediate situation, the informant being interviewed, and not to some predetermined set of procedures or stereotype of what “these types of individuals are like”. This required being courteous and patient, (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lofland & Lofland, 1984) such that participants were asked first for their permission to tape record interviews, and then given reminders that participation was voluntary. They also were informed of how responses were to be used. I also took time during interviews to wait and discover the full explanation from



the participant's sometimes delayed replies that created an atmosphere in which subjects felt comfortable expressing themselves.

Finally, it becomes incumbent upon myself to have both a firm grasp of the issues being examined, as well as the motivation to learn from one's subjects in the process (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Yin, 1989). In order to be taken seriously and avoid being dismissed, I worked to convey the knowledge and understanding that reflected my ability to analyze and interpret the theoretical and practical implications that resulted from the study. Yin (1989) likens the researcher to an investigator who must be able to ask key questions and to draw inferences in order to recognize clues during the gathering data process. As a result, I believe I have constructed a framework by fitting bits and pieces of conversations, personal histories, memories and daily experiences together in order to develop an understanding of these participants' perspectives.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS OF YOUTH DATA

#### 4.1 Overview of Findings

The interpretations reported by the youth participants in my study about their experiences with learning disabilities were individualized, dynamic and complex. In order to get a better understanding of the effects of their experiences and what it is like living with their LD condition, I spoke with them about their experiences with academics, other abilities and interests, peers and classmates, their family, and their goals and aspirations in life. I was particularly interested to find out what these experiences meant to them and how they saw the experiences influencing themselves.

Half of the youth in this study essentially were completing the latter part of their secondary education. All three participants<sup>1</sup>, Chris, Frank and Ed had distaste for the public high schools that they attended. Two other LD youth, Bill and Dave had just finished high school and were experiencing mixed feelings of excitement from having successfully graduated, while at the same time feeling more anxiety and pressure related to going on to college. Still another youth, Adam, was in the process of transitioning into his own apartment. This revealed his increased sense of freedom and his shifting relationship with the single-parent who raised him.

The information presented in Table 7 reveals the anticipated placements of youth participants in the year following my interviews with them. The data also reflect the number of college educated parents of youth participants and their family income being

---

<sup>1</sup> The following names of youth, as well as others referring to study participants are pseudonyms. The names of people and places have been changed to assure confidentiality.

reported. These characteristics may help to explain the high career aspirations and goals that most of these youth set for themselves.

Table 7  
School Setting, College Educated Parents and Family Income

Name of Youth Participant	School Setting	# Parents w/ College Education	Family Income Range
Adam	College	2	+ \$100,000
Bill	Graduated HS	2	+ \$100,000
Chris	Voc. HS	0	\$25K-\$49,999
Dave	College	2	\$25K-\$49,999
Ed	Private HS	1	\$25K-\$49,999
Frank	Graduated HS	2	*\$50K-\$74,999

\* Estimated family income based on identified occupations of parents.

Examining the perceived effects of experiences living with LD is challenging and can be complicated by the circumstances being faced at any given time. The variance portrayed in the interpretations of these youth suggests that caution is required in generalizing this study's findings. Rather, they represent certain belief patterns of these youth about their experiences living with a learning disability and what these experiences mean to their self-concept development.

This chapter begins by discussing the context of LD male adolescents' experience with learning disabilities. Then it will present and discuss several emerging themes including the presence of supportive relationships and opportunities for growth and encouragement, based on the responses of these six youth participants. Finally, it will conclude with a summary of key findings, their relevance to self-concept development and implications for research and practice.

#### 4.2 Context of Youth Experiences

Generally, the youth who were participants in the study viewed their experience with learning disabilities centering first on school and extending outwards in life. Most

faced obstacles, e.g., deficiencies in reading, writing or organizational skills that are consistent with the literature (Lyon, 1996). Many of the problems confronting the LD participants were identified in response to interview questions regarding their academic abilities. In one instance a participant, Bill, nearly completed high school before he was diagnosed with LD, which up until that point made it very difficult for him to understand why he couldn't succeed in school.

Just because I didn't know what was going on and it (the LD condition) made my whole life rather difficult. Once it was identified that I had a learning disability and I could address that personally, in school like it really improved my life. (Int.02)<sup>2</sup>

He explained how he couldn't do well in school and how it was difficult for him without knowing the reason why. Bill tried very hard to succeed in school but found he couldn't absorb the factual information, thus, he couldn't keep pace with his courses. It seems fair to question how this young man from an affluent community, whose school district scores high statewide annual rankings for performance on the Maine Educational Assessment, could have "fallen through the cracks" and not be identified as having a learning disability until his senior year?

Another adolescent, Frank, reported a similar memory problem, stating, "Trying to remember all of it (what he studies) is key" (Int.06) relative to his learning disability condition. In his particular experience this young man found it extremely difficult to prepare and organize his time and materials for classes in high school. Another participant, Adam, who was also identified as LD late in his education, just before entering high school, offered some insight as to how his condition affected his

---

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix G for a complete list of reference codes for participant interview sources being cited. Reference numbers will be cited this way, "Int.01" and so forth from here forward in the manuscript.

productivity and he honestly shared how it can now be a disincentive to his completing assignments in college.

Part of the learning disability is doing things slowly, like producing work, it takes me a lot of time and effort to do. So that problem might have something to do with why I'm not doing any homework. (Int.01)

Adam's plan was to aim high as a model student, which would eventually make him a better student. He wasn't sure how his negative experiences due to his LD, which he felt related to being unmotivated, had affected him. Yet, he repeatedly stressed his determination relative to getting his homework done or other assignments that "it will usually come down to my just deciding to do it. I need to motivate myself."

This same youth identified his LD condition as physically in the makeup of his brain that explains the negative aspect of how his brain is "wired". Adam attributed any things "that are negative are things associated with the learning disability." In contrast, the other late-identified young man, Bill, reflected his understanding of his learning disability relative to his learning process. He explained the benefit of not focusing on how well he performs, and if he doesn't, that he is able to do well. It's as if his thinking about the quality of his performance distracts him from doing well. When I asked if it required managing his LD condition's effect on his thinking about what he's doing, Bill replied, "Exactly that's with everything I do in my entire life. It changes the way my mind processes what I'm doing pretty much."

Both of these LD youth had an understanding of how their condition affected their processing information and of how each was in touch with his feelings about the way he interpreted his academic experiences as a result. Despite learning about their LD conditions later during their education Adam and Bill seemed to have developed a

maturity in their approach to dealing with them. Their maturity revealed a degree of tolerance, which Charmaz (1991) attributes to reconciling with one's disability. It also reveals a resilience that is even more illustrated in the latter youth's remarks:

For a while in school I had a lot of trouble with people picking on me and making fun of me and that helped me grow tremendously as a person because it made me realize that the way other people look at me doesn't matter. I think that helped especially once I found out I had a learning disability. It made me more independent and more 'I can do what I want to'. Yea! (Int.02)

One consistent observation I made about these young men involved their ability to explain their LD condition and what works for them in their learning. A couple of adolescent participants beginning college courses noted it was their writing and reading that were a little bit harder for them than the math and sciences. For instance, Dave informed me of his preferred way of learning that "the more ways it's taught, the more visually written, I don't learn one way. I need to get it, touch it, feel it, see it." (Int.04) Reporting on his experience in a recent course, he stated that he enjoyed having his ideas accepted, interacting with peers in discussions, and learning of their ideas. Dave was motivated by-"Receiving feedback from my ideas and how other people perceive them." The other participant, Adam, reported his motivation for doing practice problems in Calculus before tests to reduce time in reaching solutions and to avoid being perceived as being lazy, e.g., "I don't want my teacher to feel like I'm a complete slacker." (Int. 01) The latter comments are consistent with the effect of outcome expectations and perceived attributions on motivation in learning (Bandura, 1993; Shunk, 1985).

Some of these adolescents on the post-secondary threshold believed they had stepped up to the challenge that their LD condition often presented, especially in academics. Again Adam, who is taking college courses, noted he is, "Doing everything

pretty slowly regardless of what I do. I read pretty slowly, which doesn't have to say I do bad at reading." He admitted to choosing classes this year which have less writing and reading required because those assignments take him much longer to do. Adam sees this as somewhat of a "path of least resistance" in order to avoid excess work and "still get decent grades." Another youth's interview revealed the importance of his seeing an end result to his efforts and seeing the worthiness of what he accomplished. Dave expressed his satisfaction with meeting expectations of effort at school in this comment, "One that I work on hard are research papers or narrative papers where it is hard for me and I did a lot of editing and took a lot of time. But at the end I turned out a nice piece of work."

(Int.04)

Frank also expressed pride in his success in the video-computing independent studies that he has passed with little or no special education support. In his pursuit of the additional courses, other than the three computer classes being offered at his high school, Frank stated, "You get independent studies when you get to work on your own. I have classes by myself. I just work, not even he [special education teacher] is there. This is either my second or third independent study." (Int.06) As evidence of their self-confidence, several of these young men with LD who were exiting high school, or who had already exited, reported making academic progress that they believed was having a positive influence in their lives.

Interestingly, the younger two adolescents with LD identified their academic abilities in general school subjects without referring specifically to their LD condition or to any academic strategies. Chris, who along with his parents, primarily reported continuous apprehension about high school, credited only his experience with school

sports and the socialization there as beneficial and something he appreciated. The other younger participant, Ed, saw that teachers in his private school were genuinely trying to help and support him. He enjoys school now and considers it a “good experience” that will probably make him a “better person.” Ed stated that giving him work which he could actually do was another plus for teachers. He commended his private school for his current placement in a public school classroom for the first time since fifth grade which he “considered a novel experience.” (Int.05)

Many youth in the study also reported their embarrassment and shame for being placed in a special education classroom at different times in their lives. Several LD youth experienced trauma from being ridiculed and teased due to the stigma attached to LD. This resonated earlier in a comment Bill made about being “picked on” and “made fun of” in school. These accounts were reiterated by most of the parents of these young men who were also interviewed. Such experiences seemed to occur more often in earlier grades when some youth remembered being called “retard” as they first began going to special education classes. Dave indicated he asked his mother about quitting school because other kids wouldn’t play with him in elementary school.

One of the younger adolescents attended tutoring in a special education “pull-out” program where his non-disabled peers would see him go and routinely questioned him about why he needed to go there. Chris continued now to affirm that “I don’t like school at all. Well the school part, not the social part.” These memories continue to haunt most of the young men that I interviewed as characterized in the remarks of Frank who now fears the effect that disclosing his condition will have in college.

The effects of being in the learning disabled room that’s going to affect me when they (college faculty) see that and they’re (his teachers are)



telling me that if I go to college I still have these rights. That's just probably going to affect me even if I don't accept them (his rights) it's going to affect me, too. It's not helpful to know (disclose) the disability. (Int.06)

Yet, all of the youth participants have developed compensatory strategies and feel confident in addressing their individual weaknesses. Adam, who is college-bound, said that in his selection of courses, "I kind of figure out what I'm good at and what I'm not. When I figure out that I'm good at something I become confident that I can do it."

(Int.01) Dave, who had just been accepted to college, stressed that "I know what my disabilities are and how I can get around them and learn like everyone else." (Int.04) A third adolescent, Bill, explained that it was after his LD condition was identified that he was able to personally address his needs and then eventually school improved. He exclaimed that then he could attend, take notes, do his homework and enjoy school, "Like I enjoyed going to class and learning because I knew what was going on and it was fun!" (Int.02)

In several cases these obstacles were readily overcome when the adolescents were taught in a different type of academic setting. One of the younger adolescents, Ed, expressed how he benefited from the teachers and the "whole experience" at private school, "the atmosphere, the kind of learning and teaching that goes on here." (Int.05) Dave, who attended the same private school, reported that the teachers there knew how to teach him. He valued the low student-teacher ratio and the one-on-one help given from which "I've really made some strides. Now I can go into other settings and advocate for what I need." (Int.04) A third young man, Frank, valued getting his career started working with his special education teacher. He credited his high school environment for

having computers, “not just the media room, there’s a computer lab as well, where it’s networked in and you can use programs you don’t have at your house.” (Int.06)

Generally, it is evident from these interviews that most of the youth participants in the study gradually have identified ways to reconcile LD conditions and to counter, to a degree, the effects that they experienced in school. They also identified with more than their LD condition, which is reflected in the different interests and aspirations they pursued. Both of the younger adolescents articulated having career expectations. Chris explained how his summer employer has offered him an apprenticeship as an electrician and that this would, “help me to get enough hours if I needed them to get a (electrician’s) license.” (Int.03) Ed attributed progress toward his dream in life from having the opportunity to learn which has fostered his growth. He believed that what he learned has “helped me to become closer to what I ultimately want in life, to become a poet.” (Int.05)

A consistent message of optimism and hope is expressed in the words of these adolescents and each seems to have a sense of what he can do in life once he seeks the opportunity to fulfill his dream. Their self-determined posture might best be represented in the future vision that Adam holds of using his interest in physics to improve people’s lives in the world.

I have a good vision . . . view of myself as a really good person and do the right thing in most circumstances, I guess. I think I would view myself as successful if I was able to improve the quality of life for people somehow. I think that’s a fairly good motivation for someone to have. Being motivated to do that, that’s an opportunity! (Int.01)

A primary theme emerged that pertained to the context of living with LD, and it involved a degree of persistence and commitment towards learning and getting an education. I noted a degree of self-assurance present in the remarks of the adolescents

approaching or entering college. Adam reported, "You know when something interests me, I just like learning about it" (Int.01) And Frank, who was improving in his high school geometry class, admitted this was something he needed to do well in, despite his difficulty with this subject. He felt it was important if he were to be accepted at a local university or two-year college as a business /computer major. He shared, "Sometimes I like to learn new things. Learn new steps in geometry, new rules and new theories in chemistry." (Int.06)

These comments illustrate how these adolescents felt encouraged towards learning. One of the adolescents, Ed, who now was progressing well academically at a private school, noted, "Well I just like school, that whole experience [in private school] works well for me." (Int.05) Once they discovered how to succeed, these LD youth applied what they learned to increase their knowledge and further their education. Dave was just starting to take a college course and remarked, "They [successes in school] make me want to continue going to school. I feel like I want to continue my education. So I can continue having these types [successful] of events happen." (Int.04) It was common to hear of the motivation, persistence and commitment that these youth have towards learning and getting an education. Adam's words captured this theme well:

One thing I learned about everything, like how happy you are , how successful you are, is all about how motivated you are. Like what you achieve, especially academically. Like what you achieve isn't about how smart you are, but about what you put into it. (Int.01)

Some youth appeared to realize an intrinsic value in learning for their own benefit, while others recognized how they could extend high school success into college. Adam during his first semester taking college courses indicated that school now probably had a positive effect on him, saying "Learning things I find interesting, I value that a lot."

He suggested that he can become quite ambitious when he realizes he likes what he's learning. Another example of this ambition is reflected in Frank's comment, "All the computer courses I've taken in the long run will affect me in a good way, hopefully seeing it on my transcript as entering college. I'm gonna go further in my educational career." (Int.06)

Several of these youth have already set their sights on post-secondary education, and for some, this involved preparation for a vocational trade. Frank repeated his hopes to be admitted to a business college, and he also explored career opportunities in this field as revealed in this remark, "Like I went on internships . . . to see what kind of jobs are out there for computers." (Int.06) Chris expected to enter the regional vocational school in his community in the coming year which might include trying to apprentice with a local electrician.

There were even a few instances in which these adolescents sought to learn from their volunteering in local community services. Chris also recognized the benefit of reaching his dream to be a firefighter, "I always wanted to be on the fire department. Having a chance to volunteer there is good." (Int.03) Another of the youth, Dave, who had several successful experiences in community service as firefighter, local teen center volunteer, and as "eagle" scout, revealed his confidence and explained how he wasn't going to be limited to one profession. Setting broad goals based on his experiences he noted, "I came up with about twenty different job opportunities with the educational plan that I've got." (Int.04) Dave believed that pursuing any opportunity was achievable that was related to his goals and these experiences.

Throughout their responses, the youth participants often conveyed apprehension, especially regarding their parents, about meeting expectations as they approached adulthood. One reason that might help to explain this response could be their perceived past failures and some of the guilt they bear for disappointing their parents. One youth, Bill recalled, "I wasn't doing well in school and that's what was important to my father, really. We didn't get along at all and my mom was stuck in the middle of it. I pretty much just avoided my parents for that period of time." (Int.02) Bill decided to take a year off after graduating high school though he was aware that his parents wanted him to eventually go on to college. He reported that the only real concern he has is, "I'll disappoint my parents." (Int.02) In the following remark, Bill expresses ambivalence towards an opportunity that may or may not involve college.

If they support me [parents and other adults] obviously it makes it much easier and it gives me more confidence to do what I want to do. If an opportunity presents itself that I didn't create myself or have control over, then at least right now I would like to say I would take it. I would like to say that I'm not going to 'chicken out' and say well, 'I don't want to do that'. I hope so, I feel that I can right now [take a chance]. (Int.02)

The apprehension that Bill expressed was common among the other youth interviewed and it seemed rooted in their struggle to become more independent from their parents. This struggle is examined in the following section on supportive relationships. Similarly, this link was present in Adam's experience that involved his moving away from home and into an apartment for the first time. He believed that making this decision was a response to his need to discover independence for himself. Adam remarked about his actions, "I'll make a mistake and it's something that will affect her, it would make sense that she would get pissed off about it." (Int.01) He shared his admiration and

respect for both his parents, though Adam was clear about needing to go in his own direction when it wasn't what his mom specifically wanted. "I respect her and try to please her, but I don't aspire to be like her. Lately, it's weird, she's sort of really against me getting an apartment." (Int.01)

Several LD youth expressed fears about taking a risk requiring adult judgement that differed from the advice key adults were giving to them. Dave explained his tendency to heed the advice his parents gave even if he disagreed with it. He openly admitted to having some doubts about handling adult decisions, as revealed in this comment, "Am I going to be able to do it? I'm always wondering." (Int.04) Another youth, Ed, stressed that his parents are, "Always there for advice." (Int.05) This sometimes kept him on notice to adhere to certain expectations while being afraid of what he would find from success. Ed noted to me, "I guess in the end what will probably stop me basically is my fear that I just might succeed. And that will take me a while to get over. I just hope I can get I over it." (Int.05)

When asked about the influence school experiences had on his confidence and ambition, Frank stated that teachers were advising him of what to do after high school, what it will be like, and what to look for. He recognized the importance this had in guiding his direction and choice of goals. However, Frank seemed to suggest that he had to remain actively pursuing his dreams and he wouldn't stop now because of what he already knows. His fear stemmed from a level of passivity that appeared quite real in this comment:

I have to know more I believe, 'cause I see the people out there, now and I consider some people failures. I know I'm not a failure, I never will be. I'll never let myself get to that point. So I'm gonna do the best I can now, as almost being a mature adult getting there. (Int.06)

Often their trepidation and angst appeared to be due to a concern over being able to handle the responsibility of becoming an adult.

#### 4.3 Presence of Supportive Relationships

The experiences of these young men revealed an influence of caring, encouraging and supportive parents in their struggle for autonomy and transition to adulthood.

However, I want to emphasize that one youth participant asked me not to interview his parents because he felt that they didn't understand his learning disability. Yet, in most instances the parents, especially mothers, who appeared to play a pivotal role in advocating, nurturing and supporting these young men throughout their childhood. This was evident in nearly all the responses to my interview question asking how their parents are supporting their strengths in life. In this remark, Dave conveyed his appreciation for his parents and what his family had done for him: "Overcoming many of my learning disabilities. Many of that I believe that if I hadn't had the strong family ties and they're always encouraging me and the spiritual ties, that I don't know if I'd be where I am today?" (Int.04)

Nearly all the youth reported the significance of being loved, encouraged, and supported by their parents in their lives. This finding is consistently supported in the literature, citing the importance of parental support towards the positive development of youth especially those with disabilities (Adamson & Lyxell, 1996; Harter et al, 1998; McAnarney, 1985; Stone, 1997). Another LD adolescent, who experienced some difficulties in his relationship with his father, explained how things have improved over the past year or so. Bill noted having a "very loving family . . . It's like welcoming and

supportive. They're [his parents] open-minded. They're fair and logical and so it's taught me to be the same way." (Int.02) And Ed reported his parents "support me in everything I do. If I run into some trouble they're there to help me." (Int.05)

Many youth attributed their ability to compensate for their LD condition to their families, particularly parents who frequently advocated for adequate special education programming. It was common to hear statements regarding parental advocacy such as the remark Dave made about his parents "fighting against the school [public school] and finally winning." He went on to clarify the potential consequences if they didn't help as they had or if at some point they had quit.

That for my education, I believe that I wouldn't be successful. That I probably would have dropped out by now. My parents really helped me a lot. I mean with my education. If they hadn't pursued it. And I know other kids whose parents didn't pursue it. I see now that they dropped out of school and they're working at McDonalds. I'm so glad that my parents didn't! (Int.04)

A second adolescent, Chris, similarly credited his parents for their support in his educational progress. "They've always been over at school making sure of getting stuff to make it easier for me. Yea, help me with my homework." (Int.03)

At the forefront of advocacy for many of these LD participants were their mothers who were visibly involved in their educational planning and decision making. In several instances the LD youth in the study expressed appreciation for their mothers' efforts, even at an early age, which seemed to make a difference for them. Bill, who was just graduating from high school, noted, "Mom's done a lot . . . when we found out I had a learning disability, she set up appointments for me, she pushed me to do what was needed to get done and she just supported me mainly." (Int.02)



As revealed in another youth's comments, Adam's mom was pivotal by encouraging his learning and socialization throughout life although his relationship as he now exits high school is changing.

My mother raised me and she encouraged me to be interested in math and science. I guess she encouraged me to read books. She would have conversations with me in different ways than my friends would have with their parents. That was back in the day when we would have conversations and maybe that helped me to get better social skills than I would not have had otherwise. (Int.01)

The fathers of the youth also were having an impact on these adolescents' lives, whether or not they were frequently present or involved. In Adam's story, he related concern about his distance and time away from his biological dad who recently invited him to visit. His remarks reveal the anxiety that someone who experienced divorce and the loss of a stepfather at an early age would reasonably feel. "I'm concerned that sometimes from the conversations with my father, I get the sense like he wants me to spend time with him 'cause he's not going to be around much longer'. Maybe he's terminally ill or something and hasn't told me about it." (Int.01) Although Adam fears his father's incentive might be out of guilt (which his mother denied), he was quite positive about again renewing their relationship.

After enduring his father's absence for over a year due to scarcity of work, Ed shared his excitement at his father's recent return home. Because his dad also has a learning disability, Ed felt lucky that his dad provided unique insights into the difficulties and challenges that his LD condition presented. "My father has learning differences like myself, so he's helped me to understand what I have and how to use it to my advantage." (Int.05) Much of Ed's employment experience has involved doing construction work with his dad.

Just as mothers were connected with a strong advocacy role in the education of these young men, a clear vocational link existed between the youth participants and their fathers. This was especially evident in the vocational choices being made, whereas many LD youth aspired to occupations that were directly linked to their father's profession or trade. One example is reflected in the comments of Chris who now expects to go on to vocational school and become a licensed electrician someday. Chris' father is a carpentry contractor and who for many years served on the volunteer fire department. "When I was little I used to go and work with my dad doing carpentry. I was always into building stuff like that. . . My dad was on the fire department a while ago and I've always been interested in that when I was little." (Int.03) . At seventeen years of age, Chris just now completed his first year as a volunteer firefighter.

Another participant, Frank, who expected to start college courses next year in computer science, revealed his father's influence on his self-sufficiency with this remark. "I set goals for myself, if I break my car I'll fix it. It's another thing I learned. My dad's a mechanic so I learned from him." (Int.06) Coincidentally, Frank's father now works in telecommunications in addition to being a successful auto mechanic. These findings seem to reinforce the pattern identified in the demographic data on employment whereas several youth participants clearly selected career goals that are closely related to their fathers' occupations or trades.

Some LD youth expressed fears about meeting their father's expectations and several credited their fathers for boosting their self-confidence. However, their gain in self-confidence was always contingent on whether their progress would meet their fathers' standards. Two LD participants who just finished high school presented slightly

different viewpoints on such experiences in meeting their dad's expectations. Bill noted, "Depending on how my dad reacts to things I do, it can either give me a lot of confidence, like if I do something well and he says, 'Hey, good job son!'. Then I feel I can do whatever I want to succeed at." (Int.02) Bill also explained that if he didn't get his dad's approval or recognition, especially earlier in his childhood for the successes, he would lose motivation.

The other youth, Frank, stressed being strictly advised as a child to take his cues from his father. "My father's exactly like me. He's always right, never wrong. He's been there for forty years and knows what goes on. He doesn't make wrong decisions, as he would put it. I correct myself if I say something wrong. He doesn't accept that." (Int.06) Frank implied that his father was restrictive and tried to prevent him from doing anything bad. He believed that his parents impressed upon him to grow up and do something positive with his life. However, Frank now expected more autonomy and wanted them to know, "I'm eighteen now. I'm growing up and I'm not the same person I was five years ago." (Int.06)

In some instances the youth participants recognized the value of their parent's guidance throughout their lives. Although at this point in their lives, just as with most non-disabled adolescents, these youth struggle to become more independent from their parents. In Dave's view both his parents have given him a foundation for exercising his responsibility as an independent decision-maker which continues to guide him into adulthood. "I try to make intelligent decisions and that stems a lot from my parents always trying to teach me to weigh the pros and cons to make an informed decision.

Because they're my role models I can think, what would they inform me to be the best decisions that they could come up with?" (Int.04)

Two other participants, however, expressed the opinion that their parents' guidance was sometimes excessive and controlling in their lives. Ed quoted from a popular television series to convey his feelings in the following comment. "They've very really done everything to support me, but as someone on 'King of the Hill' once said, 'Some day you'll understand how much love it takes to crush a little boy's dreams.'

That's basically my parents. They love me enough to crush my dreams." (Int.05)

According to Frank, who previously noted having a restrictive father, this parental guidance amounted to somewhat of a power struggle over the decisions affecting his life.

This was explicit in several responses Frank made during the interview.

They're always there for me. That's about it. It means like they care a little bit too much. They don't want to see anything wrong. . . Have no problem with them guiding me just a little bit, but they're more into my life than I am. . . They're still there sometimes. I don't think they're ever going to let it go. No matter how old I am." (Int.06)

It was Frank's feeling that his parents were competing with his friends and this was intruding on his control in life, as Frank noted here, "They don't want to lose control, so they're trying to get in as much as they can now." (Int.06)

A related theme resonating from the youth responses given involved their desire for more freedom and independence as adults. Those adolescents, who were exiting or close to exiting high school, wanted greater freedom and independence in aspiring to become adults. This was no more clearly evident than from Frank's statement, "Just wish it was switched around a little bit. Not so much enforce if you want to call it. A little bit more freedom. I'd be there if I had more freedom." (Int.06)

The youth participants particularly want to be able to relate with their parents as adults, and they generally expected their parents to treat them as such. Adam, who is now attending college, reported noticing a change in his mother's disposition as he began planning to live on his own. He noted her being more superficial in conversations as he seemed to mature: "I really didn't like being around her." (Int.01) Since he decided to get his own apartment, "there's like this radical change" in her. He missed the way she interacted with him in the past when, "She'd talk with me like I was an adult" (Int.01) before he started planning to live on his own.

A couple of youth participants discussed the circumstances in determining what risks were acceptable and how they could become independent, responsible adults. A recent high school graduate, Bill cited how his moral grounding gave him something upon which to base his decisions. Bill reported that he would continue to discuss decisions with his parents; however, he would be better able to rationalize them. It's more that, "I can do this because if I take the time to sit down and talk with him [dad], he'll understand what I'm doing. So it gives me the freedom to do the things that I feel I need to get done." (Int.02) Bill indicated that he was ready to take a chance, "I feel like I can right now." Although he wasn't clear about his direction. Another soon-to-be graduate, Frank, reported on his preparation for adulthood, "It's all the things you have to learn and I'm getting into it. Just getting help organized." Frank expressed confidence in having worked with older adults, some of whom he supervised in his current job. He was pleased with his ability to communicate as an adult, claiming, "They can understand where I'm coming from". (Int.06)

Some youth expressed minor concerns about the responsibility for making their own choices and for having the freedom to exercise their judgement as an adult. Although not really perceived as a deterrent, such concern is revealed in Dave's uncertainty. "Once in a while I'll have some doubt. Can I do this? But I just think about that if I want it bad enough, I can do it." (Int.04) A sense of optimism prevailed even amidst the doubt among these youth. Note Bill's sanguine outlook with his plans to take a year off from school and to later return and attend college. He admitted, "But I'm scared that whatever I do do, is not going to be kosher with my parents, but that's their problem . . . So any opportunities that come up, I'll deal with that at that point and take it as it comes." (Int.02)

There were two youth in the study who expected to consider their parents' advice before making decisions as adults. This perhaps was not any different than other youth who maintain close family ties. Dave described how his parents are "Always there for advice." This definitely helped him to make decisions. They play a large part in helping Dave to deal with his problems which he could not imagine doing otherwise. This older LD youth exhibited a bit more maturity in his answer stressing his sense of control in the end. "If they advised me against something and I thought about it, even though I might not think it was good advice, I would have to consider the fact that they have experience and that I'm still young." (Int.04) During this transition period it would seem these youth are continuously weighing the risks and responsibility of individuating from their parents.

Another prominent theme in the lives of these LD youth involved the effects of peer recognition and friendships on their emerging self-image. Some of the participants had broader social spheres than others had; however, each youth seemed to experience

some level of intimacy with at least a couple of close friends. In his experience, Frank considered having about twenty close friends in every one of his four classes in high school. According to my sources (two teachers at the high school) he was very popular which was unusual for a special-needs teen. “I have a lot of friends, like either good friends or friends you can talk to in the hall.” (Int.06)

In contrast, another youth participant had moved into Maine roughly two years before the interview and now missed a number of friends which he had left behind. In forming new friendships, Ed was making slow progress. Yet, he valued at least two supportive friendships that he had just started as illustrated in his comments. “They’re nice, caring people who can generally sympathize with what I’ve been through and I can likewise with them. They’re all very smart in their own way and I care greatly about them.” (Int.05) Both of his parents and his teacher believed these were crucial friendships for him to have at this time.

Throughout the interviews, considerable weight was placed on the relationships that these LD adolescents had with peers. The following adolescent’s remarks show why Adam was invested in his friendships. “With my close friends I learn a lot from them, but that goes both ways probably. We have interesting conversations and stuff. We don’t always share the same views but I guess we understand each other quite well.” (Int.01) Many youth participants reported genuine friendships with peers who shared and understood their experiences.

I also learned of one young man’s tightly knit neighborhood where several of his friends lived within “earshot” of his house. Chris simply commented about two close lifelong friends who live “right next door” to him in this rural Maine community. “Of two

of my best friends, one of them lives right there [pointing next door]. [Another friend's name] lives right up there [points to a few houses away] and he's in eighth grade. . . We pretty much grew up together. . . . We know what each other is going through." (Int.03) These are his friends who "hang out" often with Chris at his home.

Most youth in the study felt that there were mutual benefits from their peer interactions and believed that they were being treated as equals by their friends. It was common to hear how peers close to these youth often sought them out to do things together, and further, how they had compassion, concern and respect for each other. When asked about his friends, Adam said, "I think my friendships are based on mutual respect and our ability to build on each other's ideas and amuse ourselves." (Int.01) The youth often perceived close friends to be accepting and non-judgmental which helped explain why they revered these relationships so much. As Bill stated, "They [friends] don't judge what I do, they don't judge what other people do. . . We have a lot of the same interests. [Prompt-You feel accepted by your friends?] Yes." (Int.02)

Two adolescent participants reported fewer close peer relationships, which they attributed to the transition between private and public school. As noted before, one adolescent had a couple of caring friendships that he cherished. The other youth, Dave, recently had graduated high school and stressed the importance of equality and trust in these relationships as he spoke about his friends. "They respect me as a person and don't look down upon me for any reason. They see me as an equal instead of a lesser. And they trust me. They trust me to tell me things that I can help them with." (Int.04) Both youth participants perceived their friendships to be valuable, supportive relationships, indicative of their acceptance by adolescent peers. It was clear from their overall responses that



these relationships provided substantial recognition, acceptance, and personal support for these young men.

#### 4.4 Opportunities for Growth and Encouragement

It was common to hear the study's participants describe how they were directing their academic and vocational paths as adults. There seemed to be a resolve among these youth that they would take advantage of the opportunities available in order to carve out a career path. Note Chris' feelings about the part-time job he held and his other career possibilities that he felt could result in a vocational trade in the future. "Yea, the electrician's job, pretty much [his vocational goal]. . . I just pretty much assist him [the electrician] and he's taught me how to do stuff. If it doesn't work out for some reason I'll find something else. I'm going to building trades next year for carpentry or mechanics. And I work construction work now. I'll always have some background in a few different trades." (Int.03)

A level of optimism was present regarding their career visions as evident in Ed's remarks, "I reach part of my dream everyday by going to school and having the opportunity to learn from those around me." (Int.05) He believed strongly that his learning contributed to his personal growth and it was helping him to eventually reach his vocational goal. Another youth, Dave, similarly felt optimistic from his parents' and others' support and encouragement. He said the following about reaching his career goal, "I know that I'm going to have to work hard for it and it's not going to come easy. But I know that if I work hard and want it badly that I will achieve it." (Int.04)

Several LD youth valued their learning opportunities from educational and vocational experiences, which they expected would help them to achieve their career

aspirations. One young man, Frank, described his recent job shadowing experience, which he explained was quite beneficial, “I went to a business that was just started in [name of town] called [name of internet company], where they create software. It’s vocabulary for English (-speaking) students to see what you do, how it works, what it’s based around, what do you get paid, what do you have to do, what people you work with, and what it’s like.” (Int.06) Frank reported how the computer skills and knowledge that he developed in certain high school courses and independent studies would eventually lead to work in a company like this. In a similar way, Bill also believed that learning to use computers during his high school education helped him prepare for the adult world. “I know that my use of the computer has really helped me get an understanding of the world and how things work. It’s helped me interact with the adult world on a better level.” (Int.02)

Most youth in the study expressed confidence that setting individual goals, making career choices, and achieving academic success were helping them eventually to reach their anticipated career outcomes. The remarks of Frank and Dave were representative of this confidence in their ability to get to college. Frank noted, “It’s a whole organization thing. . . I always grew up fixing things, trying to set a goal where I’m going to do it. It’s just something I actually find fun.” (Int.06) Dave asserted, “Every goal I set is not so high that I can’t achieve it. I think the goals I’ve set are high but I think they’re attainable.” (Int.04) Dave continued to explicitly stress a clear vision of the career he wanted in his adult life. “I plan to major in criminology [in college] and go on to become a forensic scientist.” (Int.04)

According to most youth in the study, their volunteer community service accomplishments and paid work experiences appeared to contribute to their feeling successful, proud and accepted as adults. Many of their experiences included accomplishments in various avocations or jobs in the community. One adolescent, who volunteered for a number of community groups, including a meal program serving homeless veterans, was Dave. He shared his thoughts about running a teen center in his hometown. "I took a job at the teen center to help and try to get people involved. I thought that if they had a young person there they would see that it wasn't just a place where adults worked. That actual kids worked there and they could have fun there."

(Int.04)

Dave also characterized the maturity that volunteering experiences have brought to the lives of the LD adolescents in this study as reflected in his comment.

Volunteering aspects helps me as a person and it also helps other people. When I do that I contribute to both the community and myself. I value my experiences with the homeless shelter, the fire department and with the boy scouts. Those have the biggest impact on me in my community.

(Int.04)

Several youth participants perceived these opportunities as successful experiences, which contributed to their self-confidence. In his graduating year Bill was selected by peers to give a speech during their senior celebration event, which both his mother and teacher, who were also interviewed, described as being pivotal for him. When asked to identify community experiences that affected his confidence, Bill noted this [senior celebration] was without exception the most significant. "The speech that I gave [at senior celebration] definitely boosted my confidence!" (Int.02)

Another participant, Frank, who lived in a neighboring community, cited how through his experiences with video-graphic filming, he learned more skills from his neighbors in the community. This experience also has aided in his creative use of video in conjunction with the computer editing that he learned at school. Frank noted, "I learn more at my house because there's other people outside like my neighbors and we work together sometimes. I go out and shoot footage [video]. Then I put it into computers at school. I learn the more you do it the more you get better at it." (Int.06)

Frank held several paid jobs, each of which required increasing responsibility that promoted his self-image as an adult. He was quite proud of his job successes, noting that in a short time and with hard work he was able to get where he is now. "I've been there for about a year and a half. I worked my way up to that. All my jobs have been either supervisor or lead." (Int.06). He admitted having to persevere at it when others quit. "Makes me feel pretty good. I worked to get there. Sort of excel at it." (Int.06)

Similarly, two other LD youth valued performing carpentry work with their fathers. Chris, who was previously reported to have worked with his dad doing carpentry even as a young boy, currently works as an electrician's apprentice. Stressing his interest in construction trades, Chris stated "I was always into building stuff like that." (Int.03) The other youth, Ed, felt his experience gave something to him that he could fall back on. "Working with my dad as a carpenter builds muscles and is a good skill to learn if I fail in the modern mainstream work environment." (Int.05)

Finally, two of the study's LD youth now successfully serve as volunteer firefighters, which they deemed quite rewarding. Chris explained this began as a childhood dream when his dad was first serving as a firefighter. "My dad was on the fire

department a while ago and I've always been interested in that when I was little. . .

Having a chance to volunteer there is good.” (Int.03) And Dave said he felt recognized and accepted by his firefighter peers who are adults. “I have many friends down at the fire department . . . I see a lot of them as equal and they're older than me, but I believe they view me as equal also.” (Int.04)

A final emerging theme involved the belief that these youth had in their self-confidence and motivation to actively pursue their personal goals. I witnessed the hope and persistence that most of the participants held towards their future. Frank explained his determination to push on and achieve his dream of being a computer major in college. “Hopefully, stay in there in a set position. That sums it up right there. Trying to achieve the goals I set. Trying not to give up.” (Int.06) In a similar way, Dave revealed in this remark how he now more equated learning with actual success in life, “I want to make sure that I learn everything so when I go into the real world I'll be able to be successful.” (Int.04)

Some LD youth in the study cited how others' encouragement and their own conviction to move forward were strong enough to assure their success. Nearly all of the youth credited the guidance of their parents, as well as certain the guidance of teachers, as influencing their desire to reach future goals. When Ed was asked what effect guidance and support from home and school had on his expectation of success, he said “I guess by they're giving me the confidence, nerve, ability whatever you want to call it to do what I want to do and do what needs to be done.” (Int.05) Also, Adam stressed the benefit of teachers who helped along the way, “All throughout school, there's always been a teacher that I could just talk to.” (Int.01)

There appeared to be some uncertainty being expressed by a couple of study participants about whether or not they could maintain the motivation or discipline to forge ahead with their vision. For example, Adam seemed determined to convince himself that he could stay motivated. “Think I just have to stay motivated. That’s like the only thing. One thing I’ve learned about everything, like how happy you are, how successful you are is all about how motivated you are.” (Int.01) In still another’s response, Bill seemed to expect success provided he gave enough effort, although he admitted needing the self-discipline to reach his college goal. “I know that whatever I do, if I try I do well in it and I succeed. . . I’ll try hard to force myself to go to college. We’ll have to see. That is a goal definitely.” (Int.02)

The majority of LD adolescents in the study felt optimistic about their ability to help shape their outcomes for the future. Despite having some anxiety and concerns about reaching their dreams, they primarily expressed hope in their future career pursuits. Four youth, Bill, Adam, Frank and Dave, all spoke of their intent to succeed in college. Frank exclaimed, “I’m gonna go further in my educational career. . . You know what I can do now, it will lead me there.” (Int.06) Adam professed, “I’m sure I’ll have the motivation, like with one year of college left I’ll have the motivation [to finish].” (Int.01) Perhaps this optimism was best represented in Dave’s assertion, who was recently accepted to a university and confidently said, “I believe that if I set my mind to it, I can achieve whatever goal I want.” (Int.04)

#### 4.5 Summary of Key Findings

In the process of understanding the meaning that these adolescents assign to their experiences living with learning disabilities, I also have learned more about these youth,

their lives, and their determination to meet the challenges of becoming adults. The effects of a learning disabled condition constitute only one of the many influences helping to shape their self-concept development. I found that many of them had traumatic experiences throughout their public education, which resulted from the stigma attached to the LD label. Although often scarred at an early age because of academic failure and feeling branded by special education classes, most youth participants were developing compensatory strategies and were working hard to become more successful in school.

As I learned through my contact with these adolescents, some were quite knowledgeable about their condition. This seemed to be reflective of reconciling with the learning disability. As one subject, Dave stressed, "I know I have to work harder than some kids. . . I'm just gonna have to work through it." (Int.04) A good example of the reconciling came from one of Bill's comments in response to my question asking what experiences he valued the most. Referring to his discovery that he had a learning disability, Bill noted, "I think that helped, once I found out I had a learning disability it made me more independent and more, 'I can do what I want to'. Yea!" (Int.02) The optimism expressed about dealing with the LD effects in life was suggestive of being active agents in their educational decisions, and holding perceptions related to being more adaptive and self-determined (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996).

I could see from some of the experiences of the youth participants that they learned to identify with more than just their LD conditions. They would candidly talk about their academic difficulties not as just an impediment, but more, as a reality that

they've learned to manage in their lives. In relating the different effects from his experiences in school, Adam stated, "I'd say the positive experiences affect me in a positive way and the negative experiences affect me in a positive way as well. They cause me to do something about them." (Int.01) Generally the adolescents in the study had the persistence and the commitment to learning and getting an education.

There were indications from youth participants of feeling some apprehension towards meeting adult expectations. Yet overall, results revealed they had perceptions of optimism and hope regarding their academic capability. The evidence of holding negative perceptions as learners, as cited from previous studies (Brier, 1994), was not present in this examination of global self-concept in LD adolescents. My findings are not representative of all adolescents with LD, though these participants met positive self-concept criteria including academic performance on which a standardized global self-concept measurement (MSCS) is based. Only subjects meeting this criteria and to whom I had access within a period of a year were interviewed. Further studies should examine LD youth who partially meet self-concept criteria, as well as subjects who are considered to have negative self-concepts.

The standard criteria for assessing global self-concept on such measurements as the MSCS, fail to capture the opportunities, strategies and settings in which LD adolescents have learned to gain confidence and self-assurance from their experiences. McPhail and Stone (1995) stressed that individual experiences involving adolescent social relationships may not be reflected in standardized self-concept instruments. One example was conveyed by Dave and Ed, -- and their parents -- in their remarks about a



special private school program credited for its instructional techniques, small classes and study skill development which strengthened academic abilities in these young men.

Dave explained that he made strong academic progress because of the small teacher-student ratio and the effective teaching during his four years at this school. Ed, who recently began giving public poetry recitals, exclaimed “Because of what they [his teachers] showed me, I’ve had the courage to become public with some of my poems” (Int.05) Their testimony appeared indicative of what McPhail and Stone (1995) described as the “dynamic nature of classroom environments”. Both Dave and Ed felt that being taught in this type of program had really turned around their faith in the education system.

While some of the youth participants were surviving their high school academic experiences, those youth starting to take college courses felt more encouraged by the teaching in this setting and with their own self-advocacy in realizing their capabilities. Several youth in the study also reported experiences in community settings, such as volunteer firefighting, scouting, competing in a chess club, a public address to classmates and doing part-time work helped them believe in themselves and promoted their ambition. Overall, most adolescent participants identified some type of community experience, from volunteering to employment, as having a positive influence upon them.

The role which social supports played in the lives of these youth participants was quite visible from their accounts. The perceived types of social support that LD youth report receiving is a critical part of global self-worth (Harter et al. 1998). A consensus existed among these youth that their caring, encouraging and supportive parents had had a positive effect on them. Several adolescents suggested in their own words that their

growth, achievement and success in life could be attributed primarily to the love, advocacy and guidance that their parents provided to them over the years. In most instances their mothers were very active advocates in the education of the young men in this study. Yet, in a couple of instances, a certain amount of tension existed between themselves and their parents according to these LD youth, perhaps representing a degree of over-protectiveness on the part of some parents.

A related pattern that was also present among the youth participants involved their connections with their fathers. The adolescent participants inferred their concern about what their fathers thought of them. This was an observation of some parents and also particularly reported by teachers. As previously noted, three of the LD youth, Chris, Dave and Frank all identified career goals which were related to the occupations of their fathers. (Ints.03, 04, &06) A younger participant, Ed, noted he could fall back on the work skills he developed from having worked in his father's construction business. (Int.05) Adam also noted his father was "a cool guy" and expressed appreciation for his re-involvement in his life, though he felt it would have been more valuable several years earlier in his life. (Int.01)

Several factors arguably could account for these connections, such as having lost a stepfather during childhood or knowing your father also grew up with a learning disability. Bill suggested that even his rebelliousness and feeling discouraged might have been in response to either his father's not-acknowledging or his father's rejection of his work. (Int.02) At one point, Frank protested his father's influence on his decisions and dominance in his life. The apparent stress and regret that Frank voiced about his parents'

control over his decisions was unique among participants, especially his father's looming image, which might explain his refusal to allow a parent interview. (Int.06)

In their pursuit of independence and freedom as young adults, these LD adolescents sought more distance from their parents while simultaneously hoping for their approval. As with most adolescents, they wanted to show how they could make sound judgements and how well they could handle their responsibility as adults. Most participants, especially those who were older, also felt that at their current age, it was important, just as for any other young adult, to become more autonomous from their parents in their decisions. It seems that the study's participants represent the roughly half of the LD youth population that have no greater difficulty in psychological adjustment than their non-disabled achieving peers (Brier, 1994).

Many of the youth participants cited the positive effects of peer recognition and friendships on their self-perceptions. This was an equally valuable source of support for this study's LD adolescents. They reported having mutual trust, respect, and interests that made them appreciate their friendships with peers. All of the youth in the study were routinely included in social activities with their friends, often through invitations over the phone, via e-mail and daily contact at school. Chris explained, "They [his friends] call me all the time and come over [to his house] all the time. They're always stopping in pretty much every day." (Int.03) Perhaps a common thread in all their close peer relationships is exemplified in Frank's remarks, "The trust factor. . . They have always been there." (Int.06)

Lastly, interview responses revealed that these youth participants accessed a number of opportunities for growth and encouragement from their experiences. Most of

the LD adolescents stated they were seizing the chance to direct their career paths into adulthood, which they believed had a positive effect on their future outlook. Several youth cited specific goals and career dreams which they were pursuing, such as Adam's desire to engineer environmentally efficient automobiles, or Frank's ambition to become a computer videographer. Each one of them reported being encouraged and supported by family, teachers and friends to secure opportunities of which they could take advantage, for example, Chris' apprenticeship with a local electrician or Ed's submitting poetry for publication in a local newspaper. This pattern appears consistent with the influence that perceived control and outcome expectations are considered to have in self-determination (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 1998) and career self-efficacy (Panagos & DuBois, 1999).

Based on the reported experiences in this study, LD youth' community accomplishments in an avocation or in employment contributed to their developing positive self-concepts. Both Chris and Dave expressed feeling valued and accepted in their volunteer firefighting work. (Ints.03&04) "Working with my dad as a carpenter" (Int.05) was something Ed particularly valued. While Frank shared how his persistence at his part-time job paid off with advancement to a better position. Even Bill noted his expectation that an international volunteer experience in the coming fall, would bring more opportunities and help to clarify what he wanted to do with his life. He anticipated this would have a positive influence on him and what he believed he could do as an adult.

Overall, individual convictions to actively shape a vision of the future were complex and as varied as the youth participants in the study. Most of the youth exhibited the self-confidence and motivation to actively forge ahead and fulfill their dreams. Many LD youth would, at times, exude confidence as reflected in Adam's comment, "When I

like it I can become really ambitious about it.” (Int.01) Their convictions often were attributed to parents’ or teachers’ support, and some youth asserted that they now had the will and determination to succeed as adults . . . as revealed in the following comments, “I guess I try to look for inspirations wherever I can.” (Int.05) Or “I think that any opportunity I have is created by me.” (Int.02) And “Yes, I think that whatever I want to do I can do.” (Int.04) It would be interesting to know whether, and to what extent, the career aspirations of youth participants were reinforced over time. Other future research might examine whether similar opportunities for growth and encouragement are afforded to female adolescents with LD. Further research also should include an examination of these patterns over time and to compare them in female LD youth, as well as male LD youth.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS OF PARENT DATA

#### 5.1 Overview of Findings

Most of the parents of youth participants were also interviewed in the study. It was previously noted in Chapters 3 and 4 that one youth refused to allow me to speak with his parents if he were to be included in the study. Also in two instances, only mothers were available to participate in the interviews. Thus, a total of five mothers and three fathers took part in the parent interviews that I conducted. The multiple parent perspectives presented here help to clarify and explain their sons' reported experiences living with their LD conditions.

In the following discussion several themes emerge based on the results of in-depth interviews with parent participants about their perceptions of their sons' experiences with LD as they pertain to self-concept development. The parents in the study responded to similar questions to those presented to the LD youth involving academic and non-academic competence, peers, family and beliefs about acceptance and aspirations. In this discussion I will focus on: the parents' context of experience with learning disabilities, factors in bridging to adulthood, the influence of a nurturing family environment and a priority of creating success for the future.

#### 5.2 Context of Parents' Perceptions of Youth Experiences

A majority of parents expressed their disappointment and frustration in addressing their sons' LD condition and the pervasive stigma associated with it. Although these parents were being asked to identify their sons' academic strengths and abilities, all but one mother inevitably began focusing at the outset on the persistent problems that their sons' LD

conditions were presenting in school. As Ed's father noted, it was easy to see how a specific LD weakness could compel an adolescent to hide his condition at any cost. "Because his attention span is very small when it has to do with anything having to do with his disabilities. He avoids it like the plague like all of us would." (Int.11) It was common to hear remarks such as those of Bill's mother who noted,

He showed such potential even though he could barely read but couldn't keep hold of it which angered and alienated his teachers. [Son] really hated school understandably and by the time we found out what was wrong, we got him on medication and he did remedial work, it was too late for him to change his patterns. . . It feels like he fell through the cracks. (Int.08)

All parent participants revealed a history in which they became frustrated, discouraged, and disappointed particularly with difficulties emerging from their sons' LD conditions in public schools. Adam's mother spoke of his middle school and then magnet school program that followed, when Adam felt repeatedly stigmatized from "pull-out" services. When working with a consultant, "he wanted to be 'declassified'. . . He felt that if he could get rid of that classification, the administration wouldn't view him as needing so much support and accommodation." (Int.07) According to Ed's parents, his history of failure looms over him in spite of the compensatory skills he now has. "He needs extra time on testing in order to be able to read the question and to process and answer it. He's still wrapped up in the belief system of 'I'm going to fail'. So no matter how prepared he is, he feels he's going to fail. I don't know if stigma is the right word, but he still insists on taking his own notes." (Int.11)

Many parents expressed frustration from the inability of special education in public schools to effectively address their sons' needs and to appropriately accommodate their sons' LD conditions as necessary for their academic success. Chris' father was adamant

about the stigmatizing effect of special education on his son, “ That [tutoring] helps but he doesn’t really like it because he’s singled out in special education which is in the back corner of school away from everything else in this dirty old trailer. Who wants to go there? The teacher does help him but he’s not happy about going there.” (Int.09) He further commented that Chris’ high school classes are inappropriate in accommodating for his skill needs and in effect are setting him up for failure. “He’s not learning or gaining anything, he’s just treading water.” (Int.09)

Several parents in the study reported the effect of early academic failures and pervasive stigma in public schools that quickly lead to their child’s embarrassment, anger and pessimism towards school, in general, and learning, in particular. Bills’ mother recalled when his struggle began back in fourth grade and he shut down. “He responded much more easily to the negative than the positive, especially after it got to where he wasn’t able to get much from the positive things that happened.” (Int.08) She remembered the comments of one teacher on Bill’s work during his early grades that were so negative and discouraging. Many parents shared experiences of when their sons recognized that they were different from other kids and, as a result, they became isolated, ridiculed, and eventually became depressed. There were many stories like the one Dave’s mother recalled to me:

When he realized that he had special needs at the end of second grade, beginning of third grade he came home. Said he was called a ‘retard’ and didn’t want to go to the resource room anymore . . . He came home one day, put his back to the door and closed it, then said, ‘How old do I have to be to quit school?’ I said, ‘Why?’ He said because he has no friends, nobody wants to play with a retard from the resource room. (Int.10)

One couple explained how their LD adolescent needed many years of interventions and counseling after experiencing the early trauma from being ridiculed and repeatedly failing in public school, before he was ready to start taking some risks again. In my



conversation with Ed's parents, they reported that Ed grew more aware of his LD by fourth grade. "He would try everything in the book to blend into the woodwork so he wouldn't get noticed." (Int.11) Other kids his age often were picking on him for it and he showed signs of depression. They feared losing the gains that he had made in the private school programs, which he had attended over the past several years. "We've got a kid who's willing to take risks again. It's taken us almost eight years [in private schools] to get back to that. We're both very concerned that standardization of public education is designed to take that away." (Int.11)

In a few instances some parents indicated how certain teaching strategies were helpful, but these were rarely consistent in their sons' programs. In one example, the parents of Chris credited the school's use of a tutor for one year, as recommended by an outside consultant, of which his teachers made an issue and resisted. Despite Chris' progress in school, the teachers insisted he be instructed at home which would have isolated him from his peers at school. "He didn't want people coming to our house and teaching him at home . . . He wanted to be part of the system, part of the community at school." (Int.09) As a result, they placed him in a "self-contained" classroom with all special needs kids who had different learning difficulties or were kids that he didn't know. His father recalled, "He hated those classes." (Int.09)

McPhail (1993) suggested that individual attention in supportive small class settings could account for greater positive feelings than average and low-average achieving students had during school. I learned from Dave's parents that the small group instruction and one-to-one tutoring given to him in private school made all the difference in his education. "That's probably the number one thing that influenced my son's success!" his mother noted.

(Int.10) Dave's parents felt they had to expose the public school limitations for their son and to challenge its full inclusion approach in order to guarantee the appropriate remediation that he needed in as quiet and supportive an environment as possible. They credited private school for nurturing their son which was absent in his public school education. "They treat him like a worthy individual who has something to give." (Int.10)

As noted in Chapter 3, a large majority of youth participants' parents (75%) had some post secondary education including some earned degrees. Among parent participants interviewed only one had just a high school education, and six reportedly had earned four-year college degrees. All of the parent participants were vocal advocates for their sons going on to college. Not surprisingly, many of the parent participants demonstrated effective parental advocacy in the education of their sons including access to private schools and colleges.

Under no circumstances did these particular parents trust that the existing public education systems had the best interests of their sons at heart. At least two parents stressed their efforts to undo some of the damage experienced in public schools by bringing their sons to specialists who could help in understanding their LD conditions. This was often pursued at their expense. Dave's parents brought him to their pediatrician who helped explain a "learning disability" and to assure him that he was intelligent and quite capable of learning. In Adam's case, his mother sought a neuropsychologist's help to educate herself about LD and how Adam learned things differently. This also, according to his mother, helped Adam to sort out how he could best perform academically.

Most of the parents, especially mothers, believed it was incumbent upon them to actively assert their sons' right to an education and to advocate strongly on their behalf. This

was reflected in the experience of Adam's mother who said, "Originally when he was identified, I had to educate the school about the learning disability. So I had to be more active as an advocate, as a parent. If you're doing that which you unfortunately have to do, the student feels singled out in a sort of way." (Int.07) Another example was revealed by Dave's mother who explained the decision that she and her husband made to take a stand against their rural public school district in order to fight for an out-of-district placement for Dave. She stressed how this was extremely important, "For academic purposes it's the perseverance, we had to persevere through six months of hearings." (Int.10)

Most parent participants had years of experience to learn how to effectively advocate for their LD children's needs. During her interview, Chris' mother recalled approaching a teacher over the repeated test failures Chris was bringing home. "I've always advocated for him at school. I went and had a meeting with a couple of his teachers . . . and said 'This isn't working'. So now in that subject he's just listening . . . and then he's going to be orally quizzed with his aide in his supervised study. It's working so far!" (Int.09) Adam's mother cited years of experience arranging for academic supports, scheduling appointments, researching techniques that would help and trying to convince Adam to learn compensatory skills. Ultimately, many parents remain hopeful that they can outlast the public school's resistance as revealed in the words of Chris' father, "We're always counteracting the school system. They're tearing it [sons' motivation and self-confidence] down and we're building it up. Our ability to build it up has lasted much beyond their ability to tear it down." (Int.09)

Generally, the parent participants have consistently impressed upon their sons the need to learn more about their LD condition in order to effectively be able to advocate for their own needs in school and as adults. Over the years Adam, according to his mother, has

had numerous opportunities to identify his strengths, interests, compensatory skills and personal goals according to his mother. His neuropsychologist, as well as the college support staff and faculty where he currently takes courses, were credited with his increased self-advocacy this year. She felt this has gotten him more invested in accessing resources and getting help there, noting they have “encouraged him to do different things that he might have felt were stigmatizing in the past.” (Int.07) In Ed’s situation, his father stressed, “We’re trying to create an environment where if he tries to self-advocate it’s safe. Not holding hands, but where it’s safe that if there is failure, it’s learning curve failure. It’s not like a total disaster.” (Int.11) Many parent participants were starting to realize that this increased autonomy was critical in their sons’ progression towards becoming an adult.

Several parents also shared their recent hope that public educational settings would adapt to their sons’ LD conditions just as the private schools, or in one instance, a university, that now educate their youth, had done. Among those parents with sons in private school there was an expectation of consistency. This was probably best illustrated by the words of Dave’s mother, “He’s had positive experiences at [private school]. It’s one-on-one tutorial teaching that’s probably the key to where [son] is today. We pushed to get him one-on-one as much as possible . . . Inclusion would have been a complete and total failure for my son and they [public school staff] wanted to do that, but we refused to allow them to do that.” (Int.10)

Adam’s mother reinforced the need for a similar environmental structure though with a caveat of his taking responsibility for using it as he attends college. “He should be provided a structure that I hope he will continue using . . . Someone may need to keep a check . . . to monitor whether he’s effectively using the structure.” (Int.07) Yet, she also

conveyed uncertainty about her sons' selectivity in using personal supports and structure. She maintained that he must become more self-disciplined and learn to tolerate courses he may need that are of little interest to him.

Some parents though remained guarded about ever diminishing their role as advocates despite the effect it had in labeling their sons for having "parents who are adversarial". In my conversation with Ed's mother, I was impressed by her angst over reducing their role now during Ed's sophomore year. His parents earlier in the interview expressed delight in preparing Ed to use computers, tape recorders and other technology which they believed he could use to self-advocate. Yet, Ed often avoided using these devices for fear of standing out among peers. Now, she felt it was necessary to continue, "Gaining self-confidence and helping him get through the everyday drudgery of the educational system at high school that you have to go through." (Int.11) Ed's parents deemed that this was important if he were to be able to follow his life goals and dreams.

For one couple, their son's separation from his advancing adult identity was still unclear to them even as he entered his first year of college and attempted to negotiate supports for the first time without his parents. With a little encouragement, Dave's parents had been successful in coaching him to get accommodations for two courses he needed last year in order to graduate. He succeeded after initially being tentative, insecure and somewhat fearful to walk away confidently saying, "Give me college! I'm ready to take it on." (Int.10) Yet, they regrettably reported his more recent encounter with academic support staff at a local college who informed him that academic accommodations are negotiated and not guaranteed as they were in public school. Dave felt vulnerable and threatened, and he expressed disappointment that his parents weren't present at the meeting. They honestly

expressed concern over his vulnerability and their fear and uncertainty about his college success.

Throughout the interviews with these parents, I recognized their persistence and commitment to promote their sons' learning and social development. A prevailing attitude existed among them that they had to endure in getting their LD youth into programs and settings which promoted individual learning and social growth. According to Adam's mother, his college instructors now "have acknowledged his strengths, but that hasn't always happened in the past." (Int.07) She noted her efforts with a rural public school, regional magnet school, private school and now a local college. "By arranging for him to have academic supports, which is pretty labor intensive, setting up all the appointments, researching who he could work with, what would help with what, and trying to talk him into it. I think I've helped him in that way." (Int.07)

I discovered from my conversation with Chris' mother, relative to addressing his previously noted test accommodations, that she believed in being proactive with public schools. She recalled getting Chris placed in an early remedial reading program in which he experienced "a lot of success" gaining two grade levels in reading that she often reinforced at home. "I think he appreciates that if something's not working in school, I'll go in and try to change it to make it work so he can learn and still succeed at the same time." (Int.09) This placement was within a research program being piloted in their school district that was recommended by a consultant whom they knew though it was not proposed by the school staff.

In addition to seeking school accommodations for their LD youth, the parent participants cited numerous efforts to find academic alternatives, use consultants, seek

outside counseling, develop an apprenticeship, or find an unbiased play group. For example, Bill's mother explained that his intelligence helped him to disguise his LD condition and to progress through high school. Eventually, Bill stopped trying when his poor grades became too painful. She stressed, "it was a difficult time, I got him to counseling." (Int.08) Once in family counseling his parents began to understand his behavior and they could isolate his difficulties, and they learned to advocate for him when they suspected genuine learning problems existed. This led them to request an evaluation and to eventually identify his LD condition. She remarked about the counseling, "It's taken a few years but that's helped in our relationships." (Int.08)

Similarly, Adam's mother had a neuropsychologist evaluate his condition. She said this assessment process provided Adam with a lot of "opportunities to become more self-aware in terms of how he processes information, and looking at his learning disabilities from a strengths-based perspective and a lot of education about learning differences and styles which wasn't provided by public school." (Int.07) Through weekly counseling with her [neuropsychologist], Adam has learned about his interests and his capability to succeed in school, to compensate for his LD, and to set personal goals. This experience was "really helpful" to him according to his mother.

Some parent participants also created a couple of unique opportunities for their sons. In one instance, Chris' mother found her son a part-time job in which he succeeded as an electrician's helper. Chris became more intrigued with the work because the licensed electrician had LD. As a result, Chris is exploring a formal apprenticeship with the same electrician when he attends vocational school in his district next year. According to his

father, “The work situation [electrician’s assistant job], that’s been huge [in bolstering Chris’ confidence].” (Int.09).

The other instance involved Dave’s parents who found that when he was attending elementary school, he was teased and ridiculed by some peers due to the stigma of being LD. They identified some playgroups, through their church, in which Dave could escape the stigmatization from his identified LD condition. His father noted, “So we would ship him down to playgroups in different towns where my friends were to engage with children [who were] his own intellectual IQ, even though they didn’t have learning disabilities and he did.” (Int.10)

The parents of these LD adolescents sought opportunities for their sons’ learning and social development through educational programs, professional services, community experiences and personal contacts. In one instance, Ed’s father revealed their endeavor to support his interest in getting his poetry published. “We’re trying to get in touch with [a local paper] to try and see if they’d be willing to let him do an apprenticeship. Or have him submit poetry or write a teen article for the [paper] once a week as an apprentice.” (Int.11)

According to Dave’s parents, it was a combination of experiences that they advocated for . . . in scouting, in sports, and in private school . . . that bolstered his self-esteem and helped eliminate the bias that he experienced in his peer interactions with classmates. “All of a sudden he became ‘king of the socialites’!” (Int.10) It seemed for many parents in the study that once their expectations of their sons changed and became more positive, they could direct efforts toward finding settings that promoted the same expectations. This was best exemplified in the comments of Adam’s mother:



Yea, changing my expectations and looking at his strengths and trying to support that. And get him enough external supports so he could develop those things. I was always trying to get resources for him and put him in situations where he could experience his strengths and not be too critical of the things he wasn't really good at. (Int.07)

Given the history of academic disappointments that their sons had experienced, most parents in the study were skeptical about both the capability of public educational systems to accommodate their sons' learning needs in the future, and also about the determination of their LD youth to self-advocate and to tap into the opportunities to succeed as adults. In my conversations with parent participants I discovered some of the ways they were confronting fear and apprehension about their sons' academic and social future as adults.

The parents of the two LD adolescents who were mid-way through their high school programs expressed their anxiety that their sons' academic progress had been marginalized by the public school system's rigidity. I heard Ed's parents complain that as the school pushes harder for Ed to be mainstreamed, he will have less opportunity to be assertive. In their eyes, he is still fragile enough to regress to being quiet, passive and again reverting to his old defenses. They were now getting indications from his public high school of plans to mainstream Ed, instead of considering another alternative there by offering a smaller class size and one-to-one attention. "He's doing well [in Maine] because he is comfortable and knows what's expected of him and he's living up to that. But because he's doing so well [the public school] is now saying we can bring your son back into the mainstream. They're not seeing the extra work it takes to keep him where he is that's being done at [private school]." (Int.11)

Another family had genuine doubts about their son's public high school, where it continues to be very difficult for Chris. His parents stressed that this was a major reason

why he didn't like school. "His self-esteem is brought down when he's faced all the time with challenges from school work that he can't do. And it's every day." (Int.09) I could sense their frustration and despair over how to help Chris as evident in his father's remarks. "[High school] is so unfair that I fear they will find a way to expel him. He can also be awful quiet and maybe he's holding in more than I know. About the feeling he has towards his learning disabilities, 'cause he won't really talk about it'." (Int.09) They also fear he may decide that he's had enough of school and just quit. His father wished, "He's so close that if he can just get through this one year he'll be in the clear." (Int.09)

Several parents voiced fears about their sons' naivete and vulnerability that could restrict their being assertive and accessing opportunities as adults. It was common to hear anxiety expressed about their youth regressing quickly to become depressed again about their educational future. In Ed's case, his parents fear more frustration and depression for him, much like it was in his earlier grades as he encounters rigidity in school programming. "He needs to grow up." (Int.11) They believe public school will squash his chance to be a better self-advocate, since it [the school] is primarily designed to protect its own interests rather than advocating for students with special needs.

Additionally, Dave's father confessed of his fear about school in the future, a fear that could be inferred from his comments, "I've got some fear about his education. Sometimes I worry about his vulnerability. Sometimes I think he's a little on the naïve side." (Int.10) Dave's father emphasized the risk involved with advocating in college and the chance that Dave could be taken advantage of in the process. These parents seemed to fear more failure for their LD adolescents unless additional strategies, supports and accommodations were built into the system.

The participants' families wanted to continue believing that their sons would become more assertive and opportunistic as adults, though I could sense some apprehension. For Bill, who was taking a year off from school, his direction was a bit more obscure. His sabbatical also involved an international volunteer experience, which his mother expected to be quite enriching for him. She expected him to go to college on his return home though she noted his complacency. Bill's mother saw his being unassertive and uncertain of "what he wants" to be problematic in his future. "Don't know if the fight was taken out of him or if it's just not in his nature. We're really waiting to see what he's going to do. I'm not sure?" (Int.08) This helped to explain her perception that Bill is being unrealistic and that she and her husband expect he will experience "a difficult time" in the next year.

### 5.3 Bridging from Adolescence to Adulthood

The parents in the study were taking advantage of community resources including access to contacts and programs in helping their sons cross over the bridge to adulthood. A number of these parents recounted various stories and experiences of utilizing community programs and activities, which encouraged and supported their sons to succeed. I was informed by Adam's mother that she had attempted to reinforce her son's perfect MEA scores in math and verbal sections by sending him, while he was in fourth and fifth grade, to a gifted program for talented youth offered at a prestigious university. She stressed that he enjoyed this and other outside activities that she suggested he do. "He was also involved in community theater. He likes public speaking and has done community theater for two years with his sister." (Int.07) She believed strongly that Adam benefited from these experiences outside of school.

Many of these community linkages offered volunteer opportunities in the arts, environmental events, scouting and public safety. I learned about the value Dave's parents placed on his many volunteer experiences in their community. "He had a great positive scouting experience, all the way up through the rank of "Eagle Scout". He got involved in the Police Explorer Post. Community services have taught him a lot." (Int.10) They noted the effect on his maturity and the personal reward that he received from his volunteering as a mentor in Special Olympics, in serving meals to disabled veterans at the American Legion and by assisting at the local homeless shelter during holidays. Now, according to his parents, Dave looks forward to giving his time to these community programs.

Similar to Dave, I heard from Chris' parents that Chris, throughout childhood, wanted to follow in his father's footsteps to become a volunteer firefighter. "He joined the fire department. He's wanted to join the fire department ever since he was four. The day he turned sixteen was the day he joined the fire department. He's been waiting for years and he went to his first structure fire the other day." (Int.09) They reported how these were wonderful connections that Chris had made in their community that grounded him with other adults. They also felt that sometimes it was a bonding experience, such as when he and his father took a hunting course together and Chris' father shared with a smile, "He joined the fish and game club so he could be around older sportsmen who dote on the younger guys." (Int.09)

Most parents valued these experiences for the way in which they recognized that they allowed their sons to make contributions to the community and also because they reinforced individual strengths of these youth as young adults. For example, one father explained that once Dave was in the volunteering experience, "he knew this was something

he had to do because he was so rewarded himself.” (Int.10) In another interview Chris’ father stated that things like the fish and game club experience and volunteer firefighting helped Chris to fit into the community and that they gave him “self-esteem” at the same time. And Ed’s father also credited an intramural soccer team from elementary private school where Ed earned the “most improved player” award one year. As a result Ed gained a “reputation” and played the role of being a “team builder,” eventually learning to always encourage the new kids throughout this experience.

These were experiences that most parent participants thought helped to instill a sense of responsibility and community among the adults present who often accepted these LD youth as contributing citizens. For example, during my conversation with Ed’s parents, they recalled his acceptance and being valued from his recent volunteering with a wildlife organization. “The volunteering down at [nearby town] marsh helped him to feel more of a part of the community type thing. Not only was he part of their ‘end-of-the-year picnic’ but he also felt very needed and well liked. But again he was accepted and the [local] group, he did like this birdseed thing, cause he really not only proved to himself [of his physical strength] but he was really thanked quite heavily.” (Int.11) Ed apparently carried out birdseed sale orders and felt that he was appreciated for his assistance. Ed’s parents noted that Ed has been asked to come back next year which they perceived to be a “good sign” as it reaffirmed Ed’s perception of being valued.

Another consistent theme identified by these parents involved building LD adolescents’ confidence through their interests in hobby, recreational and volunteer activity. Ed’s volunteer experience at the wildlife preserve also helped to foster his self-esteem and confidence in addition to affirming his valued role. His parents described Ed’s weekly

efforts all summer cleaning the wildlife area open to the public, cleaning and caring for the canoes, and hoisting and retrieving the flag. Ed's parents indicated that he was quite proud of himself for fulfilling his commitment and also for completing the daylong birdseed sale, despite his being exhausted from this experience.

Several parents indicated their sons benefited from enrichment by participating in, e.g., a chess club, guitar lessons, poetry readings, a community service or local scouting. At one point Adam's mother had praise for his membership in a new chess club and said, "He's had other opportunities for enrichment instead of just academics and that's sort of helped him to have a sense of self that's not totally tied in to academic performance. It's good." (Int.07) She revealed that he also joined a history club in their community that did historical research on an old house and enjoyed learning about period furniture that reinforced his woodworking interest. She stated that this was something he liked and "it's not something he would do by himself." (Int.07)

Other evidence supporting this theme came from Bill's mother who praised her son for his knowledge of music and his taking lessons to play the guitar which was one of his passions. She noted, "He likes it a lot. He's confident enough and much more willing to take risks [from his music endeavors]." (Int.08) In a similar way Ed's parents credited his "Poetry readings . . . He did one reading at [his private school] and he's done two articles in the [private school's] newspaper in regards to poetry night and . . . being a student that went to two different schools." (Int.11) They believed that this had a strong positive effect on his confidence and ambition.

It seemed that part of the parents' interpretation of these experiences involved their sons' gradual progression towards independently doing adult-type activity. Chris' father captures the positive effect this growing perception of his son as an adult can have:

More and more [confidence] as time goes on. Cause now he's got a car and he can go on his own. He's on the fire department. He's got some independence to seek out other things. He's getting more opportunity in the fire department he might get a pager if he gets called out of school. He's in a winning situation. (Int.09)

In another instance, Dave's father explained the prestige his son received by earning his Eagle Scout award. He reported, "That [the award] boosted his self-esteem and people admired and respected him for that more than [his son] expected." (Int.10) He felt that Dave became more accepted as an adult member of the community as a result of earning this scouting honor.

In Dave's situation, he began doing community service in his mid-teens. His parents believed these experiences, which often occurred through church, were essential to their son's spiritual growth and development and part of his obligation to the community. His father stated, "Morally, he knows what he wants as an adult when he becomes an adult." (Int.10) They admitted urging Dave when he was sixteen that he was old enough to start giving back to society from the talents with which he was endowed.

Many LD youth participants were credited by their parents for establishing connections through personal relationships. Several parents recognized certain personality strengths in their sons and an ability to develop supportive personal relationships, especially with adults. Various comments surfaced, revealing the social maturity these parents saw in their sons, for example, the following remark from Dave's father. "I never met an adult who

did not absolutely, thoroughly enjoy [son] including his teachers. That goes back to what I said earlier in his maturity level, his ability to converse as an adult, an adult thing.” (Int.10)

More evidence of parents’ perceived connections that their sons had with adults was revealed in Adam’s mother’s response, “He worked for this farmer in [name of town] and had a co-worker who was a Viet Nam vet with post traumatic stress. He would talk with me about him and that environment. The woodworking, he took woodworking lessons for five years and participated in a woodworking show in our community once in the summer and he was the only kid exhibiting among adult carpenters and professional woodworkers. ”

(Int.07) She saw these as friendships which Adam has kept over the years, and she believed that they represented relationships that were “meaningful to him” in their community.

Several parents, as well as teachers, described the many positive friendships and peer relationships these LD adolescents had. There were instances, though, when parents expressed concerns about their sons’ ability to communicate and socialize with peers. For example, Adam exhibited a selective pattern with his peer relationships over time.

According to his mother, he maintained just a few friendships over the years primarily with adults or other intellectual peers based on their shared interests. His mother saw Adam as “kind of an introvert” and she reported that since attending college, he is just now beginning to tolerate more age-appropriate peers as friends “in an intellectually community of peers with whom he could connect.” (Int.07)

In a similar way, there were other youth whose parents reported having concerns about their sons’ peer social interactions, too. In Dave’s experience, his parents noted he had stormy peer relationships throughout childhood until he commuted to a private high school. He had one or two good friends in high school who were now away at college, so



his one close friend currently is his girlfriend. Bill also appeared to follow a selective pattern of friendships during his high school years, which has more recently changed. His mother indicated to me that because of his struggle with LD and the hard time he was having, he may have felt less of a connection with peers and hence, chose to self-isolate.

Interestingly, two fathers also shared with me their sons' struggle socializing and communicating with friends their own age. First, Dave's father noted the difficulty his son experienced speaking on the phone, such that he preferred waiting to be contacted by friends. His parents noted how they encouraged and helped him through practice and role-playing; yet Dave continued to resist initiating contact for fear his friends might reject his invitation to get together. In the second instance, Ed's father identified his son's uncertainty when contacting a special needs female friend. "When [son] needs to call [female friend] to do something, he doesn't bring himself or can't bring himself and I don't know what it is?" (Int.11) Ed simply refused to call this girl, with whom he socialized, stating that he felt like he was imposing on her.

However, despite some adolescents' tendency to isolate this parent noted how her son kept a few strong relationships that also have helped him and several friends "at-risk" for abuse to support each other in their efforts to get through some difficult times. Here Bill's mother characterized his unique interpersonal strength in her comment. "Actually his relationships help him because he's the listener/helper, that's his role. The strong support person and that kind of thing. He allowed his personality to override the down feeling [of academic failure] or poor self-concept around school. He just became more popular, noticed I guess." (Int.08) At one point, Bill's mother stressed his ability now to "get along with

everybody” not just classmates, but parents and teachers, too. In her opinion, Bill wasn’t as isolated now, and he did very well socially just about anywhere.

Most of these parents still considered both their sons’ relationships with peers and adults in school and the community as a benefit to them. The parents of Adam, Bill, Dave and Ed mentioned that their sons had positive heterosexual relationships, which they perceived as supportive friendships. Chris’ parents also stated that he has a lot of friends and some of the most attractive girls in high school want to date him. His father said, “He has more people who want to be friends with him than he has time to be friends with sometimes.” (Int.09) And, although I did not speak with Frank’s parents, his teachers indicated that he was just as socially popular among peers as Chris was.

A majority of parents in the study also said their sons appeared to be linked through their relationships with adults in the community. It was common to hear parents like Bill’s mother who praised his high school science teacher for taking an interest in him, lifting his self-confidence and encouraging Bill “to think beyond a bit.” Or, in this example from Chris’ father, “Socially he’s very competent in his own reserved way, outgoing. He’s successful with adults. The adults he works for and with [volunteer firemen and a local electrician] are really impressed with him.” (Int.09) Parents believed these positive relationships provided the youth in this study with the chance for adult socialization and were considered to be encouraging, supportive adult interactions which often opened up other opportunities in their sons’ lives.

#### 5.4 A Nurturing Family Environment

Many parents described the importance of their love and support towards their sons. One mother explained how her son grew through family counseling which strengthened his

relationship with his dominant father, giving him a voice for the first time. She clarified that before they knew Bill was LD, his parents worked through issues to try to better understand what he was going through. “The underlying message has been, no matter what, we love him. That’s always been the most important thing. What I said earlier, too about encouraging him to stand up for himself ‘cause he didn’t know what was wrong.” (Int.08)

In another instance, Dave’s parents stressed their part to support and to model strategies that helped him to compensate for his LD. They felt they had tried “to teach him to lead by example.” According to Dave’s parents, Dave’s strong religious beliefs and moral values to which his family adhered have provided a solid foundation to help him make sense of the world as an adult.

As well, this parent believed her son experienced a similar effect from family love and support. Adam’s mother emphasized how important family encouragement and support was to him. She believed that he recognized and appreciated that his parents always wanted the best for him. “I encourage him to get an education, going on in school, making a contribution in the culture, like using his intelligence on something that’s socially useful. He knows that he’s a priority in my life and that’s been helpful to him.” (Int.07) Several other parents also gave testimony that their sons were encouraged to try whatever they wanted to do, to be okay with changing their direction in life, and to generally expect their family’s support for their preferences.

Several parents often perceived their relationships with their sons as positive and felt these LD youth valued the openness, guidance and encouragement that their families gave to them. In a couple of instances, parents indicated their sons realized the extent to which their families had looked out for them, and had taken advantage of every opportunity to help

them succeed in life. For example, Ed's father pointed to "their struggles" and the fact that Ed had heated exchanges with his parents. He also noted the importance that they were able to talk about issues and differences. "Through it all he knows he can always come here and just talk and say whatever he wants and it's okay. He saw us functioning as family, trying to help family." (Int.11)

Chris' parents further spoke of their continuous effort to be open-minded, encouraging and supportive to him in and out of school, e.g., helping him to get a driver's license, and then helping him to set limits with peers in order to use the family's truck to attend a concert. They noted, "He values the fact that we support him in the things he's into and that we appreciate him . . . the fact that we can talk. We can communicate and say our feelings." (Int.09) They acknowledged those moments when Chris had "a little bit harder time with it" though if it were important to him, he said what was on his mind.

All of the parents interviewed believed their LD youth recognized the positive effect of the love, care and support of their families in their lives. When asked what their sons valued most about their families, most of the parent participants conveyed feelings similar to those of Dave's parents. His father noted, "[Son values] our love, our unity and we stick together through thick and thin. That no problem is too great that can't be solved. Unconditional love and that no one's perfect and we all have disabilities whether they're identified or not. He's kind and loving towards us and vice versa." (Int.10) Just as the other parents believed, Dave's father described his son as having an open relationship with both parents to the extent that he [Dave] would be comfortable to discuss "just about everything" with them.

Most parents in the study felt that home provided a safe and trusting environment in which their sons could thrive. According to Ed's father, Ed still depended on his parents to do the groundwork for some things, a behavior that they are trying to phase out. As was indicated earlier in their remarks, Ed's parents hoped to create a home setting that was "safe" and in which it was okay to make a mistake. Ed's father said that Ed recognized this and trusted that his parents would avert any foreseeable disasters.

In a few instances, some parent participants believed their home environment made a considerable difference in their sons' sense of belonging and acceptance where they lived. It was common to hear remarks such as those made by Chris' father, "I think he's accepted by our family. He's part of our family and we do things together." (Int.09) Also, two families indicated that their home setting often counteracted the rejection and isolation their sons experienced from other settings, i.e. at school, or due to their sons' lack of peer relationships.

Parents conveyed the distinct notion that the LD youth participants recognized and were grounded in their family's foundation of values and beliefs about life. I discovered from a few parents that they not only saw their sons as obedient and considerate, but also as loving, compassionate and caring individuals. According to Chris' father, "He's very compassionate and caring, and very helpful. He'll help me all the time, so I'll feel better or just to help out." (Int.09) I was told by his father that Chris doesn't want to "let us down." In our conversation, Bill's mother also said that he recently talked about how she and her spouse were "terrific parents" to him and that they were responsible for his turning out to be "a good person."

Many parents in the study felt that certain values and ideas, e.g. honesty, open communication and hard work, were inculcated in their sons' upbringing. For example, Chris' father noted, "We've always been real honest and straight with him in bad things and in good. We try to be right up front and honest. And we expect that from him." (Int.09) Some parent participants discussed this idea as it pertained to their sons' responsibility for making decisions. In one instance, Dave's father stressed that Dave learned to think carefully and wisely before making choices, with the realization that he was accountable for those decisions. And Ed's father expressed his hope that his son retained this value to which they adhered, in understanding the "cause and effect" of the decisions being made.

Several parents in the study suggested their LD adolescents valued these qualities in their families, and as a result, they adopted these virtues in their own lifestyles. Both Dave's parents emphasized that their decision to keep Dave's mother as a "stay-at-home mom" had instilled in him an understanding of the commitment he has to make to his own children. They also pride themselves for raising Dave in a family that stresses knowing the difference between "right and wrong" and having a faith in God. "Our strong belief in God . . . That's what we taught him, that without God we're nothing. That's our personal viewpoint and that's helped him get through a lot of things." (Int.10)

Dave's parents explained where their belief foundation was reinforced during their struggle over his education. "He saw the perseverance that we went through [in due process hearings]. We sat down and discussed going to [private school] and did he realize that things that are worth a lot are notably attainable. You've got to work very hard for it. That also goes for the [private school] education and we want you to put forth 110% effort, because if

you do, you will be a success.” (Int.10) Dave’s parents seemed to hold high expectations in whatever he did.

In a few interviews, parent participants indicated that their sons have adopted the family’s environmentally sensitive and socially responsible values, which they felt had a beneficial effect on them. Adam’s mother told me of his exposure to the arts, the environment and social causes during her first marriage to Adam’s biological father. She attributed Adam’s aesthetic sense to his father’s artistic side. In a sense, Adam held onto many “counterculture values” which his mother reflected in her remarks. “He has a pretty good social consciousness. He shares our values that are not totally with popular culture.” (Int.07) Similarly, Ed’s parents boasted of their son’s respect for the environment and his sensitivity towards nature. Nearly, all these parents fostered a sense of social responsibility as evidenced by their support and encouragement of their sons’ community service.

These parent participants hoped this foundation contributed to their sons’ character and that it strengthened the ties these LD youth had with their families. In this comment, Ed’s mother revealed the dynamics and character building involved in Ed’s relationship with his father. “[His father] tries to give him friendly advice whether he needs to accept it or not. He admires [his dad’s] work ethic. Another thing I hope that he’s gotten from us is ‘being honest with yourself’. Because if you’re not honest with yourself, you can’t be honest with others.” (Int.11)

I was struck by the fervor these parent participants expressed about their family’s foundation of values and its impact on these young men. This was best illustrated in the words of Dave’s father, “They [foundation of values] made him better, more well-rounded,

mature. He knows what he wants for his future and he understands the importance of family. And an intact family, how important that is to raise the next generation.” (Int.10)

During my interviews with parent participants I also observed a similar theme of tension from parents’ experiences as their adolescent sons made the shift in their identity towards adulthood. A few parents in the study reported the struggle with their LD adolescent’s increasing freedom and recognition of their newfound independence. For example, Chris’ parents voiced concerns over his increased mobility when Chris acquired a drivers’ license. They suspected some drug use among his friends, so when Chris got his license, “he was told that he would not be driving if observed doing drugs.” (Int.09) In order to monitor this behavior and reduce the risk involved, Chris’ parents chose to “provide a safe place” where he and his friends could “hang out” routinely at their home.

Just as the LD youth discovered, the parent participants also found it difficult to cope with their sons’ evolving adult identity. I learned from Bill’s mother that he now gets support and positive feedback from adults, which has helped him to feel confident enough to “be himself.” It was difficult to determine the implications here; yet it became clear Bill’s parents always “encouraged him to be himself, express himself . . . and not care about what other people say and think.” (Int.08) Yet, Bill found, well into young adulthood, that he often felt rejected for dressing and looking different. At the time of these interviews he had dyed his hair multiple colors. When asked about Bill now being accepted by others, his mother said, “People won’t be able to see him through things they might not like to look at.” (Int.08)

Parents in the study also recognized that their relationships with their sons were changing and that this shift created difficulty for them. In one instance a father explained



how it was hard to see his son as an adult, given the risk involved and all the attention parents must give to meet the needs of their LD youth. “We try to make opportunities for him to make connections between his desires, his likes, and real world opportunities to use those. He still depends on [his parents] for some perspectives . . . even though he’s sixteen and should start doing that himself.” (Int.11) In a similar way, Dave’s father remarked about how hard he found it to now be thinking of his son as an adult:

Our relationship with him is changing. It’s going from a parent-child relationship now to an adult-adult relationship and to be honest with you, it’s hard. Maybe not for him, but I know for me and [his mom]. In my mind I still have visions of that little guy hiding behind my leg when we’d go to baseball practice. He’s not that anymore! (Int.10)

Finally, a mother admitted being overprotective, though she expected the separation was more of a challenge because she foresaw her son’s continued dependence. As previously noted, Adam sought more independence by pursuing his own apartment, which his mother first opposed. In the following comments, Adam’s mother discussed their changing relationship and that this was reasonable to expect Adam to do.

[Son’s] relationship with me comes from my having to keep him on track and set things up for him, organize stuff, so I think he and I are very close. But he wanted to get this apartment because he needs to go off on his own. It’s probably healthy for him now and he’s in a supportive school environment. . . His relationship with me is good but he probably feels I’m overprotective and ‘mother’ him too much. (Int.07)

Adam’s mother thought that she could now preclude herself from being a hyper vigilant advocate since Adam presently seemed able to navigate the system in college.

### 5.5 Creating Success for the Future

A sentiment of hope generally was expressed among parents in the study that their LD youth would achieve success as adults. Many parents cited the enormous benefits from

the recognition and affirmation of their sons' strengths, which often occurred in the community and even, at times, in school. In my conversation with Dave's parents, they spoke of his many high school sports experiences which caught the attention of other people in the community, e.g., he played and was chosen as captain on high school football and baseball teams that finished in the state finals. He was an athlete who kept fit and his father commented, "The weightlifting [required for team training] has helped him, again building his self-esteem and meeting self-set goals and accomplishments." (Int.10)

Several parents credited positive experiences including college academic support services, summer work, a graduation address or woodworking as examples that reinforced their sons' confidence. I came to understand the positive effect that college was having on one youth. In my conversation with Adam's mother, she indicated that the university setting where he attended helped Adam rediscover himself.

The university's strengths-based academic environment has worked for him. He now has enough confidence based on what he's learned that he is capable of doing through the academic support services he's receiving. The way the support services are set up at the university, they're so non-stigmatizing and there's so much education about accommodations that his self-concept has really gotten turned around in that environment (Int.07)

In another instance, Bill's mother reiterated what Bill had said about the recognition his commencement speech brought, when for once he felt connected with the school community. Bill had received encouragement from his math teacher, which helped him rise to the challenge of speaking publicly to his class. She noted,

He said it was something he'd written, that he wrote a story for speaking at graduation. When I read it, it was an allegory [about high school] . . . and it came out in the end that they [teachers] had given them [students] a sense of community. He did a beautiful job and the response was incredible [applause from teachers and peers]. It was great how it fit in and it was a great way to end a very difficult school experience. (Int.08)

Most parents in the study expressed their appreciation for the encouragement and support that the people who were involved with their sons have given. Based on what Chris' father had to say, his work experiences were a "huge" boost to him, which involved his electrician's work, as well as many other job experiences. This father's remarks illustrated how work success has built up Chris' confidence in the future. "Yea! I think he's good at what he does. I think he feels successful. People are telling him he's doing a good job at work [including work as an electrician's helper], and that makes him feel good. He has self-esteem, you know good self-esteem. He sees success in the things he's doing." (Int.09) As I also previously noted, in somewhat of a different way Adam's mother applauded the woodworking lessons that Adam took several years ago as well as his recent involvement with a local chess club where there were adults who accepted him and with whom he more often felt supported and understood.

Also there were instances when parents recalled the immediate increase in their sons' motivation, confidence and interest in school once entering a specific setting, e.g., private school in which the instruction and support built upon their sons' academic strengths. This was certainly stressed in the praise Adam's mother had for the local college he now attended. Furthermore, the following comment by Ed's father exemplified the shift both Ed's and Dave's parents witnessed during their sons' transition into a private high school program.

Experiences at both [public and private high schools] are proving that the four years prior, rebuilding his self-esteem and confidence, worked fabulously. . . He's doing well [in the private school] because he is comfortable and he knows what's expected of him and is living up to that. (Int.11)

In Dave's situation, his parents stressed that all the genuine reinforcement he received and being held accountable for his learning at private school had demonstrated that he could succeed at college. "He'd say, 'I'm going to go to college'. But I don't think he really thought he could until he was successful at the high school level [in the private school]." (Int.10)

These parents believed that sometimes the LD youth participants had to make connections between their individual goals and real life opportunities. A general consensus existed among these parents that part of their LD adolescents' developing adult identity involved setting their sights on career goals and finding opportunities for success. When asked about Ed's goals and ambitions his father described how his authoring poetry was a metaphor for Ed. "It allows him to be alone, it allows him to connect with the outside world, it allows him to play with the English language a lot [one of Ed's passions]" (Int.11) He believed the challenge was to keep Ed focused and said that he has constantly reminded Ed that it [staying focused] is all applicable to life.

In another parent's perspective, the emphasis was placed on recognizing one's individual capabilities and raising one's personal expectations. Here Dave's father explained how his tasting success, setting goals, and using accommodations made a difference in his future:

His success later on in school career, yes, has enabled him to seek further education, to really, it proved to him that he can be whatever he wants to, whatever he chooses in life. If you set your goals high enough you can reach them. If anything he's learned that a little bit of accommodation, a little bit of compromise can go a long way. (Int.10)

Most parent participants stated that they encouraged their sons' to pursue vocational opportunities vigorously in order to reach their career expectations and goals. According to

Adam's mother, she advised him to be thinking about more practical applications of his knowledge in physics and math, such as in engineering. "He has the idea of an electric car and he doesn't believe it's good to drive cars because of their emissions. He wants to come up with an alternative." (Int.07) She encouraged him to apply his pragmatic ideas, given the tremendous growth in science and technology fields.

Some parents in the study also gave examples of how they've advised their LD youth to pursue work options and to take advantage of opportunities whenever they can to show what they can do. As noted earlier, Chris' parents cited how his vocational history has truly bolstered his confidence. "He rakes blueberries every year and does his hard work. He knows he doesn't want to do that every year. He wants another job that's going to pay more money. So he doesn't have to do blueberries." (Int.09) They reported that his immediate goal is to return to work with the electrician and that he looked forward to being an apprentice for next summer.

At the time of my interview with Chris' father, he also explained that Chris was doing a lot of work-study jobs and taking advantage of new employment situations. He seemed to be keeping a balance between school and part-time work. I was informed by his father that "It's hard but he wants to work a lot. Any opportunity that he can take advantage of to do, well he's going to take. He really grabs onto what chances he has for success." (Int.09)

I got the distinct impression that parents in the study held onto their optimism while facing uncertainty and concern about their sons' future. In my interview with Chris' parents, his father expressed his wish that Chris push himself to get through the year. "He needs more motivation, he doesn't have enough I feel for school. He has to pass this year to

get into the vocational school. Yea, then he can go on for two years at the vocational school in [next town].” (Int.09) He expected that Chris would take responsibility as an adult to learn to read better and to educate himself. He said confidently, “I think he will.” (Int.09)

An overriding sense of hope seemed to exist among the parents that their LD adolescent sons will continue to progress and succeed in their aspirations. Parent participants, for the most part, were encouraged by their sons’ success and they were hopeful their sons would find their place as adults. For example, Adam’s mother described how his opportunities in college “helped quite a bit” and that he was already succeeding in his program there. “He’s starting to think about what he wants to do in life.” (Int.07) And Bill’s mother explained how she hoped his volunteering abroad would help him to find out things about himself “that will help push him a little bit.” (Int.08)

Even in spite of their apprehensions, these parents trusted their sons’ ability to make decisions as adults. Here, Bill’s mother, being confident he would set his course, also wondered whether he might take a “path of least resistance” without ever fulfilling his potential. She remarked, “He will do what he wants to do. It’s just how much of his potential is that going to involve? But I think it will [tap into his potential]. I’m afraid that what he wants might be replaced by what he wants because it’s easier.” (Int.08)

In a few instances, parents identified their anxiety and fear of “letting go” because of their LD adolescents’ vulnerability or continued need for supports (which was stated earlier in this section). Again sensing they would have a diminished role in their sons’ lives, the following comments by Dave’s father conveyed what many parents apparently were feeling.

I have fear regarding some of his college courses and the professors’ attitudes towards accommodations or modifications. Neither of us was at that interview [with academic support coordinator] and he was sorry that I didn’t go with him. He felt very vulnerable. He came home and said, ‘Mom, you

should have been there'. And I said, '[Son], I don't know when to go and when to let go? I don't know where that limit is where mom has to stay back and you have to go?' . . . He was a little on the angry side. (Int.10)

Finally, there were some parents in the study who also questioned whether their adolescent sons (once facing barriers and adversity alone for the first time) would function as mature adults. Ed's father noted, "He needs to grow up [mature]. [His parents] are very concerned about the first time [their son] really runs into the syndrome of 'you can't possibly do that'. I know that's my major frustration with the world, and I know I can't change it." (Int.11) Similar comments to these were offered by others who were, like most parents, wanting to believe that their sons would prevail to eventually become mature, successful adults.

#### 5.6 Summary of Key Findings

It was my assumption in this study that parents' perceptions would help to corroborate what their LD adolescents perceived about their experiences or help to clarify where there were differences in those perceptions. At the outset, it was immediately apparent from these interviews that parents were equally traumatized by their children's academic experiences with LD. Much of the reported scarring and stigma during their sons' public school education experience was also supported by parent participants with even greater details. Whether or not the LD condition was identified earlier in public education, nearly all parents in the study recalled their sons beginning to experience more academic learning difficulties between second and fourth grades.

According to most parent accounts, they felt their sons reacted negatively early on to public school much in the way Chris' father characterized his reactions. "He didn't even want to step on the grounds of the school after he was done with his academics . . .

When he leaves school he wants to leave it behind. If he has to be there, he'll be there but it's a negative thing." (Int.09) And Dave's parents noted how they began to understand what caused their son's anguish when it became a lot harder in fifth grade because the "kids at that point had become mean." They said it didn't take long to "come round to his way of thinking" and want out of the public schools.

In Stone's (1997) review of studies involving parents' expectations of their LD children, he concluded that parents' perceptions of their LD children's academic skills were lower and less congruent with teachers than those of parents of non-LD children. If this were true of the parents in my study, I would wonder whether or not their many years struggling with public education and special education services might have contributed to such perceptions. According to the majority of parents, the public school setting had failed to address their LD sons' learning needs and they were determined to change that. If they had accepted this fate for their sons it might have explained, (consistent with Stone's study) why they could have had such low expectations of their LD youth.

Yet, these parents were quite the opposite and maintained high expectations for their sons' ability to succeed in school. Given their strong, persistent advocacy they grasped onto the hope that their LD youth would eventually access the services and settings they would need to academically succeed. Contrary to Stone's findings (1997), they seemed to provide appropriate challenges and supports for their sons' learning. There also was evidence from the teacher interviews, which will be reported in the next chapter, that the parent participants' perceptions of their sons' academic abilities were fairly congruent with those of their teachers. Time and again, many of these parents gave clear examples of their efforts to promote raising the estimates of academic performance



in their LD youth within their school systems by identifying and accessing alternative instructional approaches and settings that worked.

Even among the parents who expressed fear about their sons' vulnerability, optimism was present about the self-advocacy they saw emerging within their LD youth. Ed's father explained, "He's getting better at standing up for himself, but he's got a long way to go." (Int.11) Both Ed's and Dave's parents succeeded in obtaining out-of-district placements for their sons at a private school for LD youth. Dave's father also stressed to me how their experience going through due process hearings encouraged their son to be ready to "take a stand" if needed in order to advocate for his needs. His father now noted about Dave, "He has set high goals and standards for himself. And he really tries his best to do that." (Int.10)

In Brier's (1994) review of the literature on psychological adjustment in children and adolescents with LD, he found very few investigations at all, let alone recent research, regarding parents. His review found in a limited number of dated studies that parents were "overly harsh" and having considerable "difficulty in setting appropriate expectations" of their LD children. Brier found (1994) that some studies examining family structure suggested that families with LD youth were "more disorganized and conflicted" than families without LD youngsters. I found that none of these findings appeared to be present with the parents and families in this study.

As I previously explained, the parents in this study not only sought school accommodations for their sons but also they persisted in accessing alternative programs, consultants, outside counseling and other help with their learning and social development. The families of these LD youth appeared to be well-organized and assertive

in their commitment towards their sons' educational and social growth. If anything (given the conflicts they reportedly experienced), they seemed "more critical and demanding" of public education. These parents stated that they were constantly exploring whatever resources they could find in order to ascertain the "appropriate expectations" they should hold for their LD youth, since they had little faith that their public schools would do so.

During this process I became aware of parent participants' feelings about their sons' future. They seemed resolute in understanding how their sons interpreted being different from other non-disabled youth, its effect on them, and their role in helping them to address the challenges that this would present in the future. One mother described that over time her son had learned to accept that his LD condition was not necessarily "bad" and that he now identified it as a part of who he was. Adam's mother noted, "I don't think he [Adam] felt like his learning disability was a bad thing." (Int.07) She said that Adam has worked through his desire to get rid of the LD label. She also noted having to change herself if she were to help him learn to compensate effectively now as an adult. "I've had to really back off and respect that he does things differently [than her non-disabled daughter]." (Int.07)

Another example of parents' sensitivity with this struggle came from Chris' father who stated, "He measures himself to his peers and he has a hard time dealing with not being able to do a lot of the work they do." (Int.09) He realized this might have a discouraging effect on Chris' ambition in the future, despite his desire to do well. Chris' father hoped Chris, as an adult, would continue to discuss his struggles confronting LD with him.

In two other families, parents noted anxiety about the sadness and isolation their sons, at times, still experienced along with the trauma of one youth who had a history of “night terrors” from the way he was mistreated by classmates. Yet, I also learned that there was an apparent breakthrough in both instances, a breakthrough about which these parents were now hopeful. Referring to his being sad and lonely for long periods of time, Dave’s mother affirmed, “We were able to successfully turn that around.” (Int.10) And Bill’s mother described his recent transformation as Bill exited high school. “He always felt different in school and struggled with that. In pushing through it [high school], he found a strength in himself.” (Int.08) If this successful transformation could only continue into adulthood seemed foremost on their minds.

During the interviews I began to see a path that these LD youth took towards successfully bridging to adulthood. Parent participants found numerous opportunities related to their sons’ interests with hobbies, recreation and volunteering outside of the home. It was often through these external experiences which their sons connected with adults and, in turn, promoted their self-confidence. Families appeared to accomplish this often through their associations with a number of community resources and access to many community-based contacts and programs. Not surprisingly, most of these parents said their LD youth valued the way in which these organizations and programs recognized the contributions their sons made to the community and reinforced their strengths as young adults. They also credited these activities for providing enrichment, fostering confidence and nurturing spiritual growth in the lives of their adolescent sons.

The research conducted by Shulman, Carlton-Ford, Levian and Hed (1994) found that LD adolescents were not more pessimistic and that they did not show a greater

tendency to withdraw from facing problems than did non-LD youth. In a related way, the parents in this study seemed confident that they promoted in their sons the capability to build supportive relationships and to ask for information, advice and help from these supports in addressing the obstacles they encountered in life. Many parents stressed that their sons' personal connections and supportive relationships with peers and other adults also were key to fostering positive adult development. Because of their trusting close friendships, and personal supports, (e.g., from college classmates and adult-mentoring relationships) as well as from associations with club members, these LD youth had similar optimistic and assertive tendencies as those found in the Shulman et al. (1994) study. Their perceived acceptance or "likeability" within this wider peer group may be as Harter, Whitesell and Junkin (1998) deemed "more critical to perceptions of global self-worth" in these LD youth.

It became evident to me that parents in the study felt as their sons did in that the acceptance, love and support that they received within a nurturing family environment was beneficial in their identity development. There were parents who gave examples of how their families provided a foundation of values and beliefs, which their sons had adopted and now used to guide their decisions as adults. Three of the fathers seemed to proudly describe their role-modeling to help instill moral and even religious values that they hoped would carry into their sons' decision making. In one instance, Ed's father admitted having a learning disability himself and both of Ed's parents agreed that, as a result, his father had a major role in advising and counseling Ed.

The link between LD adolescent and parental coping patterns in this study appeared to be similar in some ways to the connection that was reported in the Shulman

et al. (1994) study, which found LD adolescents' adaptive coping to mirror their parents. The parents in this study seemed to have been strong enough to deal confidently with problems and to seek supports when needed, such that this coping pattern was also emerging, if not already present, in their sons. In fact, LD youth in the study appeared to adopt their parents' assertiveness that was evident in their own coping patterns. Most of the parents also acknowledged their sons' desire to be more autonomous in their decisions.

It was my impression that the families that I interviewed were not engulfed by their sons' LD conditions. Shulman et al. (1994) believed that the prolonged dependence of LD youth on their parents accounted for LD adolescents' arrested differentiation in their research. This was not the case with the LD youth sample that I studied. Their parents seemed to be struggling genuinely with encouraging autonomy and differentiation in their sons. Clearly, it was a challenge for parent participants to remain hopeful, to change their patterns as primary advocates, and to encourage their sons to become more active decision-makers, thereby relinquishing control over their adult choices in life. The early adult development indicators that parents in the study reported about their sons, such as making decisions, problem solving, identifying interests, setting goals and asserting their needs (often an important self-advocacy skill) are all considered to be strongly tied to self-determination and positive adult outcomes (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

Finally, there were a number of avenues that parent participants felt were available to their LD youth to help them create a successful future as adults. Most of the parents expressed considerable appreciation for the recognition and affirmation of their

sons' strengths which was provided by certain school and community programs. Several parents also cited specific benefits from school settings towards strengthening their sons' academic competence and enhancing their self-esteem. I heard Dave's father speak about Dave's private school teachers, "they treat kids as individuals that are really worth something. . . They don't baby them, but they nurture them and that was something lacking in public school." (Int.10)

This finding seemed consistent with McPhail's (1993) research which identified school practices given in class settings that offer individual attention and support while promoting greater autonomy as helpful to adolescent development. Given the descriptions made by these parents about the private school and college experiences of their sons, McPhail (1993) similarly found that LD adolescents in her research received individual attention, small classes, increased parent involvement and expectation levels commensurate with their abilities for most of their school experience. She suggested this type of setting attributed for their having positive dispositions and active participation during school more than both average and low-achieving students. My qualitative research was limited to reported experiences in school and further study will need to examine more closely the different instructional environments in both secondary and post-secondary programs that help to promote positive self-concept development in LD youth.

Another element these parents believed would help to create success for their sons in their adulthood involved the real life opportunities which they could connect to their individual goals. The Harter et al. (1998) research found that activities which adolescents perform in a job were not major sources of pride, and hence, they were not considered to

be accomplishments contributing to perceptions of self-worth. However, some parents in the study credited their sons' volunteer and paid work experience for having had very positive influences on their career aspirations and their self-confidence. As previously reported, Chris' father stated, "The work situation, that's been huge." (Int.09) A number of accounts were given by these parents explaining how volunteering, and sometimes work, fulfilled childhood dreams of their sons and they provided a valued role within the community.

In the Harter et al. (1998) research, a distinction was made between most adolescent jobs that are "rather menial" as opposed to certain occupations where job competence does contribute to perceptions of worth among adults. Their research measured domains of self-worth based on the relative importance placed on specific competencies related to LD youth experiences, without examining the differences between those experiences. Arguments exist with respect to both the detriment and the benefit of work during adolescence (Safyer, Leahy & Colen, 1995). Harter et al. (1998) also acknowledge both the benefits and detriments accrued when adolescents become employed. At a minimum, further study is needed to explore the different work experiences of LD youth and their impact on positive self-concept development.

As it was for the LD youth, so too were parent participants very hopeful about their sons' adult lives. This was true despite any lingering uncertainty or concern they may have had. Each of these parents expressed some worries about their sons, particularly as related to their education. Many of the parents' sentiments were reflected in this remark that Dave's father made, "That's [succeeding as an adult] my main worry, is to get him to be a happy, healthy confident and productive member of society." (Int.10)

Overall, these were parents who held onto their faith that their LD youth, as adults, could continue to thrive and to learn. Notice how Chris' father conveyed such hope from this comment, "Education never has to stop just because it's a twelve or sixteen year proposition. That's what I don't want him to lose. I want him to always go on to be learning!" (Int.09) Future study of this sample should be repeated in order to ascertain whether or not these parents' perceptions remained consistent over time, and whether or not their sons could demonstrate their ability as "causal realists" in evaluating their efficacy and outcome expectations for learning as adults which Wehmeyer (1994) has associated with self-determination.



## CHAPTER 6

### ANALYSIS OF TEACHER DATA

#### 6.1 Overview of Findings

In addition to interviewing LD youth and their parents as described in Chapters 4 and 5, I interviewed teachers who were identified by these adolescents because of their understanding of the experiences of these LD youth. I was advised by Frank, the youth participant who preferred that I not interview his parents, to interview a second teacher instead. It seemed this teacher served as Frank's surrogate parent and to whom his real parents would also go for help and advice.

As a result there were seven teachers interviewed for the study, all of whom were given aliases\*. The multiple teacher perspectives presented here helped to substantiate responses from other participants and to interpret the reported experiences of their students with learning disabilities. The teacher participants consisted of five male and two female instructors, of whom three were either teaching in a private school setting or providing private tutoring, one was a college professor and three were teaching in a public high school.

In my discussion that follows I will present the results of in-depth interviews with teacher participants relative to their students' experience with LD and the development of their self-concept. The teachers in the study responded to similar questions as those that were given to the LD youth and their parents regarding their students' academic and non-academic competence, peers, family, acceptance and aspirations. I begin by providing a context for understanding the teachers' perceptions of their students' learning disabilities.

---

\* The names given are pseudonyms. All names used for teachers and all other participants have been changed for confidentiality.

Then, I explain what teachers believed about the significance of recognizing LD youth capabilities in school. Next, I identify the perceived role parents played that teachers considered pivotal in the lives of these special needs adolescents. Finally, I present these teachers' expectations regarding the future aspirations and visions of the LD youth in the study.

## 6.2 Context of Teachers' Perceptions of Youth Experiences

The teacher participants generally felt that it was difficult for these LD students' attitudes and dispositions not to be affected by their conditions. Much like their parents, the teachers of these youth initially reported the negative effect of LD on them in school. In this remark Pete, a college professor identifies Adam's continuing struggle with writing in postsecondary courses. "He still has trouble doing the writing stuff, 'cause I ask students to really communicate effectively in written words, not just write equations.' So that forces him to struggle. And also homework. He has a hard time getting on top of homework." (Int.12) Another teacher, Morris, observed how his LD student, Bill, had been stung by his failure in school. "My sense is that school by and large has been very painful for him. He hasn't had a lot of success. It hasn't been all that rewarding." (Int.13) Both of these teachers recognized the source of their students' struggle in school and the stress this produced.

As noted in earlier studies (Chapman, 1988; Harter et al, 1998; Kloomok & Cosdan, 1994) LD youth who reflected positive global self-concepts often reported negative academic self-concepts. It seemed the difference from my results suggest their teachers reinforced the parents' and youth self-perceptions of negative academic experiences without LD youth internalizing those failures. These teachers witnessed their

students' school difficulties though they do not see these young men as being less adequate about their scholastic competence. A consensus among teacher participants clearly existed that these adolescents maintained strong academic capabilities. Some of the adjectives used to describe these students academically included, "very bright," "very analytical," "excellent reader," "excellent memory," "strong creative writing" and "a willingness to learn" just to name a few.

Yet, several teacher participants also explained how the LD adolescents were less motivated to perform in academic areas involving their weaknesses, often expressing negative feelings about their placements. As Bandura (1993) stressed, most human motivation is cognitively generated. As such, "self-beliefs of efficacy play a key role in the self-regulation of motivation (p. 128)." In my conversation with Dennis, Frank's teacher, he explained that Frank had a certain strategy to ignore academically challenging coursework. Frank apparently gave considerable attention to graphic arts, which he could naturally transfer to his computer courses in which he thrived. However, as a consequence, Dennis noted, "He would focus on those [courses] early on in high school, especially as a freshman with the idea that other things would slide like more traditional academics like English or history requirements." (Int.17)

Similarly, Chris' tutor, Kyle, pointed out where special education's "pull-out" services dashed any motivation Chris had for school by separating him socially from his peers. He explained,

But he still resented being in it [special education classes] because it took him away from his other classmates and a huge experience of school is the social aspect of it. Just by the fact that he was being pulled out and was missing out on the whole social aspect of school which is everything at that age. That was hard for him. (Int.14)

Yet, there were definitely many other indications that teacher participants also saw these youth as sometimes highly motivated in school as their descriptors included “a curiosity” or becoming “excited” or having “interest” to learn. This probably was exemplified for most by Sally’s remark about Dave’s “willingness to learn” noting, “His drive to succeed makes him work that much harder. He takes what he can do, even what he finds difficult, he strives to do it and it makes him successful all around.” (Int.15)

It seemed the teachers in this study recognized how many of these youth could still maintain a positive outlook towards their learning despite being bored, frustrated or angry with special education. This finding seemed to reinforce Hagborg’s (1996) premise that having compensatory strengths in other self-concept domains along with an internal drive for academic success and a positive school attitude might contribute to a positive global self-concept despite reported low academic skills and grades. There were two examples in which teachers recalled that LD youth assumed responsibility for learning more about their conditions in order to academically compensate, e.g., developing study skills or organizational abilities.

First, Sally, a private school teacher of Dave’s, described his determination to succeed in spite of the problems his LD condition had presented. “He’s got significant learning disabilities which given any other student might just say, ‘Oh, I can’t do that.’ But he just works real hard. He’s come a long way.” (Int.15) Some research has suggested that one’s understanding of the nature and effect of a learning disability may be an important first step in accepting their LD condition, putting it into perspective and subsequently acquiring a positive self-concept (Rothman and Cosden, 1995).

Second, Dennis gave an example of Frank's learning from his mistake during the process of enrolling in a college computer course for his senior year. He maintained a positive outlook despite after all of his work he discovered that he did not fulfill the prerequisite. "When he was interested in taking a course at [local college], he really followed up with me, went to check things out on the internet, found out what he needed to take, you know all of that. As it turned out that when we got there he did not have one of the prerequisites and we talked about how he could get one of them." (Int.17) Frank then proceeded to do so.

The impact of differential school practices in McPhail's study (1993) that might contribute to LD youth's more positive and active feelings during school was thought to be due to their longevity in special education. This, to some degree, underscores the significance of onset in identifying the LD condition and helping LD children acquire knowledge about their LD condition and compensatory academic skills in public education. Interestingly, there was an adolescent in the study who was not identified to be LD by his public school until his junior year in high school. As a consequence, his teacher felt that Bill later found this to be helpful in understanding his learning capability. At one point Morris described a situation when Bill became bored with college preparatory courses which didn't tap into his math capabilities.

I was aware that he was bored in many classes. Probably, his math wasn't at the level . . . picturing that [student] didn't belong in the CP class, he really belonged in an honor class. His math preparation wasn't as strong as a typical honors kid. I think he'd been in CP classes all the way through so his math background wasn't as strong as an honors kid but it was very strong for a CP class. (Int.13)

He noted Bill's awareness of his potential now that he had been under-placed all these years. One can't help but wonder of the effect this may have had if Bill had discovered this earlier in his educational career.

As . . . he was convinced that Bill was ill-equipped to get what he needed out of the public school system, Morris indicated in the following comment. "Making the whole school system work, playing the game, getting the grades isn't the set of strategies he's ever developed or made work for himself." (Int.13) He felt there may have been some benefit to Bill's late identification of LD in the way it helped clear up much of the ambiguity for him. In contrast, Kyle believed that Chris benefited from his early LD identification as indicated in this comment. "I bet he was much more assured from having to deal with his learning disability as an issue early on." (Int.14)

Morris believed that "Labeling is sometimes helpful." (Int.13) and to the extent that it was correct, he believed it helped Bill to manage his weaknesses and help compensate in his learning. Yet, a majority of teachers also worried about the LD labeling that their students experienced and the effect of stigma in their lives. In this remark Dennis explained the challenge facing Frank in addressing the stigma attached to his LD diagnosis. When I prompted about Frank's mostly negative experience with school, he stressed, "Definitely had a negative, but he's still not a kid who's been defeated by it. It's something that he has to deal with and it gets him down sometimes." (Int.17)

I learned that Dennis had discussed Frank's participation in the study with him, stressing to me Frank's continuous frustration in addressing his LD condition and Dennis' hope that, as an adult, he can in retrospect someday realize something that emerged from the experience. In a slightly different perspective, Kyle understood Chris to have a "real

struggle” with school, due to the emphasis it placed on his weaknesses and that this was a “constant battle” to help keep his confidence from sinking. These experiences appear to highlight the extent to which the teachers realized their LD students held a delimiting view of their learning difficulties in school which research suggests contributes to a positive self-concept (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Rothman & Cosden, 1995) and maintained an internal locus of control in that setting, so crucial to perceived self-efficacy which promotes academic achievement (Bandura, 1993).

According to some teachers, the existing special education system reinforced stereotypes among teachers and used ineffective instructional strategies that further discouraged these LD youth. I learned from Sally that Dave’s middle school experience was “horrendous” and so difficult that he initially had fears of being ridiculed by his private school teachers. “I know he struggled real hard in public school. He just wasn't getting the support and the teachers didn't have the confidence in him to let him shine.” (Int.15) She noted that once he understood his teachers were going to support him in his private school, he became more willing to take risks, work harder and ask questions when he did not understand.

The quality of the academic context can have a beneficial effect on the positive regard for school held by LD students (McPhail, 1993). Yet, the experiences of LD youth cited by these teachers offered a stark contrast. Another example of this came from Kyle who explained that Chris often got the message that he was something the school had to “deal with” and that he saw this in the attitudes of teachers and the principal. “Early on he got a lot of feedback about being lazy and not applying himself, and being pulled out and separated contributes to that feeling.” (Int.14) According to Kyle, Chris

sensed a camaraderie with his classmates, but he often did not feel that his school wanted him there. This was reiterated earlier in the study by Chris' parents when his public school requested that Chris be tutored at home.

However, Kyle also explained how Chris had to find ways to get the system to work for him and he refused to give up. "[Student] tended to be very reasonable in giving instances of where he was being treated unfairly because of his disability. He didn't bow down to the system and was very mature about it when he needed to deal with it." (Int.14) Clearly, a few of these teachers emphasized that LD youth participants learned to become more resilient once they adjusted and then learned to understand how to meet their own needs. This was illustrated in Dennis' comment about Frank's improved effort and better time management. "That was probably the one thing that turned the corner from some classes that were doomed to where he would do very well. It really was about time management and organization." (Int.17)

It also was evident that most teachers recognized the influence the LD condition had on the judgment of these adolescents. These were concerns which some parents had also echoed during their interviews. In one instance Morris described Bill as a "loner" and resistant to structure or the culture within school. He seemed to imply that this contributed to Bill's isolation and rebelliousness. In this comment Morris identified how Bill wanted to be noticed.

It's so easy to not see those kids clearly. So some of those kids are wearing really outrageous stuff. [Student] pretty much did it all with his hair. He wasn't into dressing as weirdly as some of the others and he wasn't piercing his body like some of the others. But his hair was his statement. (Int.13)



Another teacher also observed his student's struggle to somehow reconcile with his uniqueness. Pete noted that Adam saw "[Student considered] himself as somewhat different from everyone. I think there's some part of him that wants to feel more accepted or feel just okay with himself." (Int.12)) This may, in part, help to explain the need for these youth to make a statement to others by their choices or by their desire to be included among peers.

Several of the teachers in the study also described experiences with these LD youth in which adults were aware the adolescents might be engaging in risky behavior. Some teachers knew of two students who were engaging in alcohol or illegal substances that might have lead to serious consequences. Both Dennis and Meg gave accounts of Frank's juvenile behavior which included illegally painting graffiti on underpasses along the interstate. Frank was also purported to have recklessly rolled his friends new sport utility vehicle off a dirt road when returning from a skiing trip. Dennis' remarks reflect the concerns these teachers had about Frank's judgment.

I know he's made some poor choices but he knows the difference between right and wrong and can make good choices. . . He's a follower. He doesn't believe in himself to be able to step out of it. So when his friends up the anti because they take a greater risk, he goes there. . . Sometimes he makes some poor choices. For example, he sometimes probably parties a little too much. He's gotten caught doing some things that are illegal.  
(Int.17)

In another instance, Pete also suspected Adam's illegal drug use, but he seemed less bothered suggesting that it was only casual use. "I don't picture him as a person who's going to have problems with either alcohol or drugs. He might be experimenting with it. I wouldn't worry about him. He seems to have his head pretty well on straight." (Int.12) It was Pete's opinion that this was just a developmental phase.

Lastly, in one instance an adolescent was described as being naïve and eager for peer recognition, which his teacher said resulted in making a poor choice on a dare. George described an incident when Ed was goaded into doing something in order to get attention from his peers. “[Student] maintains that he's able to eat anything and they'll put him up to it. The other day he was there saying he could eat his sandwich in three bites and I came in when he was almost choking.” (Int.16) I discovered that Ed often sought to fulfill his desire for acceptance and a little bit of recognition in a not so “entirely appropriate way”. Afterwards, George requested the school social worker help Ed address this kind of behavior with peers.

There is evidence in the literature of the risks to psychological adjustment among LD youth (Brier, 1994) and even depression and suicide (Huntington & Bender, 1993). Often attributed to their poor socialization skills and social isolation, these risks increase with the rate of LD severity in most adolescents. I did not get the impression from these teachers that any of these LD youth were that severely disabled nor were they expected to gamble with their adult futures by engaging in juvenile delinquency. Interestingly, the student whom teachers deemed more at-risk for this type of activity was the only youth participant to score in the “low-average” self-concept in “academics” on the MSCS.

Another emerging concern expressed by these teachers involved the apparent vulnerability of the LD youth in adult life. Somewhat related to the difficulty involving personal judgment, Pete expressed his fear that Adam might unrealistically seek striking out on his own in some remote part of the country. “My only concern is that he might pursue some adventure like going to Alaska on a commercial freight train that he's very careful. I fear he could get in some situation that's over his head.” (Int.12) He wasn't

sure how Adam's sense of discovery might lure him to do something adventurous for which he wasn't as yet prepared to do.

In my conversation with Morris, I also learned of Bill's potential vulnerability as an adult. "He floated through high school reasonably unstretched" according to Morris. (Int.13) This teacher felt that, as a result, Bill wasn't really clear about his future and that he might not be prepared enough for situations which would really challenge him. "I bet he comes out of this experience somewhat confused about where he should set his goals at." (Int.13)

Several teacher participants noted apprehension over the naiveté of some LD youth. Both of Frank's teachers expressed concern about his fragility. Meg informed me, "With his learning disabilities, he can easily become overwhelmed." (Int.18) She stressed the need for Frank to consider different options and to perhaps "bite off a little bit at a time". In Ed's case, George had similar fears that he was too fragile and could easily become a target for other teens. "He is perhaps a little gullible and could perhaps be taken advantage of. . . I don't know of any specific experience but I believe that he's a little bit naive. He's had a pretty sheltered life." (Int.16)

As these young men began to enter adulthood, each gained more experience in making choices and in assuming responsibility for them. Both of Frank's teachers felt he might become overwhelmed with the possibilities. One of those teachers feared that Frank was even prone to escalate towards greater risk-taking behavior. In this comment, Dennis explained his tendency to avoid issues hoping they'll disappear. "He doesn't volunteer when there's a problem, because he doesn't really mind sweeping it under the table because he'll do it at the last minute." (Int.17)

Both of his teachers described Frank's often unsupervised social life, which Dennis attributed to his parents' disconnection from his life. Sadly, Dennis felt that Frank sought attention through a disaffected peer group and took part in activities of greater risk with them, having no one to "rein him in" which Dennis revealed in this remark.

And he gravitated toward other students who didn't care that he was flawed or that was his perception. It created some problems socially that tend to get carried over into school occasionally. He still tends to gravitate more towards those kinds of kids. Kids who are getting into trouble, are risk-takers and experimenters . . . (Int.17)

Dennis had taken on a surrogate parent role with Frank, fearing that he didn't connect the risks with consequences and hoping he could learn to control his actions while avoiding suspension from school which often was a real possibility.

### 6.3 Recognizing Students' Capabilities

It was clear that a majority of teachers believed the LD adolescents exhibited the capability to continue building upon their strengths and successes in school. It was common to hear similar remarks like the following, which Morris made about Bill's academic aptitude. "I'd say in terms of the speed in which he learns his conceptual strength, he belongs in an honors class, not the CP class. . . He has a very wonderful natural curiosity. This teacher thinks he's really interested in learning." (Int.13) For example, Morris observed how Bill benefited from being organized in class, much like Frank had. Morris felt Bill often made connections to more advanced ideas and was conceptually accurate in developing them while taking his courses.

In my conversation with Pete, I discovered that he felt Adam's enrollment in college courses was an appropriate challenge and that this was "good" for him at this point in his life. "He has a very analytical mind. And a pretty good physical intuition for

things. His math skills are pretty good, too. . . Curious and good quantitative and intuitive skills, those are the strengths I see.” (Int.12) In his opinion, Adam was growing, maturing and changing as he tried to examine those fundamental questions most young men ask about life, i.e. “Who am I ?, Where do I fit in society?, What can I do?”

Most of these teachers saw the value of tapping into the academic strengths and abilities of these LD youth, and they believed in their learning potential. It was Frank’s teacher, Meg who identified some of the efforts to assist Frank in career exploration by building upon his computer knowledge and interests. At times, teachers made arrangements for him to job shadow within some businesses or to explore computer courses at a local two-year college. Dennis affirmed Frank’s career potential and work attributes in this comment. “He’s very capable with computers from what I’ve heard and from what I’ve see some of. He’s been on some job shadows, he’s very articulate, he can ask questions. He’s very polite. . . He definitely has some follow up; when you set something up, he’ll come to my office. He’ll follow up.” (Int.17)

Perhaps the strongest praise came from Sally who attested to most of the academic qualities that Dave’s parents also had identified. She believed that Dave was now reaching his potential in a private school setting and exhibiting some “real strengths”. She had every expectation that Dave would maximize his education in the future.

His strengths are his broad knowledge base, he ties everything he learns new to what he’s already learned, which is why he makes those connections in his mind that much easier to access too. His willingness to learn, he’s a model student for the internal motivation. He just wants to learn. He’s ready to ask questions. He has that drive to know more, to take it that step further. (Int.15)

In many instances teachers reported the qualities and attributes of these adolescents as learners. Still another example was the admiration Kyle expressed towards Chris as a learner. Kyle indicated that Chris did well in the academic experiences that were matched with his abilities, which was something he believed the public school often missed. If appropriately challenged Kyle asserted that “He [student] still had definitely a drive to learn about things and do things. . . He [student] had a very strong creativity, creative writing and stuff like that. The creativity aspect of writing was good and his comprehension in reading was excellent, too. His short term memory was excellent.” (Int.14)

The teacher participants observed their LD students gain skills, receive support, and make academic progress that certainly seemed to add to their self-confidence. Each teacher gave examples when they witnessed these youth begin to start believing in themselves and in their own capabilities during their progress. Morris explained how Bill began to utilize support in school after they identified his LD condition as a junior. Having someone “helping him with the organization” Bill submitted more assignments on time and his work quality improved. “It really helped him get himself together.” (Int.13) Similarly, George stressed the effect his language exercises were having due to the expectations that Ed would succeed. “I believe the experiences that he’s had through me . . . one of the reasons that they improve his self-image is because he’s been allowed to achieve success.” (Int.16)

Some studies have shown perceived social support to be related to global self-concept in LD youth (Hagborg, 1996; Kllomok & Cosden,1994). A number of teachers in my study also attested to the benefits of fostering encouragement and support to these

LD youth in school. Many of these teachers echoed the same philosophy George described. They believed it clearly helped their LD students to learn to succeed and also bolstered their confidence in the process. School had to be more strengths-focused instead of only attending to their learning difficulties. “You work on strengths and improve the strengths, they will pull the weaknesses up.” (Int.16)

In addition to the support these LD students appeared to receive from their families, their teachers indicated that they often were fostering encouragement and support for these young men while in the academic setting. Pete reinforced Adam’s curiosity and passion for inquiry, which he saw in himself at that age. In another instance, Morris provided the reason that he suspected Bill was connected to his teaching style. “If there's any reason why he might have picked me is because aside from the grades and not doing the homework, I could look at him and see that this was an exciting and curious kid. And treat him as such, and he really responded.” (Int.13)

According to Sally, Dave received considerable encouragement and support in his private school environment, which she credited for his tremendous academic gains, increased self-confidence and realizing his potential.

I think that especially in this setting, the constant feedback and constant positive comment, the willingness of the teachers to work with him, you know, keep working with him and not just let it go and move on hoping you get it [helped him academically]. So I think the willingness of the teachers and small class size and the fact that he's in a school where his peers all have similar issues. (Int.15)

Several teachers in the study emphasized taking advantage of their students’ excitement and enthusiasm for learning by bolstering their study skills, using mentors or tutoring, and positively reinforcing their efforts. Meg explained that Frank had progressed to the point where he would reach out for help now when he was struggling.

“He takes advantage of the support, the special ed support and I know he has a very close relationship with [teacher's name].” (Int.18) And Dennis revealed their strategy with Frank to use male mentors which he felt could also help if Frank goes on to college. “[Student's] acceptable to sort of a mentor kind of thing and that's what we kind of hope will happen with him when gets beyond high school that we can get him hooked up with someone like a mentor. He tends to relate better to males.” (Int.17)

In one teacher's experience, his student adapted to a study system that provided the organizational structure he needed for a project which he was able to then apply again in other courses with similar required writing assignments. In the following remark, Kyle identified his strategy for creating inclusive activities in which Chris could participate and which also held his interest, provided positive feedback and avoided isolating him.

Things that he was excited about interested about and we would do writing projects or stories based on that, where he would be very into it. Then positive feedback, stressing his strengths and commending him on those at the same time. You also see working on the areas he needs help with while constantly reminding him of what he's doing well. Positive reinforcement like that certainly helped him out. (Int.14)

Kyle gave Chris as much “group learning” and exposure with classmates as possible to help sustain his social connections while Chris was being pulled out of so many classes in his first year of high school.

Generally, these LD adolescents were recognized for the many non-academic competencies they acquired and demonstrated. One teacher in the study reported a specific student's accomplishment in a non-academic domain that he felt had a lasting impact on his student. “He liked boating. He built one as one of his projects that his parents initiated him to do, was building a boat with another friend. He talked about that and was very fond of doing that, going out on a lake in it fishing.” (Int.14) To this day,



Kyle noted Chris continued to hear compliments about his boat, which he built with the help of a mentor in fifth grade.

Several of these teachers cited their LD students' exceptional abilities in areas, e.g., painting graffiti, playing soccer, writing poetry, which they also suggested indicates their students' independent spirit and, for some, a leadership capability. In my conversation with Morris, he implied that Bill exhibited leadership in the way he confronted and handled the anger and hostility present in the class. Morris remarked, "Though he was never mean and often was a calming element in the class. . . He was able to deal with anger and wade into and calm things down. The leaders aren't those elected to student council, [student's] quiet easy-goingness was something that others started to emulate, though he wouldn't have considered himself a leader." (Int.13)

In some instances these teachers also recognized the positive effect these abilities were having on their students' emerging self-identity, given their persistent academic challenges. For example, Pete identified the significance of Adam's playing at a chess club and how Adam was proud of his personal chess set at home. And, despite his struggles with high school, Chris was also often buoyed by his participation in sports. Chris' teacher, Kyle, shared this about him, "He participated in sports. He played soccer and wasn't a standout but he was good. He was competent and good and probably right in the middle of the pack in his abilities. I think those experiences certainly helped [his self-image]." (Int.14)

Many of the teacher participants observed that developing and promoting non-academic competencies was equally important to the developmental needs of these adolescents. According to Meg and Dennis, there were many extracurricular activities

that Frank excelled at, which added to his peer popularity. Dennis highlighted how this made Frank feel better about himself. "He did a lot of bicycling and dirt-biking stuff that he felt sort of like an athlete in some ways and he would go with buddies and go tag an underpass or something. It made him feel better about himself. He was good at something [riding and making graffiti]." (Int.17)

In her comment, Sally appeared to echo a similar influence that non-academic successes had on Dave, for example, from various sports and scouting activities. "He's had a good self-concept in general, maybe weaker in the school area. He does a lot of outside extra-curriculars that are making him proud to be who he is." (Int.15) As well, there was also an indication from George that Ed's successful poetry compositions and competitions had a positive effect on his self-esteem. "He's writing poetry. He writes some very good poems by the way. . . He has participated in even two poetry readings in [high school's name]. [Teacher] went to the reading and said that one night that he had the second best poetry of anyone who read that night and it was tough competition." (Int.16) A majority of the teachers felt that the combination of solid academic progress coupled with outside extra-curricular accomplishments, and as George noted about Ed, engendered, "a lot of success and it's improving his self-image a lot." (Int.16)

This group of LD students seemed eager to obtain the experience and confidence they needed to become adults according to these teachers. In her comment about Dave, Sally emphasized that he has generalized his confidence from school into his adult experiences in the community, such as volunteer firefighting.

Once he made tremendous gains [at school] that just boosted his self-confidence, his understanding himself and what he can do. . . He enjoys the fire-fighting volunteer thing. The men in the department have accepted him. They're taking him under their wing. That's really nice for

him. He feels that, too. He's actually verbalized that he feels camaraderie there. (Int.15)

Sally has no doubt about his growing confidence and ambition to succeed as an adult.

A few of these youth also were reported to be working on jobs and handling some responsibility as adults. I discovered from Kyle that he recognized the impact Chris' job apprenticing with an electrician had on his growing identity as an adult. "More recently I heard that after I had him, they [his parents] lined him up with an electrician and one who happened to be dyslexic and had an understanding and appreciation. That kind of thing where he gets the sense, there are things he can do well and has interest in and can build the confidence." (Int.14) It was Kyle's impression this experience provided Chris with a considerable opportunity to test the waters of adulthood.

The second instance came from Frank's teachers who each observed the maturity with which he had advanced in his employment at a large hotel where he supervises others including some adults. Dennis indicated, "[Student's name] works so well with adults and in the job place, that he is now a manager where he works, in a fairly responsible position. He is in charge of other people, some who are young adults, older than he is." (Int.17) This experience, according to Dennis, resulted in Frank's gaining confidence to enter adulthood.

Another example of their persistence to become adults involved an LD adolescent who was struggling with his mom over his decision to move out from home and to get an apartment, which he was determined to do. Peter recognized what this meant to Adam when his mother asked if he could dissuade Adam from getting his own apartment.

And I know there's some stress because his mother keeps tabs on him and she has called me more than once. She wanted me to talk with him and he was very resentful of that. He said, 'Did my mom call you?' And I said,

'Yes.' So I think he's struggling with her going from teenager to adult and wanting that independence. (Int.12)

Peter recalled how much Adam resented this and stated the significance of his being able to separate from his mother at this age.

These teachers generally stressed how most LD youth were gaining confidence and feeling accepted by other adults based on the range of experiences that they had. A majority of the teachers recognized their students' ability to relate quite well with adults, [sometimes better than with peers] and reflected their preference towards more autonomy. This was probably best illustrated in Peter's remarks from a prompt about Adam's desire to break out of his pattern of over-dependence on his mother. "He certainly wants to because of his reaction against his mother's influence. So I think he wants to be more independent." (Int.12)

#### 6.4 The Pivotal Role of Parents with LD Adolescents

Most teachers in the study acknowledged the major role of parent advocacy in their LD students' success in school. Sally noted what Dave's parents were able to do: "As far as his academics, his parents were right on top of things. They know the law inside and out. They were right there fighting for what they thought he needed and got it for him. So I think that having a good parent advocate was wonderful for him." (Int.15) Clearly, an important factor in most cases shaping the academic aspirations of these LD youth was their parents' primary advocacy efforts with school. Even if it did result in some degree of over-protectiveness or dependence, the teachers felt that it made a major difference in students accessing needed resources and services.

Several teachers described how the parents of these LD youth, particularly their mothers, were visibly active advocating for the needs of their children. According to

Kyle, it was Chris' mother's confronting public schools that helped Chris become a better self-advocate. "Probably the main reason he [student] could stand up so well for himself, particularly his mother who was a very outspoken supporter. She would take on the principal as well as the school and would get quite a head of steam going." (Int.14) According to Kyle, she got the district's attention and brought its teachers and resources to bear down on the needs of her son.

I also discovered from George that Ed's parents kept a watchful eye on school, especially his mother who followed his academic progress closely. "His mother is very dedicated to him. She looks out after him and is very concerned. She comes in and wants to know what he's been doing and we talk. She's doing everything she can do. So the relationship with both parents is normal and a little better than average. He's taken care of well." (Int.16) George was complimentary of Ed's parents and felt that they always had his best interests in mind with respect to school.

It was common to hear teachers like Kyle and Sally speak openly of their students' appreciation for all that their parents had done for them. Many teachers felt the LD adolescents valued the advocacy efforts of their parents and recognized the positive effects this advocacy has had on their learning. Morris reflected Bill's realization in the following comment that his parents were genuinely looking out for him when they finally got the public school to identify his LD condition in his junior year. "From his reaction before the PET meeting I think he understands that his parents are concerned about him and have his interests at heart." (Int.13) This was after many years of their uncertainty and ambiguity about what he was going through in school.

In one LD adolescent's experience, he was able to understand his academic needs and to self-advocate, once he realized his parents were less willing to help without conditions. Dennis informed me that Frank had a falling out with his father who had struggled over the years without knowing what to do when Frank acted out. In the past his parents "would stick with him through thick and thin"; yet when "push came to shove" in some recent incidents his father set limits which Frank exceeded. As a result, Frank's parents expected Dennis to provide guidance to Frank now that he turned eighteen. Frank also decided to become better at his own self-advocacy, excluding his parents from his decisions. Dennis explained how school has sometimes frustrated Frank, but he especially valued Frank's knowledge of his disability and what he could do to address his needs. "It's something that he has to deal with and it gets him down sometimes. But it's like he's one who says, 'It's so good to have this learning disability and I've learned how to advocate for myself.'" (Int.17)

Another primary theme emerging from teachers involved the consistent love, support, and guidance the families of these LD youth provided. As noted previously by George, Ed was thought to have a "better than average" positive relationship with his parents. George said in the interview, "He loves his dad. His dad had to take care of his house until they sold it while he and his mom moved up here. [Student] missed his dad a lot and when he came up to visit, he was almost ecstatic. . . His mother is very dedicated to him. She looks out after him and is very concerned." (Int.16) In this comment, George revealed the attachment Ed has with his family, particularly with his father.

It was George's assertion that his time spent working with his father was contributing in a positive way to Ed's emotional adjustment. He stated, "When he helps

his dad. When he realizes that he's been a big help it makes him proud. He loves his dad and loves working with his dad. When he can help his dad it makes him feel good."

(Int.16) This was the special bond which George believed he observed between this young man and his father.

Most teachers in the study reported particularly strong relationships present between parents and youth. It was also previously reported that Bill understood that his parents were "concerned about him" and had "his interests at heart". I heard Morris say in his interview that he did not know them [Bill's parents] well but observed their concern during a meeting for special education which he attended. Morris later said, "They were very concerned parents. They really saw [student] achieving at below his ability level and were trying to get a handle on why that was happening."(Int.13)

Several teachers credited parents for their care, support and love which had provided these LD adolescents with a stable home environment. Two teachers expressed considerable praise for their students' parents and witnessed the love their sons, in return, gave to their families. In our conversation Sally revealed the strong ties Dave had with his parents. "They're very close knit. I think they're probably very open and honest. He values the fact that his parents do support him. They have fought for him in the past . . . He values the fact that they're supportive and confident in his ability. And they're very close." (Int.15)

In the second instance, I learned from Kyle about Chris' devotion to his parents, even facing typical teen differences with his parents that he was experiencing at this stage.

Has a very strong relationship with his parents. He was very respectful of them and seemed to want to please them. He recognized that they were his

biggest supporters. He clearly took to heart and showed appreciation for all they had done for him in support despite having the same teen conflicts with parents that anyone has. . . They let him know they accepted him for who he was at the same time pushing him to do as much as he was able to do. I felt they kept a good balance. (Int.14)

The stable home setting Kyle claimed that his family gave him, helped in Chris' psychological development.

Even when LD youth were struggling with their autonomy and resisted their parents influence, the teachers still believed these youth valued the caring families and parents that they had. This became evident from the interviews with both of Frank's teachers who reported that in spite of the differences that Frank had with his parents, he loved them and respected their feelings. Dennis explained Frank's caring for his parents and how compassionate he believed Frank's father to be when he genuinely sought Dennis' help in addressing the social welfare of his son.

He has enormous amount of respect for his parents. He loves them and cares about how they feel about him. His mother is a quiet women. His father is the opposite and out there with his feelings. His dad has called me to run some issues by me. On occasions we would work to help his dad address these issues with [student] which were rarely about academics. I understood why he wanted to carefully approach the teenage boy stuff coming out. I often asked him to be above board with [son] after we spoke, because I didn't want [son] to think his dad was sneaking behind his back. [Student] needed to be part of the conversation. (Int.17)

At one point Frank's father became pessimistic and discouraged. Yet, he responded to Dennis' encouragement and continued to remain involved with Frank's education despite feeling so frustrated. Meg also reiterated the belief that "he seems to have parents who really care for him and that are concerned." (Int.18) Dennis also stressed that there was "some kind of foundation there" in his family that he believed would "matter a lot more" in the future than it did to Frank now.



It must also be noted that one teacher, Pete, had little to discuss about the parents and family of Adam. This teacher, who is a college professor, was the only teacher who admitted it would be speculation to comment on Adam's relationship with his parents since he had only minimal contact with his mother. Pete explained that he had little knowledge about Adam's mother's opposition to Adam getting an apartment. Pete offered no opinions about Adam's parents, saying it was "sort of scary" but he didn't know these things "about a lot of my students."

A few teachers in this study saw their students' parents as a primary influence on the ambition and aspirations of the LD youth. I got the impression from Kyle that both of Chris' parents were continuing to identify alternatives for him that involved other area secondary school vocational programs. In their pursuit of options they were involving Chris in decisions, though they seemed to definitely influence the direction of his ambition and aspirations. Kyle explained, "I think they will affect his decisions probably by helping him pursue and take initiative to seek out what he loves to do and to keep looking until he finds things that seem to suit him that he loves to do and is willing to try." (Int.14)

In a few instances, as some other teacher participants perceived, fathers had a major effect on the type of vocational aspirations the LD youth were pursuing. Sally quickly made the connection for me in this comment about Dave's bond with his father. "I think his dad is in law enforcement and that's his interest in forensic science. That makes a bond between them." (Int.15) In another instance, George identified Ed's passion for working with his father in his construction work. "His father is a contractor, carpenter of sorts and he loves working with his dad. He likes physical labor and he also

has a lot of strength. He's a strong kid and he likes doing physical work.” (Int.16) As I reported in Chapter 4, it was Ed who noted his option to always be able to work in his father’s business which he indicated was one of his vocational preferences.

In a couple of instances these teachers indicated that parents have provided their sons with opportunities to help broaden their experiences and awareness of their potential options. For example, Meg described Frank’s trip to visit relatives in Arizona that his parents had arranged, and which seemed to expose him to another part of the country and to broaden his thinking.

They've given him the opportunity to travel out to Arizona. He has an uncle and some cousins out there. He's shown a lot of interest in going to the southwest. So I suppose in some way that's been because of his parents. [prompted- travel to southwest affects decisions] It opened up his horizons some more and made him realize there's more out there and that he would like to go and get out of the small town. (Int.18)

In more of a practical way, Kyle emphasized the influence Chris’ parents were having on his ambitions and aspirations. They were also reportedly exploring more vocational options with him. Kyle explained that Chris’ parents had him look at other schools with “machine shop” and “boat building” programs, too. They were helping him to keep a “more positive can-do attitude” and to “be realistic” about looking for alternatives even within high school.

Several teachers asserted that, as a result, these opportunities inspired the LD youth to set their sights on some personal goals. I learned from George that he felt Ed’s just getting out of his home and into the community had helped him a lot. It seemed that the attribution Ed received from his poetry recitals at school and working with his father reinforced his career ambition. George said that one of Ed’s aspirations is to be a published poet and that his family encouraged him to pursue this goal. “[prompt- parents

encourage] Oh yea. He got some kind of recognition over there [public high school] for the poetry. Something was written about it in the [local] paper. He likes to work with his dad and I bet he gets recognition there, too. I wish I could tell you more about this, but I really don't know.” (Int.16)

There were also other examples in the study of the family or a parent’s impact on youth ambition. I found a comment from Sally to reveal Dave’s internalization of his educational ambition from the family. “The fact that his family values education and he’d never think of giving up or calling it quits . . . Now it’s growing from not wanting to disappoint his parents to a not wanting to disappoint himself, type thing.” (Int.15) I also heard from Dennis that recently Frank was advised to broaden his options in a shorter computer program as well as to pursue a college degree in computer science. Although Dennis regretted that Frank could not discuss these career issues with his father, he reported that Frank still could depend on his parents. In fact, Dennis attributed Frank’s openness to teachers’ advice to the importance that they [Frank’s parents] continued to place on Frank (Int. 17). Meg also stressed that “they’re supportive of him.” Both teachers felt Frank maintained his career goal towards a postsecondary computer education, in part, to prove himself to his parents. (Int. 18)

During the interviews, I had the impression that the teachers tried ascertaining social maturity in the development of their LD students. As previously indicated, they witnessed some social difficulties with their students, and they conveyed their concern over the judgment and vulnerability of the LD youth participants. In Brier’s (1994) review of the literature on LD children and adolescents having implications for psychological adjustment in LD adults, there are socialization issues regarding their

interpersonal communication and social perceptions that may play a part in the social maturation of LD youth. In this study there seemed to be some progress being observed in the social growth and maturity of these young men.

Most teacher participants recognized the growing social maturity evident in these LD youth. One of the teachers expressed some concern over his LD student's continued social isolation. George believed that Ed, although not being rejected outright by his peers, was experiencing difficulty interacting with them. Overall, he felt Ed was playing "pretty well" in games with his peers. "I was kind of impressed in his level of participation in one of the games [he observed]." (Int.16) I got the impression this was not yet perceived by George as a strong indicator of social maturity, but rather as a positive sign that Ed's socialization prospects were improving.

In a different sense, Morris perceived Bill to be somewhat of an "introvert" and "more of a loner"; yet he was associating with a peer group which was comprised of "really bright" students who were "challenging authority". Morris noted how Bill identified with the social maturity of his peer group, despite their experimentation with substance abuse to which he could not relate. Morris complimented Bill on his "good social skills" and moral strength, stating, "he doesn't particularly accept the structure or culture he sees around him, he really looks past it." (Int.13)

In some instances these teachers felt it was a normal process to see their LD students become more independent, resist authority and weigh-in on parental guidance. According to Kyle, Chris exhibited some resistance in his pursuit of independence, though he more often heeded parental advice. "He was a normal teenage boy with a lot of stuff that goes on in teenage boys' years. He was very warm and sociable and with other

students he was more respected. He was respectful of others but fun. He handles himself maturely for a person his age.” (Int.14)

During his emerging autonomy, Dave similarly appeared respectful of his parents’ wishes, especially since he was living at home, although he preferred to be seen as a mature adult. He enjoyed being independent and being a model for other kids in the community. In her remarks, Sally revealed Dave’s visible maturity, which would be an asset in adulthood. “Considering most teenagers today, he is very appropriate and polite. Very respectful of others young and old. At the teen center job the kids look up to him. Not only for his size, I think he handles himself well with those kids, too.” (Int.15)

In one instance, the teacher believed a parent was being overprotective with the LD adolescent who wanted to live independently on his own. I learned from Pete that he viewed Adam’s desire to separate from home as natural for someone his age. He felt that Adam’s mother was being overprotective when trying to prevent him from seeking his own apartment. In this comment, Pete believed that Adam was going through the same experiences he had as a teen, and they both related to this. “Cause he's very curious and he's questioning me on things as teenagers are always apt to do. I'm that kind of person anyway and I did the same thing he does, so I think we clicked pretty well that way.” (Int.12)

I discovered that Pete believed their relationship gave Adam the chance to express his independence to an adult and gave Pete the chance to understand Adam’s perspective through his evolving maturity. “He always has these interesting stories and I'm happy to discuss the ideas he's talking about. Just chatting is actually valuable and I feel I've gotten to know him better that way. That's always the case when you get to see a person outside

of the class, you get to see a little bit of them.” (Int.12) It seemed to me that this may have been present in several of the relationships the LD youth had, especially with the male teachers in the study.

In contrast, one teacher believed it was difficult accepting his LD adolescent’s autonomy, now that he turned eighteen. In this example, Dennis feared that Frank was not socially mature enough to be keeping his late hours at night and on weekends as he did without parental supervision. Note the concern that Dennis expressed in this response.

It's been tough as he's gotten a little bit older and a little more independent and some of that outside social stuff has crept in a little bit more as it does with a lot of high school kids. I don't have influence over his weekends, afternoons and who he hangs out with and too often teenagers bring that all into school. (Int.17)

Although this was the only indication of pessimism expressed by teachers about the social independence and maturity of their LD students, I wondered what implications Frank’s risky, socialization patterns might have, relative to the perception of Frank’s self-concept.

A consensus existed among teachers that the LD youth had multiple peer relationships, which for some of them, tended to fluctuate at times. As I reported, George indicated that Ed had some peer interpersonal difficulties, though he did not say that they rejected Ed. In this remark he acknowledged Ed’s two new friends and the socialization opportunity this afforded him, just as Ed’s parents did. “According to his mother he really only has two friends, one here in this school, a boy and he's met one over in [public high school], that's a girl. It's not that kids reject him, but he hasn't really gotten close to many of them. It's good for him that he's got these two friends.” (Int.16) George pointed out that Ed was a little “shy” and liked to isolate himself from time to time.

In another teacher's opinion, his student vacillated between interacting with his peers and isolation. Morris explained that Bill selected a certain peer group as friends, yet he seemed equally comfortable with himself as an individual. "That was [student's] peer group here as much as I saw him relating to anybody. That group has some of the most creative kids in the school, artists, kids involved with theater. That was [student's] group, but I didn't see [student] having a group. I think that he was able to be himself, be by himself." (Int.13) This observation appeared quite similar to the perception that Bill's mother shared, a pattern of cycling between friends and self-selected isolation.

Several teachers in the study explained that their students had many positive qualities and social skills that helped them to develop a number of friendships. In Bill's case, Morris stressed that Bill's friends were slowly coming to know him and that his "intelligence," "curiosity" and "inquisitiveness" had probably helped him to be accepted around peers. In another instance, Kyle noted that Chris was more mature than some classmates and that he chose to spend time with similar students. "He actually ran for student council and was elected. His classmates voted him in and did that for awhile. He was well-liked and sought after by peers." (Int.14)

These youth were considered to be fairly well-adjusted in their socialization with peers, though there were some relationships which were either tenuous or more like acquaintances. Based on Sally's testimony, Dave had some personal qualities which classmates admired and respected and that this might partially explain his being chosen by teammates to captain his baseball team in high school. However, as revealed in the following comment, she observed the difference with acquaintances that Dave now has from those close friends in the past.

He's friendly with everybody, as far as they might not be good friends but he's friendly with them. He can chat with anybody about anything. I think they respect him for his ways. I know last year there were one or two guys he felt closer to. Even the ones who were from the same home town as him, they didn't have a whole lot in common. I'm not sure of the close friendships he has. (Int.15)

In one instance a teacher also felt the peer interactions could sometimes encourage risk-taking for these LD youth. This was true for Frank, as previously reported, which Dennis again noted in voicing his concern here.

They really like him and have a lot of respect for him. He's someone they would seek out. If something was going to happen, I'm sure they would want [student] included. He has some kids that he's friendly with and then there's some other kids that don't make good choices and he can be convinced to go their way at times. He has fairly good self-esteem but it's not really strong. (Int.17)

I discovered that Dennis believed Frank still has some insecurity and can be swayed somewhat into taking more risks in order to impress his peers. Similarly, Meg conveyed her concern that Frank has been caught doing illegal activity, and now that he's eighteen, he "needs to be careful now and be making better choices." (Int.18)

#### 6.5 Future Aspirations and Visions of LD Students as Adults

There was evidence according to teachers that the LD adolescents had experienced numerous successes in their school, work and community pursuits. Earlier in this section, George identified Ed's passion for working with his father and the benefit that this had for him because Ed also loved hard work. These statements were consistent with the responses of Ed's parents who also valued his successes at work in the community, once helping to build a foundation for his aunt's new home and another time as a volunteer at a wildlife refuge. It seemed George believed that these experiences likewise contributed to Ed's aspirations towards adult work.



These achievements were considered to be of great benefit to the LD youth in the study and were viewed as a major factor in helping to fostering their self-confidence. Some teachers made statements resembling the sentiment from Kyle's comment about connections to the community and to life as an adult that Chris had through his parents.

His parents were really supportive and would seek out his skills and interests from a very young age. His father trusted him with tools and encouraged him to help out with projects, both carpentry and mechanical stuff . . . they lined him up with an electrician and one who happened to be dyslexic and had an understanding and appreciation. That kind of thing where he gets the sense, there are things he can do well and has interest in and can build the confidence. (Int.14)

Most teachers believed these experiences gave their students the chance to build adult relationships and to establish more connections with the community. Kyle recalled that Chris had this sort of special relationship with his boat-building mentor from fifth grade on.

In a similar instance, Sally emphasized the effect of all Dave's connections through his family and his volunteering that promoted his feeling accepted as an adult. Being connected also seemed to directly influence Dave's visions of becoming an adult. It was obvious to Sally that Dave would seek a career in public safety and continue volunteering in the community.

He has a such close home life, he's accepted at school, he's successful at school, and that he has a community job, he runs the teen center . . . Last year he did the soup kitchen in his home town and a parade and he also worked with the Special Olympics. So I think all of these community activities have made him feel a part of . . . made him feel accepted. (Int.15)

Again this observation coincided with parents' perceptions such as those of Dave's family that experiences in an avocation, as well as in employment, were equally important for these LD youth as were their successes in school.

As well, another teacher reported that one youth was given a promotion which added supervisory responsibilities to his job, consequently boosting his self-image as an adult worker.

[Student] works so well with adults and in the job place, that he is now a manager where he works, in a fairly responsible position. He is in charge of other people, some who are young adults, older than he is. . . He really right now doesn't like that job, but it's money to him and he wants the money. When I spoke to him and said how proud I was about the promotion, I asked if he understood. I don't think it had occurred to him what this meant. (Int.17)

This job promotion appeared to reinforce so many of the adult expectations of Frank, according to Dennis, especially when there were competing incentives towards juvenile risk-taking always facing him.

Generally, these teachers believed that a number of these LD youth sought to experience, or expected to access, opportunities for personal growth in their lives. In contrast to previous concerns about his emerging autonomy, note that Dennis' remark here also admits this was an asset to Frank in finding individual opportunity. "[Student] is a bit of an independent thinker in that he knows when he has a strength. . . When he has a strength he's quite clear about it. He wants to take courses at the university before he's out of high school. He wants to take one or two computer courses. And he's done independent exploration." (Int.17) Both Dennis and Meg observed Frank independently pursuing activities like videotaping workshops, taking computer courses, or job shadowing in order to further his personal interests.

Several teachers shared perceptions of how their LD students would seek out opportunities to independently explore things of interest in their lives. Pete had identified Adam's membership in a chess club and his recent investigation into some type of

adventure. "Hiking the Appalachian Trail might be a lot safer [than hopping a freight train]. He wants some experience like that which would probably be good for him. I guess that kind of thing would give him a lot of self-confidence. So he's looking for that kind of thing right now, maybe some kind of break." (Int.12) Pete heard that Adam was actively looking for this type of personal growth experience.

In a different way Morris suggested, when prompted about Bill making any more self-discoveries, that he had certain attributes in this respect that would help him. "[prompt-more discoveries about self], I suspect he's going to be a successful person because aside from the academic brightness, he's got a lot of social brightness. And it's hard for me to see the combination of those two things not working out for him, one way or another." (Int.13) Morris may not have consciously been aware of this but at the time Bill's mother coincidentally shared his plans for participating in a personal growth experience as an international volunteer in a third-world country, which Bill completed during the next fall. There were also parents of other LD youth who reported their sons accessing similar opportunities and activities of a personal growth nature to those which these teachers reported.

Also one teacher reported her student's successful pursuit and access of various experiences in scouting, sports and firefighting:

The Boy Scout thing was huge. The fact that he managed to go through and reach that honor really. . . we're all in awe. I think the football and becoming a captain, or he was the co-captain of the football team last year. They went to state championships and they won it one year. That was really satisfying for him to reach that point. He enjoys the firefighting volunteer thing. The men in the department have accepted him. They're taking him under their wing. That's really nice for him. (Int.15)

It was Sally's opinion that these were clearly opportunities which Dave had selected and that they were activities that fostered his personal growth and maturity.

Finally, aspirations and visions of adulthood appeared to be reflected in these students' individual goal setting and in the expansion of their horizons. Two of the teachers could see the goals and the evolving paths that their students were taking though each felt that they lacked the complete picture in this regard. I learned from George that Ed's ambition was being shaped by his desire to pursue poetry, which expanded his horizons both vocationally and socially. Because of the attention it brought to him, he now seemed to have more confidence in a close friendship. George noted, "He has expanded in his horizons with that friendship and the poetry reading and in other ways that I probably don't know about." (Int.16)

In the second example, Morris' faint perception of Bill's insight into his LD suggested that he persisted with his goals as he graduated. "Potentially it [knowing about the LD] may have been very positive for him. It might give him more ability to hang in there with some goals that might be hard to accomplish. I don't know what those aspirations are for him at the moment" (Int.13) Morris felt that this was pivotal for Bill in setting his course for adulthood. Although these teachers gave limited testimony about this, they inferred the LD youth had the ability to set personal goals and broaden their own horizons.

Many of the teachers were of the opinion that the LD students learned to be goal-focused and benefited from having identified their aspirations. In our conversation, Pete emphasized the significance for Adam to know what he wanted to do and to be able to make that choice. "It's really important that he be able to do it [pursue his goals].

Whether he stays with physics or something else, he's doing right now what he wants to be doing and that's good for him." (Int.12) Pete felt this was a sign of Adam's growing adult identity.

Some teacher participants attested to when their students gained confidence and realized their possibilities for the future. For example, Sally described Dave's focus, self-confidence, and determination in her comment, as he began passing the threshold into adulthood.

He sets short-term goals for himself. He set this one long-term goal. Every goal that he meets gives him that much more confidence that the world is his to do with as he sees fit . . . as he wants. [prompt- pursuing is helping] Yes. This is just the beginning. He's got the rest of his life. He's well prepared to meet whatever road blocks . . . he's not going to give up. (Int.15)

In another instance, a teacher observed that her student was now thinking much more broadly about his life after he had spent sometime living in another part of the country.

He was in Arizona last spring skateboarding and has some relatives out there. I think he'd like to go out there and go to school. He's having a broader perspective so I see him as not being stuck in [public high school] forever. He'll want to see what kinds of schools are out there and want to be realistic about his disability and needing some support. (Int.18)

Just as Sally saw Dave sizing up his adult life, so too, Meg believed that Frank was opening up to options and considering plans to explore those possibilities that lay ahead in the future.

## 6.6 Summary of Key Findings

In my examination of teacher perceptions in the study patterns emerged which affirmed what both LD youth and their parents were reporting. Similarities were evident in the context of these teachers relative to a learning disability, whereas its negative effect and stigma on LD youth were readily apparent. Just as the parent participants, these

teachers also recognized the benefit of promoting learning and growth in their students through ongoing encouragement and support and by building upon their strengths, primarily in the academic setting. They also valued their students' opportunities to increase self-confidence through external, non-academic experiences and praised the role that their loving and supportive families played. As well, these educators acknowledged several factors that they felt contributed to their students' future aspirations and visions as adults.

I also discovered some things that were unique to these teachers' experience and knowledge of their students. Perhaps more notably from the teachers' interviews was the limited data that they provided about specific peer relationships. In retrospect, this probably should have been anticipated since youth typically begin to socialize more, outside of school during mid- to late adolescence. Several of these teachers were instructing at a private secondary school and a local college to which their students commuted daily. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that they observed less social activity and knew little about their students' external, social relationships with friends and classmates. Although the exception seemed to involve Frank's teacher, Dennis, who perhaps served more as a surrogate parent having in-depth knowledge and understanding of his student's extracurricular lifestyle.

In a slightly different way than the parents, these teachers seemed to grasp the importance of the LD adolescents' efforts to individuate from their parents who, until now, had such a major role in their life decisions. Yet, they too expressed anxiety over their students' apparent vulnerability with their emerging independence and, in some instances they had serious concerns regarding the judgment of some LD youth.

Ultimately, the teachers expressed faith in their students' capabilities that most of them were becoming more mature as young adults showing their potential for setting goals, pursuing opportunities and approaching their career aspirations.

Foremost among teachers' observations within the school environment was the negative influence that perceived stigma, repeated academic failure, and limited skills associated with LD were having on their students' outlook towards learning throughout much of their education. In their review of the literature, McPhail and Stone (1995) reported consistent evidence of a negative academic self-concept present in LD youth which might be realistic and expected by most professionals, and "perhaps even adaptive" given their academic experiences. This adaptive aspect seemed to be consistent with my findings since teacher participants still attributed strong academic potential in these young men. For example, many teachers also suggested, as Sally did in the following remark, that their students were continuously adapting, taking on responsibility for their learning and focusing on their career paths as adults. "He'll learn and then make some changes. He has the ability to grow and change and live and learn." (Int.16)

These teachers credited their students' abilities to compensate now for their LD condition, as Dennis noted in this remark, "When he pays attention to organization, if he pays very close attention to organization, he does very well." (Int.17) Morris said of Bill that "he catches on quickly. He has a very wonderful natural curiosity. . . he's really interested in learning." (Int.13) There were other comments similar to this observation that Sally made about Dave, "he just works real hard. He's come a long way. He's now an excellent reader. Writing has come light years from before." When I prompted, asking

whether he turned weaknesses into strengths, she stressed “yea, he’s definitely turned some into strengths.” (Int.15)

The teachers in the study also provided several examples of LD youth being naive and acting in what might be construed as socially immature. In some instances, they appeared to be expressing fear that their students might be vulnerable under certain social circumstances. Some of these teachers also voiced apprehension due to their students’ judgment regarding social situations. For example, one youth was caught doing illegal activity and some were thought to be using drugs. In Brier’s (1994) review of the literature, recognition is given to the increased risk of delinquency and self-control problems with the presence of LD in children. However, he also emphasized that a majority of LD youth do not qualify as being anti-social.

It was my conclusion based upon teacher reports, that only one student seemed to be at a greater risk for delinquent behavior. As I indicated, Frank was the only LD youth participant who scored a below average academic self-concept on the MSCS and refused to allow his parents to participate in the study. According to Dennis, his mother no longer attended his Pupil Evaluation Team (PET) meetings. He lamented that Frank had “too much free rein” and remarked, “Unfortunately, his parents haven’t made the connection to stay involved in [their son’s] life.” (Int.17)

Both of Frank’s teachers have described academic problems for which his parents refused to take responsibility in helping him to address. The coping patterns of LD adolescents were found to be linked with the coping styles of their parents (Shulman et al. 1995). Dennis simply pointed out that “He often had problems getting to school and they didn’t help him to deal with this issue.” (Int.17) I wonder whether the extent to which his



coping with the struggle of being LD was related to the difficulties in coping that his parents were experiencing?

Overall, the majority of LD youth in the study, according to teacher participants, seemed to be gaining confidence, growing socially, and using personal and family supports to cope more effectively. I got the impression that their students exhibited enthusiasm, perseverance and other noteworthy learning attributes upon which these teachers could build. As a result these LD youth learned to increase their academic strengths and successes through the encouragement, support, positive feedback and skill development that they were receiving in school.

In his opinion, Pete observed Adam to have “a little bit more self-confidence” in his abilities with the program that he is taking now. “I definitely see improvement. It’s a little slow, but that’s okay.” (a-5.B) Schunk, (1992) suggested that teachers’ feedback and modeling that highlights students’ progress and supports students’ perceptions of learning, will likely have a beneficial effect on sustaining motivation and increasing self-efficacy. The teacher participants seemed to infer their instruction had a positive effect on their students. In fact, George had this to say about his instructional strategies, “I believe that the experiences that he’s [his student has] had through me . . . it’s one of the reasons that they improve his self-image is because he’s been allowed to achieve success.” (Int.16)

Bandura (1993) has indicated that the challenge for creating settings conducive to learning lies heavily on the abilities and self-efficacy of teachers. In another example of LD students responding to these techniques, Sally explained Dave’s evolution to the small class size, individual support, constant positive feedback, accommodating teachers

and open self-advocacy. He became aware that all the teaching staff was on his side to make his academic success a reality. "Once he realized that, then he was willing to take risks, work harder and admit when he didn't understand or know." (Int.15) It seemed to me these teachers believed strongly in their instructional efficacy which, in turn, as Bandura (1993) indicated, supports the development of their students' intrinsic interests and academic self-directedness.

It is unclear how much of an effect these approaches had on their students, although teacher participants seemed certain that their school-based interventions were enhancing LD youth' self-concepts. Research has indicated that both skill development and self-enhancement approaches in school settings can lead to beneficial changes in the self-concepts of LD students (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999). I would even suggest that the experiences which these teachers have reported also bolsters the argument that differences in classroom contexts create different opportunities for relating with significant others (McPhail & Stone, 1995) . . . a factor that might contribute to LD students feeling more positive and active during school (McPhail, 1993).

The majority of teacher participants also were impressed with their students' non-academic abilities including their performance in sporting activities, the arts, volunteer work and employment. Acknowledgement was given to Adam's chess club competitions and Ed's poetry recitals. Much like parents in the study, these teachers felt that such experiences were successful endeavors that helped to increase LD youth' self-confidence. For example, Kyle explained that Chris participated in a mentoring project to learn how to build a boat which he now fishes from out on the lake. As discussed earlier, Kyle

noted “He talked about that and was very fond of doing that, and now going out on a lake in it fishing!” (Int.14)

In another instance, Dennis described the gratification Frank received from his athleticism and creativity when he would paint graffiti with friends. Here is his entire comment that revealed the affirmation Frank would sometimes receive from adults who saw his work.

He did a lot of bicycling and dirt biking stuff that he felt sort of like an athlete in some ways and he would go with buddies and go tag [paint graffiti on] an underpass or something. It made him feel better about himself. He was good at something. Guys working on the railroad tracks would come by and say, ‘That’s pretty amazing!’ and he’d be delighted that adults would have seen his work and didn’t tell him to ‘get lost’.  
(Int.17)

There were also indications from several of these teachers, including those of Chris and Frank, that volunteer work and paid employment increased the self-confidence levels of their students. It was Sally’s impression that Dave especially valued the adult acceptance that he received in volunteer firefighting, and felt “camaraderie” there. Each work experience seemed as one teacher stressed to be, “That kind of thing where he gets the sense there are things he can do well and has interest in and it builds the confidence.” (Int.14)

This finding appears to raise the issue of perceived importance that these areas of competency hold for LD students. Giving consideration to perceived competence or adequacy in areas rated important by LD youth, Harter et al. (1998) found improved the predictability of their global self-worth. Yet in the same study, there was also a weak correlation between job competence and global self-worth using Harter’s Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents, despite its

strong importance rating by subjects. However, the researchers also linked job competence with their youth sample's desire to earn money and admitted that certain job positions, just like the jobs that these youth seemed to value, could serve as a source of pride and positively contribute to feelings of self-worth.

Based on their responses, I learned from teachers in the study that the parents and families of the LD youth were pivotal in advocating, encouraging, supporting and guiding their students towards adulthood. Most teachers reported that parents continued to play a strong advocacy role for these youth. There were numerous comments stating that their students' parents were "really supportive," "have his interests at heart," "were right on top of things," "very dedicated to him," and "who really care". The following comment from Kyle about Chris' family seemed to reflect what a majority of these teachers felt about the families of their students. "Family in general was an important source of strength for him. They were the ones who understood him." (Int.14)

Only one teacher had little to say about a student's parents, noting that a struggle occurred between mother and son due to the passage from "teenager to adult and wanting that independence". This might reveal, to some extent, how LD adolescents experience similar developmental processes at this stage (McPhail & Stone, 1995), just as Pete believed Adam was struggling with. Still, the importance of social support both within and outside of school to the academic self-worth of LD youth is consistent with the literature (Hagborg, 1996; Harter, 1990; Rothman & Cosden, 1995). In fact, Kloomok and Cosden (1994) in their

study found parental social support to be an important factor in the self-concept development of LD students.

There was some indication from teacher participants that LD youth received benefits from friendships and peer acceptance, though these relationships seemed to be shifting at times and they were often inconsistent. In their research, Harter et al. (1998) also found “close friendships” was rated important by LD youth, although also not highly linked with global self-worth. Yet, researchers recognized the value of “close friendships” for other reasons, such as a source of empathy, sharing feelings, clarifying values and practicing trust-building. This was much like the mutual recognition benefit that Mishna (1996) found in peer group work with LD adolescents. These teachers explained that some students’ friendships were still emerging and, to a degree, the LD youth were still socially vulnerable. Yet, the teachers were generally hopeful that as their students continued to adjust and mature socially, they would be able to also strengthen those relationships with peers.

Finally, there were several factors that these teachers felt contributed to their students’ aspirations and visions as adults. A majority of teachers attested to the positive effects of successes in school, work and community pursuits on LD youth. As I cited their students’ competency in sporting activity, the arts, volunteer work and employment added to their confidence and provided them with opportunities to develop supportive adult relationships. Within their own relationships they could see unique qualities in their students that appealed to

adults, such as being “genuine,” “honest,” “respectful,” “modest,” “straightforward” and “responsible”.

Generally, most teachers’ perceptions about students’ extracurricular activities commonly reflected a sense of belonging in the community as exemplified in the following remarks of Sally: “In the past he’s been included in just about everything” (Int.15) Kyle noted in Chris’ community, “He’s totally accepted and I’m sure he feels accepted.” (Int.14) Many LD youth participants were observed to have strong relationships with adults in employment or other community settings. Harter et al. (1998) have suggested that likability or perceived acceptance by the wider peer group is more critical to perceptions of global self-worth in LD students. Youth acceptance was observed to a considerable degree in their adult relationships in this sample. I believe that further study examining acceptance of LD youth within their adult relationships, as part of their wider peer group, is indicated.

According to teachers in the study evidence revealed that these youth were accessing growth opportunities consistent with their aspirations as adults. Many sought external challenges, which could have been volunteer in nature and reflective of their emerging independence as adults. Much of their students’ motivation towards realizing their visions in adulthood seemed to grow naturally out of their increased self-efficacy and the learning environments which they had experienced. Schunk (1992) has indicated that student self-direction and setting personal goals will influence their learning and motivation, provided individual progress is reinforced. Take note of this teacher’s wish relative to his student’s

opportunity for self-direction and personal goal- setting. "I hope that he continues to be given the opportunity to pursue things that he would see as worthy aspirations and goals for himself. That will keep him to developing new ones for himself." (Int.14)

These teachers stressed the importance for students themselves to set goals and to expand horizons in their adult lives. It was my impression that teacher participants recognized the effect that their students' growing self-efficacy was having on their motivation towards adult aspirations. Bandura (1993) has linked self-efficacy beliefs with motivation relative to the individual's goal determination, expended effort, length of perseverance and resilience to failure. More research is needed to examine self-efficacy beliefs and motivation in young adults with LD as they pertain to these important factors. These variables were beyond the scope of my study. It also would be interesting to determine whether LD youth with positive self-concepts have what Bandura (1993) calls "self-reactive influences" and can exhibit a strong belief in their capabilities as adults to exert greater effort when they are failing to master the challenges they may face in adulthood.

A related issue in the literature is the extent to which students with disabilities can become causal agents for their lives which is influenced by perceived external control (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Their research, which included LD youth among their sample of students with cognitive disabilities, indicated that students in self-determination groups achieved more positive adult outcomes than their peers did one year out of school. This study acknowledged

not controlling for different school experiences, an important factor that McPhail (1993) linked to feeling more active and positive during school in LD youth. Weymeyer and Schwartz (1997) also noted the typical programmatic instruction of LD youth emphasizes developing cognitive and academic skills. This cognitive development factor may account for LD students showing higher perceived internal control and a greater propensity for becoming causal agents in their lives than students with mental retardation (Weymeyer, 1994).

It appeared that these teachers provided numerous examples of skill acquisition believed necessary to become causal agents and hence, self-determined. A number of compensatory skills described by these teachers seemed to include learning to access resources for adulthood, communicating interests and preferences, setting and monitoring achievable goals, time-managing and organizational planning, problem solving and self-advocacy. Weymeyer and Schwartz (1997) were quick to also promote attitudes that empower student self-determination in conjunction with skill development, and warned of the detriment from excessive external control. This was an issue that at least one teacher presented in my study.

Most teachers in the study felt as Kyle noted about Chris, "I think he has the ambition and self-confidence at this point and the abilities to find his way in life." (Int.14) Yet, they were not completely without concerns, as George expressed in this opinion about Ed's potential as an adult. "He's got to have the right guidance. He's got to have some people that are helping him, I believe." (Int.16) In contrast, Pete saw the harm from the repeated control that Adam's



mother exerted. Even Dennis had hope for Frank, who was often unsupervised, stating that his period of “making poor choices is necessarily over”. His teacher asserted, “He knows that when he has to perform and needs something, it will mean more to him and he’ll work to get it done. He wants to do what’s right and he’s learned some things about himself.” (Int.17)

There appear to be implications for examining school experiences and the typical instruction of LD youth that pertain to their own efficacy expectations and perceptions of control as adults. In this regard I suggest that further research should be twofold: 1) to identify cognitive development’s effect on motivation in LD youth; and 2) to explore the context for extending supports needed by LD youth into adulthood in order to enhance their self-efficacy beliefs and perceived control in their lives. Both of these are associated with self-concept development and becoming a causal agent.

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION: PERCEIVED ATTRIBUTES FROM LIFE EXPERIENCES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN LD YOUTH

#### 7.1 Overview

In this study, I investigated the influences on the development of self-concept in adolescents with LD based on perceptions of the youth themselves, their parents and their teachers. As previously discussed regarding the study's methodology, I systematically reviewed data aggregation, management and analysis throughout the study which increased confidence in the validity of data. I repeatedly checked and rechecked the multiple data sources considering the experience of previous research and intentionally examined the data for consistencies and inconsistencies to study all potential explanations of my results.

The following discussion highlights what I learned about the perceptions and interpretations of these LD youth' experiences relating to their self-concept development. In particular, I will present evidence of the perceived attributes from the life experiences of these LD adolescents and identify certain individual, interpersonal and environmental factors which appeared to shape their positive self-concept. In addition to this presentation of new insights from my data analysis, I will address the several research questions that I proposed. Then, I will conclude with a discussion about self-concept development in LD adolescent males along with suggested implications for theory, research and practice.

In their integrative literature review, McPhail and Stone (1995) considered adolescent developmental issues to highlight various dynamics related to the complex self-evaluation occurring at this stage. Additionally, some processes were suggested to

likely be at work in the development of self-concept in LD adolescents (McPhail & Stone, 1995). My research investigated processes that are indicative of experiences and perceptions of this sample of male LD youth at the environmental, interpersonal and individual levels. "The impact of most environmental influences on human motivation, affect, and action is heavily mediated through self-processes" (Bandura, 1993, p.118). The findings in this study helped to uncover the following factors that are believed to be influences on the self-concept development in these LD youth.

### 7.2 Dynamic Forces of Self-Concept Development

Evidence from the participants' (youth, parents and teachers) perceptions revealed that several strong factors surfaced within the individual, interpersonal and institutional contexts (McPhail & Stone, 1990) and considering both an internal and external frame of reference (Marsh, 1990). Those individual forces influencing self-concept in this male LD youth sample that are especially salient from my research include 1) the adolescents' determination to become adults, 2) their confidence in reaching their personal goals, and 3) their recognizing and building upon their strengths and successes.

The youth participants specifically sought more independence and freedom in their drive to become adults. Their determination to prove themselves as adults and to meet adult expectations was a major influence in their emerging self-identity. These youth, especially those finishing or near to completing their high school education, were seeking more autonomy and choice separate from their parents. Parents corroborated their sons' strong drive towards adulthood despite the risks involved, although they noted difficulty with their changing perceptions of these youth as a result. Teachers attested to the growing confidence of these LD youth as emerging adults. Both parents and teachers

observed tension between LD youth preferences towards separation and the family's tendency for overprotection.

Another major individual force that influenced the evolving self-concepts of these youths was the confident goal-directedness that they applied to life. The LD youth participants characteristically expressed considerable self-confidence and motivation to achieve their personal goals. They also perceived control over directing their academic and career paths as adults, which represents a closely related theme. The youth were certain that their goal choices and directions would lead to their career aspirations in life. Again both parents and teachers concurred that these beliefs had an impact on the LD youths' feelings of self-worth and future outlook as adults.

In addition, affirming and building upon the strengths of LD adolescents in school and in the community was found to be the third individual factor to have an effect on self-concept in these youth. The LD youth and their parents consistently recognized that adding compensatory strategies to LD adolescents' strengths was an important influence on self-worth in most settings. The teachers primarily noted the positive effect of expanding their LD students' skill repertoire in school. Yet, the teachers in the study also noted how their students' experiences instilled and promoted non-academic competencies, something that primarily occurred outside of school and represented a closely related theme. Teacher participants implied that developing these abilities had a positive effect on their students' self-perceptions.

In research involving LD students, Schunk (1992) suggested that they are active processors of information in which perceptions of self-efficacy, control and outcome expectations play an important role. Evidence also suggests linking the same perceptions

to becoming self-determined and assuming a role as a “causal agent” in youth with disabilities (Weymeyer, 1994). Given the abilities and adequate skills that these youth possessed, their expectations of positive outcomes, and further that they valued their outcomes, it seems safe to hypothesize that self-efficacy beliefs have influenced the choice and direction of much of their behavior (Schunk, 1992).

My research uncovered four factors facilitating the development of self-concept in these LD youth at the interpersonal level: 1) caring, loving and supportive parents; 2) supportive personal relationships; 3) inadequate social self-efficacy; and 4) parental advocacy. The benefit of caring, loving and supportive parents was a principal force that participants in the study confirmed as a very powerful influence on LD youth self-concepts. Research suggests LD adolescent coping styles are linked with their parents’ coping (Shulman et al. 1995) and their parental support is a strong predictor of global self-concept (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994). The encouragement, support, guidance and love from their families who participated in the study seemed fundamental at this level to their sons’ ability to develop other supportive relationships and learn to self-advocate. It also appeared to strengthen the foundation from which these youth would internalize their families’ value and belief systems. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

The second factor at the interpersonal level was the perceived effect on LD youth self-concept development by their supportive personal relationships. Based on the youth perspectives, these relationships included peer friendships, though it was not always clear if this meant same-age peers, as some youth had supportive adult-peer relationships also. Several studies have identified the significance of perceived social support to global self-worth in LD students (Hagborg, 1996; Harter, 1990). Kloomok and Cosden (1994) also

have suggested that perceived support from parents is one of the most significant predictors of global self-concept in LD children.

Both parents and teachers confirmed the importance of relationships (with youth and adults) that provided encouragement, affirmation and support to LD youth. Teachers in the study interpreted this factor according to the encouragement and support that their LD students received from their relationships with them as well as with other teachers in school as well as with their parents. Several of these LD youth also gave many examples of when their fathers served as strong role models and supports for them. Both youth and teacher participants attested to the unique supportive relationship existing between some LD youth and their fathers.

In contrast, there were indications from parents and teachers that some peer interactions had an opposite, negative effect on LD youth self-concepts. Both parents and teachers stressed that peer interactions in the past often were traumatic for these LD youth. According to their perspectives, the LD youth to this day continue to have difficulty building peer-relationships that are supportive and which reflect social maturity among peers. Most parents and teachers believed that their relatively sheltered lives and social vulnerability seemed to influence opportunities for these youth to develop mature social judgment among their peers and now to behave more autonomously as adults. Yet, it is unclear from the findings whether or not the adolescent risk-taking sometimes perceived as a judgment issue could be, as with other adolescents without disabilities, adaptive and illustrative of their resilience. However, concerns were expressed about the ability of these LD youth to behave in a more socially responsible way and to face adversity as adults, which reflects on their emerging self-concept as adults.

It appears from this study that inadequate social self-efficacy may continue to be an issue even for these young LD males with positive self-concepts. Lower self-ratings in cognitive competence were reported among LD adolescents in related self-concept research (Harter et al. 1998). Breyer (1994) has asked whether, as in LD children, external control and learned helplessness are useful constructs to consider in examining self-concepts in LD adults. Parents in the study, especially those of youth finishing high school, reported struggling with their decreased role as advocates and with their tendency towards overprotection despite the growing autonomy of their sons as young adults. It appears that their sons' self-efficacy beliefs in this domain have not yet been realized and hence, this inhibited these LD youth from becoming socially mature and self-determined despite their accomplished positive self-concepts.

The fourth interpersonal force, which seemed moderately related to self-concept development in LD youth, involved the effect of parental advocacy. Despite sheltering and overprotecting these youth, which arguably families may have engendered, the parents and teachers concurred that parental advocacy increased the LD adolescents' access to educational and vocational opportunities throughout their lives. Consistently strong evidence revealed that the parents were effective in getting their sons into special programs; private schools; tutoring and mentoring programs; supportive special services; and college.

In addition, the parents sought and found outside supports and services such as counseling or consultation for their sons. As I noted in Chapters 3 and 5, the parents of these LD youth were generally well-educated and held high expectations for their sons' learning. This factor constitutes a limitation of my study since the sample may not be

representative of the broader LD youth population. Their parents' efforts provided unique opportunities for growth and adaptive settings that addressed their sons' learning and developmental needs. It is suggested that perhaps this force should serve as an effective advocacy model for other parents in their efforts to promote positive self-concept development and self-determination in their LD sons.

Wehmeyer and Kelchner (1997) have examined the effect of failing experiences in school on the perceived external control in the learning of youth with cognitive disabilities. Their research suggested these students need greater access to opportunity using different strategies, levels of intensity, degree of support and modifiable settings leading to learning success in order to reverse the impact of repeated academic failure. In effect, I would argue that, to a great extent, the advocacy of parents in the study seems to have mitigated the effect of their sons' academic failure helping them to access similar learning environments and instructional experiences. As a result, their adolescent sons realized greater self-efficacy, internal control and outcome expectations in their academic progress which are associated with becoming a "causal agent" (Weymeyer, & Schwartz, 1996) and with positive self-concepts in middle school LD students (Hagborg, 1996).

There was some degree of over-protection observed among the parent participants which often inhibits internal control for students with cognitive disabilities (Weymeyer, & Schwartz, 1996). Yet, more of the evidence in my study suggests that these parents minimized their over-protective tendencies and that this factor contributed enormously to their sons' academic growth. Bandura (1993) indicated that family plays a key role in children's school success and that self-efficacious parents regard education as a shared responsibility. This was the same impression that these parents gave in this study.



There were three forces observed at the institutional level that shaped self-concept development in these LD youth: 1) accessing opportunities/resources that lead to success beyond school, including avocations, volunteer and work experiences; 2) internalizing a belief foundation guiding adult decisions; and 3) confronting pervasive stigma towards addressing needs. At this level, the strongest effect involved accessing opportunities and resources that lead to success for these LD youth in the school and community. Youth and their teachers specifically cited their accomplishments beyond school, including avocations, volunteer, and work experiences in the community as being major influences on their self-worth. All participants, to a great extent, linked this factor with the LD youth having access to such opportunities through various contacts, programs and resources primarily within the community . . . often through parental advocacy and support.

The next institutional factor identified was the belief foundation, including the value systems that these youth internalized from their families. Both parents and teachers indicated how this influence guided most of the adult decisions of these youth. This was a force that appeared to be shaping their career ambition and aspirations. It also seemed to be linked to another youth theme reported that pertained to the adolescents' persistence and commitment to learning and seeking an education. I believe, as previously noted, that these were expectations that were more representative of this sample. It is reasonable to infer that this pattern is attributed to the youth sample having adopted many of the same values and beliefs of their families. This also seems to reiterate the importance of parental advocacy and support on the self-concept of LD youth, as I noted earlier and which is supported in the literature (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Rothman & Cosden, 1995).

These two influences seem related to the way that these youth developed their self-beliefs of capability in accessing opportunities from internalizing their parents' persistence and determination to meet the challenges they faced. There are numerous appealing options that students do not pursue because they judge themselves to lack the capabilities to succeed (Bandura, 1993). Adequate evidence emerged in this study to suggest these youth inculcated self-beliefs about their capability to succeed in multiple ways . . . in school, as well as in the community . . . that bodes well for their future as adults. It is this characteristic of psychological empowerment, acting on the beliefs that one has the capacity to perform behaviors needed to influence outcomes in their environment, and if one does so, anticipated outcomes will result that has been identified as "essential" to self-determination in youth (Wehmeyer, 1994; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

The third institutional force identified in the study appeared to have an opposite, negative effect. Both parents and teachers attested to the prohibitive influence that pervasive stigma had, especially in school, towards addressing youth participants' needs. This seemed to be a factor that remained unpredictable to them. The experience with stigma was traumatic, began in the early grades in school, and appeared to them to reflect failure in the educational system to accommodate the learning needs of these LD youth. Teacher participants perceived the use of ineffective instructional strategies that reinforced stereotypes and which discouraged these youth from learning in school to be related to this effect. This may be a factor that is associated primarily with academic self-concept in LD youth and that rises from experiences with rejection and failure in school.

This force may represent an institutional pattern that is more inherent in the attitudinal and systemic context of public education.

McPhail (1993) applied an experiential-conceptual framework to findings from her study on the subjective experiences of LD adolescents, suggesting that those students having less positive experiences in high school than in their out-of-school experiences will believe in school as being less personally fulfilling. This pattern, at times, also seemed evident from the perceived stigma's effect on the LD youth in my study.

“Contexts within school and the varying opportunities they provide for individual, social and scholastic transactions contribute to the phenomenological basis of the development of self-constructs and their meanings.” (McPhail & Stone, 1995, p.220) This study raises the issue of ineffective instructional programming and special needs labeling, the extent that it reinforces stigma and stereotypes, and its influence on self-concept of LD youth.

### 7.3 Research Inquiry into Self-Concept

In effect all of the forces which have been reported and discussed, including those with an opposite effect, inadequate social self-efficacy and perceived stigma, to a degree, help address the first two of the study's research questions:

- How does the experience of living with a disability affect the perceptions of adolescents with LD held by themselves, their parents and teachers?
- How do the experiences of living with a disability influence the self-concept development of adolescents with LD?

I have presented evidence that relates these experiences to the developmental processes taking place for LD youth in the “dynamic nature of the structure and content of self-concept” (McPhail & Stone, 1995, p.214). I would argue that each force affected the participants' perceptions in some ways about these LD youth, which then, consequently influenced the global self-worth of the youth participants as well. Predictors in global

self-concept in LD children were found to be strongest in perceptions of outward appearance, social acceptability and personal support, especially from parents (Kloomok & Cosden, 1994). My research can, at best, illustrate both the developmental and contextual differences in the processes in which these LD youth were engaged as they evaluated themselves.

Overall, the weight of a majority of factors countered the presence of the negative influences in the lives of these LD youth. There seemed to be a pattern of resilience described by participants in the study that grew from youth participants' eventual awareness of their condition and their ability to reconcile with it at some point in their lives. Their teachers witnessed this in the persistence of these youth to remain optimistic in school and to eventually overcome their adversity and learn to succeed. I suspect that the LD youth in this study held a less negative view of their LD condition than did their peers with a lower global self-concept. This pattern of youth resilience is akin to the conclusion Rothman and Cosden (1995) made, "Understanding the specific nature and extent of a disability appears to be an important first step in accepting that disability, putting it into perspective, and subsequently developing a positive self-concept." (p.211)

The base of my inquiry into self-concept development was rooted in the interpretations of these LD youths' experiences made by the participants in the study. It is my impression that eight of the ten factors presented below were influences on the positive self-concept emerging in these LD adolescents. Two of the forces were identified to have an opposite (\*negative) effect: inadequate social self-efficacy and confronting pervasive stigma.

Individual	-determination to become adults; confidence in reaching personal goals; and building upon strengths and weaknesses
Interpersonal	-caring, loving and supportive parents; supportive personal relationships; *inadequate social self-efficacy; and parental advocacy
Institutional	-accessing opportunities/resources to succeed beyond school; internalizing a belief/value foundation; and *confronting pervasive stigma

All of these forces, to a degree, were perceived to contribute to self-concept development in these LD youth and hence, help to address the study's next two research questions.

- Which of the experiences of living with a disability do these adolescents, their parents, and teachers perceive as influencing positive self-concept development?
- What other factors (for example, personal support or perceived control) influence the development of positive self-concept in adolescents with LD?

My findings identified three factors from LD youth participants' experiences perceived to have the strongest impact on their positive self-concepts: 1) determination to become adults, 2) confidence in reaching their personal goals and 3) parental encouragement, support and love.

Their determination to succeed in adulthood and their confidence in reaching individual goals was represented by the emerging psychological empowerment and self-determination of youth participants. I believe that the self-efficacy, perceived control and outcome expectations of these LD youth were pivotal to their drive to learn and succeed (Schunk, 1992) and to become "causal agents" in their lives (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). For the moment they seem to be able to mitigate their social efficacy weaknesses to a degree and retain a less-negative view of their LD condition (Rothman & Cosden, 1995) in order to develop a positive global self-concept.

Bandura (1993) has linked self-efficacy beliefs to cognitive motivators including casual attributions, outcome expectancies and cognized goals. The confidence of these LD youth to be able to fulfill their ambitions and reach their adult aspirations seemed to be related to their self-efficacy beliefs, motivation to learn, and expectations to further accomplish their educational/vocational pursuits. Research already has indicated that there is suggestive evidence linking high levels of self-concept with motivation to learn (McPhail & Stone, 1995).

There also has been considerable evidence indicating the importance of social support, especially parental encouragement and support in global self-concept of LD youth (Harter, 1990; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Rothman & Cosden, 1995). So much was reported on the effect that their parents and families had on these LD youth, which, for most youth, was fundamental to their finding success in their lives. In addition to the parental care, support and love they received, their parents and families provided consistent advocacy and a foundation of values and beliefs. These youth also had a number of supportive relationships with others, including adults in the community. If LD youth in the study include these relationships within their wider peer group, then the perceived acceptance or likeability among this group would be considered critical to their perceptions of global self-worth (Harter et al. 1998).

It also appears that both the effect of building and affirming strengths in school and in the community, as well as promoting accomplishments in avocations, volunteer and paid work experiences on these youth, were key forces helping to shape their positive self-concept development. In fact, many of these experiences also engendered supportive relationships, often with adult peers in the community. All participants reported various

examples of when instructional approaches and settings guided the learning of LD youth and promoted their self-efficacy beliefs. Strong evidence exists to suggest framing feedback to focus on achievement and progressive mastery that strengthens personal efficacy, fosters efficient thinking and enhances performance attainment, which is crucial in strengthening self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1993; Schunk, 1992).

Their non-academic achievements also were perceived to contribute to positive self-concept development in these LD youth. In his literature review, Chapman (1988) insisted on distinguishing beyond academic self-concept to include other general self-concept domains. Harter et al. (1998) suggested that demonstrated competence in highly rated extracurricular pursuits which are areas that LD youth deemed important, would be highly predictive of their global self-worth. It is my conclusion that these are the factors emerging from the experiences of LD youth in my particular study that were primary contributors to their positive self-concept development.

The design of my study explored the meanings assigned to experiences of living with LD. It also examined the relevance of participant perceptions to self-concept development in LD youth. I realize that as my qualitative research evolved, it fell short of uncovering specific perceptions and definitions of self-concept. Hence, I did not analyze the last research question, "How are perceptions of self-concept among these special needs youth different from the standard definition of global self-concept?" My discussion about the extent of the study's limitations, the implications for understanding self-concept in LD youth and furthering theory, research and practice in this area follows.

#### 7.4 Theory, Research and Practice Implications

Little research has been conducted into understanding the ways in which adolescents with LD construct their evaluations of self and the meanings that these evaluations have in their daily lives (McPhail & Stone, 1995). My study suggests that there are a number of factors involved in the developmental processes reflected in dimensions deemed critical to self-evaluations of LD youth in any point in time. This finding would seem to support the idea that the construct of self-concept is not trait-like, but changes in transactions with experiences (McPhail & Stone, 1995).

The range of forces identified as influences on self-concept for this group of LD youth include several closely linked factors to self-efficacy beliefs, perceived control and outcome expectations which are associated with motivation to learn (Schunk, 1992) and self-determination in youth (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996). The evidence in this study strongly suggests that personal encouragement and support from parents and others were paramount in the self-concept development of these LD youth. My research also reinforces the premise that perceived social supports provided by significant others are critical to a positive self-concept (Hagborg, 1996; Harter, 1990; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994; Rothman & Cosden, 1995).

Due to some of the limitations that are acknowledged involving this study, it is suggested that further research is needed which would be helpful in expanding upon its major findings. My study sample included LD youth who were identified to have a positive self-concept and it examined their experiences as interpreted at this point in time by participants. It would be helpful to track the perceptions of LD youth over time, for example, to see whether as adults, they identify different forces shaping self-concept



within the sample. Continued study of LD participants into adulthood also should focus on their capability of learning to access resources as adults, communicate preferences, set and monitor achievable goals, efficiently use time, problem solve, and self-advocate which are reflective of being a “causal agent” (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

Further studies also should expand upon the sample to include LD participants with negative self-concepts as well as those with partial positive self-concepts. Harter et al. (1998) implies that the inability to discount the importance of success in problem areas that define a particular special needs group appears to take a toll on global feelings of self-worth. It seems important to consider the severity of LD or study the barriers to different LD youth groups in learning to being able to discount difficulties in problem areas that may influence self-concept development. There may also be important group differences in the expectations and advocacy of parents and families of LD youth that affect their access to opportunities and experiences, such as settings that use critical skill development and self-enhancement approaches (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999) which positively impact self-concept in LD youth.

Employment and career aspirations were pertinent issues inferred from the study. Employment was among LD youth accomplishments identified in the study that was recognized and which held value for them. Working during adolescence may not always be advantageous (Safer et al. 1995), although evidence indicates that job competence in certain occupations does contribute to perceptions of self-worth among adults relative to work and family (Harter et al. 1998). Some research suggests that subjective factors such as self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, in addition to objective skills, also are significant to the career development of LD adolescents (Panagos & DuBois, 1999).

Gender differences within LD youth groups are thought to exist for both global and certain specific domains of self-concept (McPhail & Stone, 1995). The differential rates of employment and other vocational outcomes across groups of youth with disabilities based on demographic variables such as race and gender indicates the need to further investigate gender differences in career development among LD youth (Panagos & DuBois, 1999). Related research that focused on issues relevant to autonomy found part-time employment to be associated with gains in self-reliance, particularly in female adolescents (Safer et al. 1995). A more exploratory study should examine vocational opportunities, employment and career direction patterns over time and their effect on self-concept among similar samples of both male and female LD adolescents.

Youth participating in the study also stressed the importance of directing their career paths into adulthood. Panagos and Dubois (1999) also have suggested using various strategies, including decision making, self-monitoring and goal setting to raise career self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations which were found to be important in shaping career development for LD adolescents. Interestingly, these were some of the same strategies teachers reported observing among this study's sample of LD youth and which Wehmeyer and Kelchner (1996) also have associated with self-determination in youth with cognitive disabilities.

A pattern of resilience that participants in the study described emerged from the adolescents' eventual awareness of their condition and their ability to reconcile with it during their lives. Now they are recognizing that disclosure of their learning disability may have different implications in adulthood. Parents were under the assumption that disclosure was advantageous in order to access school services for their sons. However

the evidence showed that attached stigma, isolation, ridicule, and sometimes persistent academic difficulties often accompanied those services. Their adolescents' resilience in other settings, such as college and employment may be influenced by the personal choice of when to disclose and under what circumstances. There appears to be more to this issue regarding the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure at this transition stage that make it a more complex issue and worthy of future research.

Educators at both the secondary and postsecondary levels must consider the opportunities that their programs provide for enhancing motivational processes in LD youth. In cognitive development theory, self-efficacy beliefs and perceived control are critical to motivation to learn (Bandura, 1993). There is evidence to suggest that a direct relationship exists between high levels of self-concept and motivation to learn (Harter, 1990). Additional research is needed to explore the significance of this relationship and its implications for understanding positive self-concept in LD youth.

Chapman (1988) advised a shift in self-concept research to study self-evaluation involving LD youth perceptions and their interactions with motivational, social and classroom processes. Wehmeyer and Kelchner (1996) similarly investigated perceptions of control, class setting and attributions of success and failure among students with cognitive disabilities, factors often linked to motivation and learning (Bandura, 1993; Schunk, 1992) and relative to their self-determination. In order to become self-sufficient young adults, special needs students need to have learning experiences that help develop self-determinations skills, to have the chance to apply them, and to assume more control over and responsibility for their lives (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1996). My study was limited to exploring a small sample of LD adolescent's perceptions and interpretations of

their experience with these processes. The impact of self-efficacy beliefs on motivation warrants further study in this area relative to global self-concept in LD youth and to becoming self-determined.

Previous studies suggest that the use of classroom contexts that included teachers who were perceived as warm and who also supported student autonomy tended to enhance LD youth's motivation and, as well, their achievement (McPhail & Stone, 1995). One of the greatest challenges faced by LD youth in the study was their access to instructional approaches and settings that promoted individual success. There were a number of external factors in my study, such as parental advocacy, that influenced the inclusion of the LD youth in programs, activities, and instruction which cultivated their academic growth.

Research that examined school-based interventions, using both self-enhancement and skill development approaches, found that both types helped to improve self-concepts of LD students (Elbaum & Vaughn, 1999). My research was limited to the reported experiences of LD youth in school, and it considered only a small number of settings. Further research should be conducted to examine opportunities for access to the various instructional approaches and environments in school and the community that foster positive self-concept development.

Finally, the issue of social efficacy continues to pervade the lives of the LD youth in this study, even into their adult years. Research has shown that social and interpersonal difficulties persist within the experiences of LD children and LD adolescents (Brier, 1994). My findings highlight the need for further research to study the effect of perceived acceptance with adults and the extension of supports into adulthood

on LD youth self-concept development. Both acceptance and social support are critical to LD youth during adolescent development (Hagborg, 1996; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994). The presence of supports in adult relationships, just as their increasing importance was shown in adolescent social relationships (McPhail & Stone, 1995) could prove to be essential for LD young adults in maintaining a positive self-concept.

### 7.5 Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived attributions that contributed to the positive self-concept in a sample of LD male adolescents. For these LD youth various individual, interpersonal, and institutional forces influenced their self-concept development including some that had an opposite effect. Nevertheless, these youth revealed resilience by apparently coming to terms with their LD condition and by learning to compensate for most of the difficulties that it presented. Generally, a majority of the factors involved in the self-evaluation processes of these LD youth are considered to have had a positive impact on their self concept development.

The interpretations outlined and limitations presented here suggest the need for further research to confirm, clarify and expand upon these findings. This study focused on the processes in which several LD male youth were engaged in constructing a positive self-concept, given their circumstances at this point in time. In order to develop a more informed understanding of the self-evaluation processes of LD youth, the sample must be broader to include other LD youth groups, for example 1) females, 2) those with partial positive or negative self-concepts, or 3) those who are more severely learning disabled. The perceptions of LD youth also will need to be examined for a longer period of time.

As has been reported in the literature (Hagborg, 1996; Harter, 1990; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994), social support from parents and significant others was found to be important to the youth participants in the study. These LD youth received the supports and encouragement necessary in order for them to be able to reconcile their LD condition and to develop an optimistic perspective that discounted the academic difficulties, which they were experiencing. Through the support of parents, teachers and others they realized the importance of understanding their LD condition, the extent of their limitations, and the access to opportunities to learn to compensate for their weaknesses. Primarily, this was facilitated, to a great extent, through the encouragement and support of their parents, families, teachers and other adults.

Opportunities and experiences leading to accomplishments both in and out of school, influenced self-concept, and these included both work and avocations linked to the career-related aspirations of the youth in the study. Further investigation is warranted to explore different work experiences and their effect on LD youth self-concept development. Historically, gender-based differences occurred among youth with disabilities in employment and vocational outcomes (Panagos & DuBois, 1999) that support the need for more research into group differences between male and female LD adolescents, especially with respect to work and career-related successes. Such research also would help to determine the importance of employment as it pertains to self-concept domains for female LD youth.

Findings of this study support Harter's (1990) suggestion there are links between the self-concept development of these youth and their motivation to learn and to succeed. Various factors, like goal directedness, were related to expectations and values of youth

participants that were internalized from their parents. The LD youth in this sample expressed strong self-efficacy beliefs, and they were highly motivated to direct their career paths as adults. There is also support linking these same elements to becoming self-determined and assuming a role as a “causal agent” (Weymeyer, 1994). More studies are needed to examine the role of self-efficacy beliefs and motivational processes in the self-concept development, as well as in the self-determination of LD youth.

It is incumbent upon educators to consider the effects of environmental contexts and instructional approaches on the academic and other related self-concept domains for LD youth. McPhail (1993) implied that the dynamics within classroom contexts and academic settings can result in different opportunities and experiences that impact the self-concept development of LD youth. Additional research needs to be done to further examine different academic settings and approaches to determine how various contexts influence the development of self-concept in LD youth.

Clear evidence exists that both external and internal forces are at work in the cultivation of a positive self-concept in LD youth. My findings suggest that there are a number of variables that families, schools, and communities can change to have a positive impact on the self-concept development of LD youth. Teachers, parents and youth in the study have identified those strategies, opportunities and environments that countered the effects of stigma and weak social self-efficacy in order to foster the positive self-concept of these six LD youth.

## REFERENCES

- Adamson, L., & Lyxell, B. (1996). Self-concept and questions of life: Identity development during late adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, 569-582.
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. § 12101 *et seq.*
- Archambault, F.X., & Willis, W.G. (1995). Review of the multidimensional self-concept scale. In J. Conoley, & J. Impara, (Eds.), *The Twelfth Mental Measurements Yearbook* (pp. 647-650). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive functioning. *Educational Psychologist*, 28(2), 117-148.
- Blum, R. (1988). Developing with disabilities: The early adolescent experience. In M. Levine, & E. McAnarney, (Eds.), *Early Adolescent Transitions* (pp. 177-192). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen S.K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc.
- Brier, N. (1994). Psychological adjustment and adults with severe learning difficulties: Implications of the literature on children and adolescents with learning disabilities for research and practice. *Learning Disabilities*, 5 (1), 15-27.
- Brumfitt, S. (1993). Losing your sense of self: What aphasia can do. *Aphasiology*, 7(6), 569-591.
- Byrne, B.M. (1984). The general/academic nomological network: A review of construct validation research. *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 427-456.
- Byrne, B. M. (1988). Adolescent self-concept, ability grouping and social comparison: Reexamining academic track differences in high school. *Youth & Society*, 20(1), 46-67.
- Chapman, J. (1988). Learning disabled children's self-concepts. *Review of Educational Research*, 58 (3), 347-371.
- Charmaz, K. (1991). *Good days, bad days- The self in chronic illness and time*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Code of Federal Regulations, Title 34, Individuals with Disabilities Act. 20 U.S.C. § 300 and 1400 *et seq* (1991).



- Davis, S., Anderson, C., Linkowski, D., Berger, K., & Feinstein, C. (1985). Developmental tasks and transitions of adolescents with chronic illnesses and disabilities. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 69-80.
- Davis, W.E., & McCaul, E.J. (1991). *The emerging crisis: Current and projected status of children in the United States*. Orono, ME: Institute for the Study of At-Risk Students, University of Maine.
- Elbaum, B., & Vaughn, S. (1999). Can school-based interventions enhance the self-concept of students with learning disabilities. In *Two Decades of Research in Learning Disabilities: Reading Comprehension, Expressive Writing, Problem Solving, Self-Concept* (pp. 2-3). Keys to Successful Learning: A National Summit on Research in Learning Disabilities, New York: National Center for Learning Disabilities, Inc.
- Elkind, D. (1985). Cognitive development and adolescent disabilities. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 6 (2), 84-89.
- Ferguson, P., & Asch, A. (1989). Lessons from life: Personal and parental perspectives on school, childhood and disability. In D. Biklen, D. Ferguson, & A. Ford (Eds.), *Schooling and disability* (pp.108-140). Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.
- Finn, G. (1995). Developing a concept of self. *Sign-Language Studies*, 86, 1-17.
- Fraenkel, J., & Wallen, N. (1993). *How to design and evaluate research in education*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.
- Gliedman, J., & Roth, W. (1980). *The unexpected minority: Handicapped children in America*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA; Sage Publication, Inc.
- Hagborg, W. (1996). Self-concept and middle school students with learning disabilities: A comparison of scholastic competence subgroups. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 19 (2), 117-126.
- Hahn, H. (1985). Toward a politics of disability: Definitions, disciplines and policies. *The Social Science Journal*, 22, 87-105.
- Harris, P. (1995). Who am I? Concepts of disability and their implications for people with learning difficulties. *Disability & Society*, 10 (3), 341-351.
- Harter, S., Whitesell, N., & Junkin, L. (1998). Similarities and differences in domain-specific and global self-evaluations of learning disabled, behaviorally disordered and

normally achieving adolescents. *American Educational Research Journal*, 35 (4), 653-680.

Kloomok, S., & Cosden, M. (1994). Self-concept in children with learning disabilities: The relationship between global self-concept and academic 'discounting', nonacademic self-concept and perceived social support. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 17 (2), 140-153.

Kronick, D. (1981). *Social development of learning disabled persons*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Lawrence, B. (1991). Self-concept formation and physical handicap: Some educational implications for integration. *Disability, Handicap & Society*, 6 (2), 139-146.

Liebert, D., Lutsky, L., & Gottlieb, A. (1990). Postsecondary experiences of young adults with severe physical disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 57 (1), 56-63.

Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. (1984). *Analyzing social settings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Marsh, H. W. (1990). A multidimensional, hierarchical self-concept: Theoretical and empirical justification. *Educational Psychology Review*, 2, 77-171.

Marsh, H. W., & Hattie, J. A. (1996). Theoretical perspectives on the structure of self-concept. In B. A. Bracken (Ed.), *Handbook of self-concept* (pp. 38-90). New York: Wiley.

Marsh, H. W., & Yeung, A.S. (1997). Coursework selection: Relations to academic self-concept and achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34 (4), 691-720.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1995). *Designing qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 38-77). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

McAnarney, E. (1985). Social maturation: A challenge for handicapped and chronically ill adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 6 (2), 90-101.

McPhail, J. (1993). Adolescents with learning disabilities: A comparative life-stream interpretation. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 26(9), 617-629.

McPhail, J. C., & Stone, C. A. (1995). The self-concept of adolescents with learning disabilities: A review of the literature and a call for theoretical elaboration. In T. E. Scruggs, & M. A. Mastropieri (Eds.), *Advances in learning and behavioral disabilities* (pp. 193-226). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, Inc.

- Miles, M., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 40-237). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Mishna, F. (1996). Finding their voice: Group therapy for adolescents with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 11 (4), 249-258.
- Morningstar, M., Turnbull, A., & Turnbull, R. (1996). What do students with disabilities tell us about the importance of family involvement in the transition from school to adult life? *Exceptional Children*, 62 (3), 249-260.
- Nowak, R., Laitenen, R., Stowtschek, J., & Affleck, J. (1995). Advocates and adults with developmental disabilities: Shared and unshared perceptions of self-determination opportunity and impact. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 5, 307-317.
- Offer, D., Ostrov, E., & Howard, K. (1984). Body image, self-perception and chronic illness in adolescence. In R.W. Blum (Ed.), *Chronic illness and disabilities in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 59-73). Orlando, FL: Grune & Stratton.
- Palmer, S., & Wehmeyer, M. (1998). Students' expectations of the future: Hopelessness as a barrier to self-determination. *Mental Retardation*, 36 (2), 128-136.
- Panagos, R., & Dubois, D. (1999). Career self-efficacy development and students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 14 (1), 25-34.
- Pless, I.B., & Pinkerton, P. (1975). *Chronic childhood disorder: Promoting patterns of adjustment* (pp. 21-33). Chicago: Year Book Medical Publishers.
- Quinn Patton, M. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation* (pp. 44-164). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Reschly, D. (1996). Identification and assessment of students with disabilities. In R.E. Behrman (Ed.), *The future of children: Special education for students with disabilities*. (pp. 40-53). Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children, The David & Lucille Packard Foundation.
- Resnick M. (1984) The social construction of disability. In R.W. Blum, (Ed.), *Chronic illness and disabilities in childhood and adolescence*. (pp. 29-46). Orlando, FL: Grune & Stratton.
- Rothman, H., & Cosden, M. (1995). The relationship between self-perception of a learning disability and achievement, self-concept and social support. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 18, 203-212.
- Rubenstein, E. (1991). An overview of adolescent development, behavior and clinical intervention. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 72 (4), 220-225.

- Schloss, P., Alper, S., & Jayne, D. (1993). Self-determination for persons with disabilities: Choice, risk and dignity. *Exceptional Children*, 60 (3), 215-225.
- Schunk, D.H. (1992). Theory and research on student perceptions in the classroom. In D.H. Schunk, & J.L. Meece (Eds.), *Student perceptions in the classroom* (pp. 3-23). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Schunk, D.H. (1985). Participation in goal setting: Effects on self-efficacy and skills of learning disabled children. *Journal of Special Education*, 19, 307-316.
- Schutz, A. (1971). *Collected papers: Vol. I. The problem of social reality*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Seigel, W., Golden, N., Gough, J., Lashley, M., & Sacker, I. (1990). Depression, self-esteem, and life events in adolescents with chronic diseases. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 11 (6), 501-504.
- Shavelson, R., Hubner, J., & Stanton, G. (1976). Self-concept: Validation of construct interpretations. *Review of Educational Research*, 46, 407-441.
- Sheeran, P., & Abraham, C. (1994). Unemployment and self-conception: A symbolic interactionist analysis. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 4, 115-129.
- Shulman, S., Carlton-Ford, S., Levian, R., & Hed, S. (1995). Coping styles of learning disabled adolescents and their parents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 24 (3), 281-294.
- Shulman, S., & Rubenroft, C. (1987). The second individuation process in handicapped adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 10, 373-384.
- Silverman, R., & Zigmond, N. (1983). Self-concept in learning disabled adolescents. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 16 (8), 478-482.
- Stainback, S., Stainback, W., East, K., & Sapon-Shevin, M. (1994). A commentary on inclusion and the development of a positive self-identity by people with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 60 (6), 486-490.
- Stone, C.A. (1997). Correspondences among parent, teacher, and student perceptions of adolescents' learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30 (6), 660-669.
- Strax, W. (1988). Psychological problems of disabled adolescents and young adults. *Pediatric Annals*, 17 (12), 756-761.

- Strax, W., & Wolfson, S. (1984). Life cycle crises of the disabled adolescent and young adult: Implications for public policy. In R.W. Blum, (Ed.), *Chronic illness and disabilities in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 47-57). Orlando, FL: Grune & Stratton.
- Viberg, M., Blennow, G., & Polski, B. (1987). Epilepsy in adolescence: Implications for the development of personality. *Epilepsia*, 28 (5), 542-546.
- Wagner, M., & Blackorby, J. (1996) Transition from high school to work or college: How special education students fare. In R.E. Behrman (Ed.), *The future of children: Special education for students with disabilities* (pp. 103-120). Los Altos, CA: Center for the Future of Children, The David & Lucille Packard Foundation.
- Wehmeyer, M. (1994). Perceptions of self-determination and psychological empowerment of adolescents with mental retardation. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, March, 9-21.
- Wehmeyer, M., & Kelchner, K. (1996). Perceptions of classroom environment, locus of control and academic attributions of adolescents with and without cognitive disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 19 (1), 5-30.
- Wehmeyer, M., & Schwartz, M. (1997). Self-determination and positive adult outcomes: A follow-up study of youth with mental retardation or learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 63 (2), 245-255.
- Weitzman, E., & Miles, M. (1995). *Computer programs for qualitative data analysis: A software sourcebook* (pp. 115-128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- World Health Organization (1980). *International classification of impairments, disabilities and handicaps*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.
- Yin, R. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods* (pp. 27-126). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Zimmerman, M. (1990). Toward a theory of learned hopefulness: A structural model of participation and empowerment. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 24, 71-86.
- Zimmerman, M., & Rappaport, J. (1988). Citizen participation, perceived control and psychological empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 16 (5), 725-750.
- Zola, I. (1982). *Missing pieces: A chronicle of living with a disability* (pp. 207-208). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

## APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Positive Self-Concept Criteria**

### **Criteria for Positive Self-Concept: Adolescent Survey**

*Subjects must answer yes to 3 out of 4 questions in each area (and be rated affirmative by a parent or teacher in 2 of 3 questions in each area) in order to qualify as having a positive self-concept.*

1. Beliefs about academic success-
  - ◆ Do you feel good about your ability to succeed in school?
  - ◆ Do you think your teachers and classes help you to succeed in school?
  - ◆ Do you think your study habits, skills and any assistance outside of class helps you to do well in school?
  - ◆ Do you think teachers, classmates and others recognize your strengths and abilities in school?
2. Beliefs about peer acceptance-
  - ◆ Do you feel the kids your age show that they like you?
  - ◆ Do you think you get along with your classmates at school?
  - ◆ Do you feel good about the friends you have?
  - ◆ Do you think that kids your age, classmates and friends generally include you in the things they do?
3. Beliefs about family acknowledgment-
  - ◆ Do you feel your parents and relatives accept you for being yourself?
  - ◆ Do you think your family recognizes you for your accomplishments?
  - ◆ Do you think your family has confidence in your abilities to succeed in life?
  - ◆ Do you think your family has given you the chance to participate in the decisions about your life?
4. Beliefs about aspirations and belonging at home, in school and in the community-
  - ◆ Do you feel your parents and family members care for, encourage and support you to reach your goals in life?
  - ◆ Do you think your teachers and classmates care about, encourage and support you in achieving your goals in life?
  - ◆ Do you think your friends and neighbors in the community show concern, interest and support to you in achieving your goals in life?
  - ◆ Do you think you can generally be yourself at home, in school and in the places where you go in the community?



### **Criteria for Positive Self-Concept: Adult Survey**

*Parents/teachers must answer yes to 2 out of 3 questions in each area (and adolescents be self-rated affirmative in 3 of 4 questions in each area) in order to qualify as having a positive self-concept.*

**1. Beliefs about academic success-**

- ◆ Do you think his teachers and classes help him to succeed in school?
- ◆ Do you think his study habits, skills and any assistance outside of class helps him to do well in school?
- ◆ Do you think his teachers, classmates and others recognize his strengths and abilities in school?

**2. Beliefs about peer acceptance-**

- ◆ Do you think he gets along with his classmates at school?
- ◆ Do you think that he feels good about the friends he has?
- ◆ Do you think that kids his age, classmates and friends generally include him in the things they do?

**3. Beliefs about family-**

- ◆ Do you think his family recognizes him for his accomplishments?
- ◆ Do you think his family has confidence in his abilities to succeed in life?
- ◆ Do you think his family has given him the chance to participate in the decisions about his life?

**4. Beliefs about aspirations and belonging at home, in school and in the community-**

- ◆ Do you think his teachers and classmates care about, encourage and support him in achieving his goals in life?
- ◆ Do you think his friends and neighbors in the community show concern, interest and support to him in achieving his goals in life?
- ◆ Do you think he can be himself at home, in school and in the places where he goes in the community?

**APPENDIX B**  
**Participant Information Form**

### Participant Information

Please provide the following demographic and family background information on your child with a learning disability. All the information you provide will remain confidential. No identifying characteristics will be used that can connect this information with your adolescent.

Name of adolescent- \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone- \_\_\_\_\_

Address- \_\_\_\_\_

City/Town \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male      Female

Date of birth: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Race:      Caucasian

African American

Hispanic

Asian

Native American

Other- \_\_\_\_\_

Disability type:      Learning Disability

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Education:** Please fill-in all the high schools he has attended and other pertinent information.

School name(s) & address(es)	Grade(s)	Special Ed. Teacher (s)	Telephone

**Transition:** Did your son receive any transition services, as part of his special education program?      Yes      No      Do not know

If so, please list below all the programs including vocational education and training that were involved in developing his transition services?

Program name(s)	Address	Contact(s)	Telephone

**Work:** Has your child had any work experience?      Yes      No      Not sure

If he has had either paid or non-paid work experience(s), please list them below.

Employer's name(s)	Address	Supervisor(s)	Telephone

**Family background:** Please identify both parents and family members other than the participant who are now living in your home and fill-in other appropriate information.

Names of Parents/Guardian	Yrs. of Education	Occupation	Income

Names of Brothers/Sisters	Age	Years of Education	Employment

**Thank you for your assistance in completing the participant information form. Please return it immediately in the self-addressed, stamped envelope that was provided.**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Guidelines for Adolescents, Parents and Teachers**

## **Domains for Positive Self-Concept: Adolescent Interview Guideline**

*You have been asked to participate in this study because people who know you have said that you have a positive impression of yourself. As you move through adolescence toward the challenges of young adulthood there are some of your experiences and your views that I would like to ask you about -*

1. Beliefs about academic competence-
  - ◆ Could you tell me about your strengths and abilities in school?
  - ◆ Could you tell me the experiences, which you like in school?
  - ◆ How do you think your experiences there affect you?
2. Beliefs about non-academic competence-
  - ◆ What are the things you like to do outside of school?
  - ◆ Could you tell me about your experiences outside of school that help the most?
  - ◆ How do you think you do in your outside school activities?
3. Beliefs about peer acceptance-
  - ◆ Could you tell me about your friends and classmates?
  - ◆ What are the things you like about your friends and classmates?
  - ◆ How do your classmates and friends generally include you in the things they do?
4. Beliefs about family support-
  - ◆ Could you tell me what your relationship with your parents is like?
  - ◆ What are the ways that your parents help you to develop your strengths and abilities?
  - ◆ What are the things you like most about your family?
  - ◆ How do your family experiences affect your decisions about life?
5. Beliefs about aspirations and belonging at home and in the community-
  - ◆ What are your experiences at home, in school and in the community that you value the most?
  - ◆ How do your experiences at home, in school and in the community influence your confidence and ambition?
  - ◆ Could you tell me about your opportunity to follow your dreams or aspirations in life?
  - ◆ What are your concerns about following your dreams or aspirations in life?

## **Domains for Positive Self-Concept: Parent Interview Guideline**

*You have agreed to participate in this study which will examine your child's self-concept development. Below are some questions about your child's experiences and your perceptions of him during this time that I would like to ask.*

1. Beliefs about academic success-
  - ◆ What are the strengths and abilities of your son, which you have observed?
  - ◆ Could you describe the experiences that you think help him to do well in school?
  - ◆ How do you think his experiences in school have affected his self-concept?
2. Beliefs about non-academic competence-
  - ◆ What are the things your son likes to do outside of school?
  - ◆ Could you describe his experiences outside of school that help him the most?
  - ◆ How do you think he does in his outside school activities?
3. Beliefs about peer acceptance-
  - ◆ Could you describe your son's relationships with his classmates and friends?
  - ◆ Which of his qualities do you think his classmates and friends like best?
  - ◆ How do you think he is generally included in his experiences with classmates and friends?
4. Beliefs about family-
  - ◆ What do you think his relationship is like with you or your spouse/partner?
  - ◆ Could you describe how you or your spouse/partner help him to develop his strengths and abilities?
  - ◆ What do you think he values the most about his family?
  - ◆ How do you think his family experiences, effect his decisions about life?
5. Beliefs about aspirations and belonging at home, in school and in the community-
  - ◆ What do you think are the experiences in the home, school and community that help your son to feel accepted?
  - ◆ Could you describe how your son's experiences at home, in school and in the community influence his confidence and ambition?
  - ◆ How do you think your son's experience to be able to pursue his goals or aspirations helps him in life?
  - ◆ What are your concerns about your son's pursuit of his life goals or aspirations?

### **Domains for Positive Self-Concept: Teacher Interview Guideline**

*You have agreed to participate in this study which will examine self-concept development in (student's name). You and those who know (student's name) have identified him as having a healthy self-concept. Below are some questions about his experiences and your perceptions of him during this time that I would like to ask.*

5. Beliefs about academic success-
  - ◆ What are the strengths and abilities of (student name) which you have observed?
  - ◆ Could you describe the experiences that you think help him to do well in school?
  - ◆ How do you think his experiences in school affect his self-concept?
6. Beliefs about non-academic competence-
  - ◆ What are the things (student name) likes to do outside of school?
  - ◆ Could you describe his experiences outside of school that help him the most?
  - ◆ How do you think he handles himself outside of school?
7. Beliefs about peer acceptance-
  - ◆ Could you describe (student name)'s relationships with his classmates and friends?
  - ◆ Which of his qualities do you think his classmates and friends like best?
  - ◆ How do you think he is generally included in his experiences with classmates and friends?
8. Beliefs about family-
  - ◆ What do you think his relationship with his parents is like?
  - ◆ Could you describe how his parents help him develop his strengths and abilities?
  - ◆ What do you think he values the most about his family?
  - ◆ How do you think his family experiences, affect his decisions about life?
9. Beliefs about aspirations and belonging at home, in school and in the community-
  - ◆ What do you think are the experiences in the home, school and community that help (student's name) to feel accepted?
  - ◆ Could you describe how experiences at home, in school and in the community for (student's name) influence his confidence and ambition?
  - ◆ How do you think (student's name)'s experience to be able to pursue his goals or aspirations helps him in life?
  - ◆ What are your concerns about (student's name)'s pursuit of his life goals or aspirations?



## **APPENDIX D**

### **Overview of Study, Criteria for Selection and Disclosure of Researcher**

## **NOTICE OF STUDY ON YOUNG MEN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

Subjects are needed for a study on young men with learning disabilities. Doctoral dissertation research is being conducted on the development of a positive self-concept in young men with learning disabilities. This study will look at the experiences of young men with learning disabilities and ask whether their particular disabilities have helped them grow as individuals. Researchers and educators understand the importance of adjusting to a disability, being supported and helping persons with disabilities learn to compensate. These elements help youth to become more capable, self-confident and successful in both school and in the community. This research will consider the parts of living with a disability that youth, themselves, their parents and teachers see as enhancing their own development of a positive self-concept.

Participants in the study must be young men between 16 and 19 years of age, who have been identified as having a learning disability by their local school district. The disability could have been identified at any time during their elementary or secondary education and should have been documented at school. Young men who participate must be willing to provide personal information including parental/guardian permission to interview teachers, parents and themselves. Each participant completing an assessment and an interview will receive a \$20 stipend. All information being shared will remain strictly confidential.

This study is being conducted by Charles Bernacchio, a doctoral student from the University of Maine. Mr. Bernacchio has worked over the past 25 years, teaching, counseling and performing research in the special education/rehabilitation field. He has taught special education at the elementary and secondary levels. Mr. Bernacchio has also been a rehabilitation counselor and currently serves as an adjunct professor in the Counselor Education Graduate Program at the University of Southern Maine. He has also conducted both local and national applied research including a study on learning disabilities as well as on other disability and human service populations for twelve years at the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service. Charles Bernacchio is a polio survivor; a condition he's lived with since he was two years old.

Anyone interested in participating in this study should contact:

**Charles Bernacchio**  
**400 Bailey Hall**  
**Dept. of Human Resource Development**  
**University of Southern Maine**  
**37 College Ave.**  
**Gorham, ME 04038**  
**Tel. # (207) 780-5461 or (800) 800-4876 (Ext. 5461)**  
**E-mail: [charlieb@usm.maine.edu](mailto:charlieb@usm.maine.edu)**

**APPENDIX E**  
**Student Assent Script**

## **STUDENT VERBAL ASSENT SCRIPT**

### **Perceived Attributes to Positive Self-Concept Study**

Hi, my name is Charlie Bernacchio. I am a doctoral student from the University of Maine and I am studying the experiences of youth with disabilities. I also teach in the graduate school at the University of Southern Maine. I have been teaching and doing rehabilitation work involving persons with disabilities for 25 years. For the past 15 years, I have been particularly interested in youth with disabilities.

I am doing research that looks at the experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities and asks whether their particular experience with disabilities has helped them grow as individuals. In this study, I want to consider the parts of living with a disability that adolescents feel contributes to their own positive self-concept. In order to do this, I must look at things, which are known to influence, how people see themselves and what they choose to do in their lives. This would include parents' perceptions, peer relationships, internal/external control, academic performance, employment experience, vocational or post-secondary aspirations, parents' education and occupation, ethnic/cultural background and information about the disability condition.

I have requested your parents' permission to have you participate in the study. If you participate in the study, I will be collecting information from teachers, your parents, and yourself in this way.

- Information about yourself- This form will ask for two things: 1) general information about you (name, phone number, age, gender, ethnicity, and disability information), and 2) information about your family (family structure, parent's educational background, occupation and income).
- Self Concept scale- I will administer an individual self-concept scale to you. This asks 150 questions about your feelings in certain areas of life and can be completed in 20-25 minutes.
- In-depth interviews about you - I will conduct a formal interview with you and your parents to help identify attitudes, beliefs, experiences, relationships, supports, behavior and perceived control that may influence your developing self-concept.
- Teacher interviews- Teachers who know you will be asked to provide your current academic status including grades and behavior. Information will be requested about your performance, communications and relationships in school. Teachers will be asked about your career aspirations, participation in services, vocational preparation and employment experiences.

I will insure confidentiality of information collected about you and take precautions in this study. I will be the only person, who will see the information being collected. For example,

all forms will be returned to me in a stamped, self-addressed envelope that I will provide. I will be the only one to ask your teachers about you. I will be administering the self-concept questionnaire to you, and I will remain with you until the scale is completed and collected. Once I have all the above information, your name will be removed from the forms and your file will be given an individual number. Except for a master list, which will be secured in my office, no identifying information can be traced to you. At the end of the study, I will present a summary report to your parents/guardians or yourself. You will be informed about this meeting through a mailed notice. Absolutely, no identifying information about specific people involved in the study will be shown in the report.

The permission and participation are entirely voluntary. If you refuse to participate, no one will be penalized. If you change your mind about whether to participate in the study, there is also no penalty. Finally, you may choose not to answer any particular question from any form, scale or interview without a penalty.

If you want more information about this study, please let me know. I can be reached at (207) 780-5461. Any letters should be addressed to Charles Bernacchio, 400 Bailey Hall, College of Education & Human Development, University of Southern Maine, 37 College Ave., Gorham. ME 04038.

Are you willing to participate in this study?

**APPENDIX F**  
**Consent/Release Forms**

**INFORMED CONSENT AND RELEASE OF INFORMATION FORM**  
**Perceived Attributes to Positive Self-Concept Study**

My name is Charlie Bernacchio and I am conducting this research. I am a doctoral student from the University of Maine, who is also a faculty member of the University of Southern Maine.

The Perceived Attributes to the Development of a Positive Self-Concept from the Experiences of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities Study will examine the experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities to determine if any aspects of living with a disability have enhanced the development of a positive self-concept. In this study, I want to examine the experiences of living with a disability that may be seen by adolescents, their parents and teachers as contributing to the development of positive self-concept in adolescent boys with learning disabilities. In order to study this, I must look at things, which are known to influence, how youth see themselves and what they choose to do in their lives. These things include parents' perceptions, peer relationships, internal/external control, academic performance, vocational or post-secondary aspirations, employment experience, parents' education, occupation and income, ethnic/cultural background and information about the condition of disability.

Six-seven adolescent boys with learning disabilities are needed for the study. If you are between the ages of 16 and 19 years old, and have a learning disability that was identified by special education, you could participate in this study. If you or others believe that you have a positive self-image, you would be an important subject for this study. Should you participate in the study, you will be given a \$20 stipend to help compensate for your time and travel expenses.

These Consent & Release and Participant Information forms are being given to you with the expectation of having you participate in the study. On the Consent & Release form please indicate whether or not you want to participate in this study. If you agree to participate in the study, information will be collected from your records, parents, teachers and yourself in the following manner.

- **Participant Information-** This form requests 2 things: 1) general information (youth's name, telephone, age, gender, ethnicity, and disability type), and 2) information about the family (family structure/type, parents' educational background and parental occupation).
- **Self Concept scale-** I will administer the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale to you. This scale involves asking 150 questions which will be completed in approximately 20-25 minutes. Responses will range from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' on such items as: "I feel appreciated by my family"; and "I often disappoint myself"
- **In-depth interviews with you, and your parent(s).** I will conduct a formal interview with you and your parent(s) to identify your attitudes, perceptions, experiences, relationships,

supports, behavior and perceived control that may influence developing a positive self-concept.

- Interviews with teacher(s) who know you. Teachers will be asked to provide your current academic status including grades and behavior. Information will be requested regarding your performance, interactions and relationships in school. Teachers will be asked about your career aspirations, participation in services, vocational preparation and employment experience.

Precautions will be taken to insure confidentiality of the information collected regarding the participants in this study. I will be the only person, who will see the information as it is being collected. For example, both the Consent & Release and the Participant Information forms will be mailed to me in the stamped self-addressed envelope being provided. Only I will gather information from school(s) or any agencies. I will administer the self-concept scale to you, and I will remain with you until the scale is completed and collected. Once all the above information is compiled, your name will be removed from all of the forms and your profile will be given an individual number. Except for the master list of youth with their assigned numbers, which will be secured in my office, no identifying information about subjects can be traced to you. Immediately, following completion of the study the master list and any remaining identifying information will be destroyed. A summary of the results then will be presented if you or your parents/guardians are interested at the end of the study. I will inform you about this meeting through a mailed notice. It is important to remember that the results will not contain your name or any identifying information about specific participants or others involved in the study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. First you decide whether to give permission to participate in the study and to allow me to explain the study, and ask if you wish to take part in it. You may withdraw from the study at any time and may skip any question from any form, scale or interview.

If you give your permission to be in this study then please sign and complete the following informed consent/release section. Please return this form along with the completed Participant Information form by mail in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided.

Consent to Participate:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ consent to participate in the research study entitled, "Perceived Attributes to the Development of a Positive Self-Concept from the Experiences of Youth with Learning Disabilities." The study is being conducted by Charles Bernacchio, a doctoral candidate from the University of Maine. I understand the results of the data and study will be published in a doctoral dissertation. Being either 18 years of age or older, I can attest to the fact that it is my choice to participate.

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



Consent for Release of Information:

I also grant permission to the school(s) with which I have been affiliated and for teacher staff who were involved in these programs to release information to Mr. Bernacchio about my educational performance, vocational preparation, employment history, and most recent individual service plans (e.g. IEP, or IVEP). The information will be used only to provide background information about me as one of the study's participants and should be released from the following school(s):

---

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you would like more information about this study, please telephone Charles Bernacchio at (207) 780-5461. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at (207) 581-1498 (or e-mail [gayle@maine.edu](mailto:gayle@maine.edu)).

**PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT & RELEASE FORM**  
**Perceived Attributes to Positive Self-Concept Study**

My name is Charlie Bernacchio and I am conducting this research. I am a doctoral student from the University of Maine, who is also a faculty member of the University of Southern Maine.

The Perceived Attributes to the Development of a Positive Self-Concept from the Experiences of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities Study will examine the experiences of adolescents with learning disabilities to determine if any aspects of living with a disability have enhanced the development of a positive self-concept. In this study, I want to examine the experiences of living with a disability that may be seen by adolescents, their parents and teachers, as influencing the development of positive self-concept in adolescent boys with learning disabilities. In order to study this, I must look at things, which are known to influence, how youth see themselves and what they choose to do in their lives. These things include parents' perceptions, peer relationships, internal/external control, academic performance, vocational or post-secondary aspirations, employment experience, parents' education, occupation and income, ethnic/cultural background and information about the condition of disability.

Six-seven adolescent boys with learning disabilities are needed for the study. If your child is between the ages of 16 and 19 years old, and has a learning disability that was identified by special education, he could participate in this study. If you or others believe he has a positive self-image, your child would be an important subject for this study. Should your son participate in the study, he will be given a \$20 stipend to help compensate for his time and travel expenses.

These Parent/Guardian Consent & Release and Participant Information forms are being given to you with the expectation of having your child participate in the study. On the Parent/Guardian Consent & Release form please indicate whether or not you want him to participate in this study. If you permit your adolescent boy to participate in the study, information will be collected from his records, his teachers, you or your spouse and your adolescent himself in the following manner.

- Participant Information- This form requests 2 things: 1) general information (child's name, telephone, age, gender, ethnicity, and disability information), and 2) information about the family (family structure/type, parents' parental educational background, occupation and income).
- Self Concept scale- I will administer the Multidimensional Self Concept Scale to your child. This scale involves asking 150 questions which will be completed in approximately 20-25 minutes. Responses will range from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' on such items as: "I feel appreciated by my family"; and "I often disappoint myself"

- In-depth interviews with adolescents, and parent(s). I will conduct a formal interview with your child and yourself to identify your adolescent's attitudes, perceptions, experiences, relationships, supports, behavior and perceived control that may influence his developing a positive self-concept.
- Interviews with teacher(s) who know your child. Teachers will be asked to provide your adolescent's current academic status including grades and behavior. Information will be requested regarding your adolescent's performance, interactions and relationships in school. Teachers will be asked about his career aspirations, participation in services, vocational preparation and employment experience.

Precautions will be taken to insure confidentiality of the information collected regarding the youth in this study. I will be the only person, who will see the information as it is being collected. For example, both the Consent & Release and the Participant Information forms will be mailed to me in the stamped self-addressed envelope being provided. Only I will gather information from school(s) or any agencies. I will administer the self-concept scale to your child, and I will remain with him until the scale is completed and collected. Once all the above information is compiled, your child's name will be removed from all of the forms and the youth profile will be given an individual number. Except for the master list of adolescents with their assigned numbers, which will be secured in my office, no identifying information about subjects can be traced to a child. Immediately, following completion of the study the master list and any remaining identifying information will be destroyed. A summary of the results then will be presented for interested parents/guardians or participants at the end of the study. I will inform you about this meeting through a mailed notice. It is important to remember that the results will not contain your child's name or any identifying information about specific participants or others involved in the study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. First you decide whether to give permission for your child to participate in the study and to approach your child, explain the study, and ask if he will agree to participate. Your child may withdraw from the study at any time and he may skip any question from any form, scale or interview.

If you, as a parent or guardian, give permission for your child to be in this study then please sign and complete the following informed consent/release section. Please return this form along with the completed Participant Information form by mail in the stamped, self-addressed envelope provided.

Consent to Participate:

I consent to allow my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the research study titled, "Perceived Attributes to the Development of a Positive Self-Concept from the Experiences of Adolescents with Learning Disabilities." The study is being conducted by Charles Bernacchio, a doctoral candidate from the University of Maine. I understand the results of the data and study will be published in a doctoral dissertation.

Parent/guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Parent Consent for Release of Information:**

I also grant permission for my child's school(s), with which he has been affiliated and for teacher staff, who were involved with these programs to release information to Mr. Bernacchio about my child's educational performance, vocational preparation, employment history, and most recent individual service plans (e.g. IEP, IVEP). The information will be used only to provide background information about my child as one of the study's participants and should be released from the following school(s):

---

Parent/guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

If you would like more information about this study, please telephone Charles Bernacchio at (207) 780-5461. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at (207) 581-1498 (or e-mail *gayle@maine.edu*).

## **APPENDIX G**

### **Reference Coding of Participant Sources**

### Reference Coding of Participant Sources<sup>3</sup>

<u>Reference#</u>	<u>Participant(s)</u>	<u>Source</u>	<u>Date</u>
01	Adam	Youth	3-9-01
02	Bill	Youth	6-15-01
03	Chris	Youth	10-12-01
04	Dave	Youth	12-7-01
05	Ed	Youth	12-13-01
06	Frank	Youth	6-18-01 & 12-18-01
07	Adam's mother	Parent	5-18-01
08	Bill's mother	Parent	7-26-01
09	Chris' parents	Parents	10-12-01
10	Dave's parents	Parents	1-6-02
11	Ed's parents	Parents	2-9-02
12	Pete	Teacher	5-7-01
13	Morris	Teacher	6-22-01
14	Kyle	Teacher	11-30-01
15	Sally	Teacher	12-17-01
16	George	Teacher	1-18-02
17	Dennis	Teacher	7-13-01
18	Meg	Teacher	8-27-01

---

<sup>3</sup> A total of eighteen interviews were completed. The assigned numbers will be cited within the manuscript in this way, "Int. 01" referencing the first interview and so forth.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Charles P. Bernacchio was born on March 16, 1951 in Taunton, MA and graduated from Monsignor Coyle High School in 1969. He received his baccalaureate degree from Boston University in 1973. He taught at a state institution for persons with mental retardation until 1976, then he interned through Curry College to earn K-8 certification in Massachusetts. He was a part-time teacher and then worked for the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission for several years. In 1980 he earned his M.Ed. in Special Education and Rehabilitation from Boston College. He became certified and taught special education in Massachusetts for one year and then moved to Maine in 1981. He subsequently taught special education in Maine for four years for MSAD 40 and in Union 47 within the Bath School District.

He began his career at the University of Southern Maine in 1986 conducting research at what has become the Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service. He started instructing graduate special education and counseling courses in 1992 while he directed federal grants and state contracted research there until 1996. He began his doctoral studies at the University of Maine at this time during his transition to the College of Education and Human Development. Since 1997, he has held a clinical position in the Counselor Education Graduate Program there, teaching, coordinating internships, conducting research and managing state and federal training contracts.

He currently resides in North Yarmouth, ME with his wife, Catherine and their daughter, Michaela. He continues to teach and do research at the University of Southern Maine. He is a candidate for the Doctor of Education (Individualized Program) degree, from The University of Maine in May, 2003.