The Educational Journey of Three Adults with Learning Disabilities: A Demonstration of Resiliency

Lori Hufnagel Buglak

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THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY OF THREE ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A DEMONSTRATION OF RESILIENCY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By
Lori Hufnagel Buglak

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THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY OF THREE ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A DEMONSTRATION OF RESILIENCY

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ABSTRACT

THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY OF THREE ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A DEMONSTRATION OF RESILIENCY

By

Lori Hufnagel Buglak

December 2008

Dissertation supervised by Professor Rodney Hopson, Ph.D.

Not all students who are diagnosed with LD are destined to live a life of academic struggles, missed opportunities, and unfulfilled dreams. Not all students fit the stereotypical idea of troubled, underachievers who will drop out of school, aspire to low level jobs, and remain financially dependent (Miller & Fritz, 1998). Some students with LD become resilient to the negative effects and attributes that are often associated with having LD; and despite the odds, make it in life (Werner & Smith, 1992). The purpose of this study was to understand how students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences and how those experiences influence their post-secondary and career choices.

The theoretical framework used in this study focused primarily on the risk/resiliency model and the importance of proximal and distal developmental influences. Risk and protective factors were used as a way to navigate through the
personal experiences of three individuals with mild LD and help to identify certain times in their lives when resiliency was evident.

Using a multiple case study design, phenomenological interviewing was employed as the primary method of data collection, along with one focus group session and document reviews. The results of the data collection were reported as three case studies highlighting the participants’ individual experiences. The data was analyzed using analytic induction. Repeating ideas and themes emerged from the data creating the constructs that were used to write the theoretical narrative. Triangulation and member checks were used to verify the results.

The findings revealed that 1) the participants developed resiliency in spite of their school experiences not necessarily as a result of their school experiences, and 2) the participants’ school experiences directly influenced their post-secondary and career choices. These findings have implications for the field of special education in terms of program design, transition planning, and relationship building between students and teachers.
DEDICATION

To my children, Kiely and Jonah, in an attempt to teach, model, and encourage them to be resilient. Someday you will realize that life is 20% what happens to you and 80% how you react to it. Resiliency is a choice that requires great effort. Make the choice. Make the effort. Be resilient!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Finally, thank you to Dr. Rodney Hopson, my dissertation chair, for hanging on through the ups and downs that have been a part of this rigorous learning experience. Thanks for seeing me through. Your patience is remarkable.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

For more than twenty years now the term at-risk has found its way into the vocabulary of almost every teacher and school administrator in The United States. With its roots in the field of medicine and the application of the “risk-factor” model (Brown, D’Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001), the term at-risk has been used in education to identify students who have dropped out of high school or are considering it (Knutson, 1996), students from disadvantaged or underprivileged backgrounds (Werner & Smith, 1982; 1992), or students who have various types of learning disabilities (Wiener, 2003).

Students with learning disabilities (LD) are often referred to as at-risk learners because without structured, explicit, intensive instruction these students are at-risk for academic failure (Williams, 2005). Historically, the diagnosis of LD was considered a risk factor that contributed to a student’s academic failure because it was identified through the absence of certain skills or attributes, which constituted a deficiency (Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2006). Recent trends in education have moved away from the deficit model that has traditionally been used to identify students at-risk and has moved towards the risk/resilience model that is driving current research; especially when understanding the successes and failures of students who have LD (Bryan, 2003; Cosden, 2001, 2003; Donahue and Pearl, 2003; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Sorenson et al., 2003; Wiener, 2003; Wong, 2003;).

Students with LD are students who “do not achieve adequately for the child’s age or meet state-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading
fluency, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, and mathematics problem solving” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004, 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10). Researchers such as Bryan (2003), and Donahue & Pearl (2003) agree that students with LD can be at-risk for a number of negative social and academic outcomes such as social perception difficulties, communication problems, poor quality of friendships, and ongoing self-esteem and emotional difficulties, not to mention elevated high school dropout rates, vocational problems, underemployment, and high rates of dissatisfaction with their lives. To compensate for some of the academic issues that they may face, students who are identified with LD receive supplemental aids and services while in school. Inclusion programs are designed to minimize the negative impact of a student’s LD by offering adaptations and modifications to the general education curriculum.

When students’ academic risk factors are countered with appropriate intervention strategies, Franklin (2000) indicated that students with LD are no longer at-risk, but at-promise. The notion of students “at-promise” focuses on the factors that intercede in a student’s life to help reduce the negative impact of their risk factors. Identifying students as “at-promise” rather than at-risk, as Franklin suggested, emphasizes the protective factors that make students resilient rather than focusing on the risk factors that make them vulnerable.

Chapter One begins with a description of the problem and purpose statements of this research study. The research questions are embedded in the purpose statement as they address the issue of how students’ positive and negative school experiences affected their post-secondary and career decisions. These questions were designed to add to the
current research on resiliency in students with LD and how resiliency becomes a factor in students’ post-secondary and career choices.

Chapter One continues with a description of the theoretical framework that is the foundation of this research study. The notions of at-risk and at-promise are discussed as the boundaries of the theoretical frame, putting parameters on the students’ experiences as either positive or negative. The framework continues with an explanation of the risk/resiliency theory, risk and protective factors, and proximal and distal developmental influences, which are all central ideas in this study. These terms are used to help explain the unique circumstances and assumptions that surround students with LD. From feelings of inferiority and a general dislike of school to academic supports, notions of at-risk and at-promise are juxtaposed to describe the cumulative effects of the positive and negative experiences that students with LD may have in school.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodology that is used for the study as well as the significance of this piece of research. This research is significant in light of the demand for continued research regarding resiliency in students with LD (Bryan, 2003; Margalit, 2003; Wiener, 2003; Wong, 2003). It is also timely due to the changing nature of supplemental aids and services in special education and the need for data regarding students’ successful transition to adulthood. This information was obtained through document reviews, a series of individual interviews and one focus group, and is reported in the form of multiple case studies.
Problem Statement

The problem statement of this work is divided into two major arguments. First, the identification of LD has lasting effects both on students who are identified with LD, as well as on the field of special education in terms of instructional practices (Bradley & Danielson, 2002; Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2006; Lipsky, 2005; Roffman, 2000; Williams, 2005). Deficiencies in the areas of achievement, self-esteem, social skills, emotional well-being, and employability all have a lasting impact across a person’s life span (Dole, 2000). The research of Lipsky (2005) and Williams (2005) shows that as students grow and mature, they continue to have difficulties as a result of their LD.

According to Williams (2005),

One of the things we have realized, sadly, is that to have LD is not to have a single, circumscribed problem that can be removed through remediation. As our field continued to grow and mature, so did the young participants in our studies – and they continued to have difficulties. (p. 130)

Lipsky (2005) indicated that the results for students with LD who were separated from their peers in the general education classrooms were not positive. Her results echoed the continued difficulties that Williams (2005) experienced with her students. Lipsky (2005) stated,

The results for the majority of the [self-contained] students involved [in separate special education classes] continued to reflect disturbing outcomes, including failure to master IEP goals and grade level curriculum; exclusion of special education students from standardized testing; high dropout rates; low graduation
rates; the absence of return to general education; high unemployment rates; and lack of integration into the community. (p. 156).

These characteristics illustrate the possible effects of LD on school performance as well as the lasting effects that could interfere with the student’s adult life. Results like these have impacted the field of education in terms of state and federal laws, professional development, and emerging best practice for instructional delivery and assessment (Lipsky, 2005; Williams, 2005).

Federal laws such as Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (1973); Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004); and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) drive research regarding the implementation for evidenced-based practices for identification, instruction, and assessment for students with LD. In keeping with characteristics that were identified by Williams (2005) and Lipsky (2005). Poplin and Rogers (2005) found that special education classrooms grossly underestimated the abilities of children with disabilities. The trend in special education has moved toward an inclusive model of instruction where students are educated in the general education classroom with their general education peers to the greatest extent appropriate (IDEA, 2004). Williams (2005) suggested that the responsibility of researchers and practitioners is to continually improve the methods of instruction through professional development.

Our job is to make sure that the instruction that gets into the classrooms is the best that it can be. And we must also be alert to the problems that might arise in the inclusion classrooms in which at-risk children are placed. It is often a challenge for teachers to deal with heterogeneous classes, and there is not enough
professional development within general education that addresses the needs of children with disabilities. (Williams, 2005, p. 130)

Federal law, IDEA 2004, requires that students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) whenever possible. With the implementation of supplemental aids and services, the general education classroom is considered the LRE for many students with LD. However, the LRE can range from the general education classroom to a residential facility for students with disabilities depending on the educational requirements in the student’s IEP (IDEA, 2004). General education teachers are expected to provide the necessary accommodations for students with LD to be successful in the general education curriculum. This law created the demand for on-going professional development for teachers who are not familiar with curricular modifications and accommodations necessary to meet the learning and emotional needs of students with LD.

The second problem of this study intends to counter the preponderance of the literature of LD focusing on student deficits. Past educational literature has centered on the deficit model, which focuses on the student’s deficiencies, as well as the outcomes of those deficiencies. However, IDEA 2004 now states that the discrepancy model can no longer be used as the sole determiner for the diagnosis of LD. Researchers as well as current regulations are requesting that less emphasis is placed on student deficits and a greater emphasis be placed on student resiliency through proximal and distal developmental influences and the social and emotional well-being of students with LD (Brooks, 2001; De Civita, 2000; Margalit, 2003).
Poplin and Rogers (2005) found it alarming that there are so few adult “thrivers” among people with LD. However, they found it encouraging that information about the characteristics of those who do thrive was beginning to develop, suggesting that student resilience, rather than deficit, is an area where future research should be focused. They recommended that longitudinal studies that follow the “thrivers” need to be completed to encourage students with LD to develop self-understanding, self-awareness, perseverance, pro-activity, coping strategies, and social networks such that their disabilities do not overwhelm them. Poplin and Rogers recommend the following strategies for helping students to develop these skills:

(a) help students [and their teachers] to think and talk about the greater purposes in their lives; (b) assist them in defining their strengths [outside of just academic ones – diligence, perseverance, commitment, self-awareness, and goal directedness]; and (c) address the possibilities for employment and meaningful work in the larger world, including non-college track professions. (p. 161)

Individuals with LD, who are diagnosed early in their academic careers and continue to show resiliency, become valuable sources of information once they reach adulthood. As adults they can comment on the quality of services and programming that they received as well as give examples of their own experiences that may help to develop lessons or programs that may encourage resilience in other students with LD. According to Miller and Fritz (1998),

Missing from the extant literature are clear examples of resilient individuals with LD who tell their own stories. It is important to hear these stories, not only because they illuminate the route to resilience that someone has taken, but also
because other persons can learn from them. If educators can help today’s students with LD develop resilience, it may be from applying lessons taught by resilient individuals. (p. 2)

Miller and Fritz clearly defined a need in the existing literature to discuss resilience through students’ own voices as they describe their personal experiences as students with LD.

The long term effects of the LD label on students and the implications for instructional practices coupled with the demand for literature that focuses on student resiliency and personal experiences has created an area of education that is in need of further exploration and research.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The diagnosis of LD should not sentence students to a life of underachievement and unfulfilled dreams. In fact, Cosden (2001) found that “many individuals with LD function successfully in both school and in the community” (p. 3). These students are considered to be resilient (Werner & Smith, 1992). Despite their disability, many students with LD move on to lead successful, productive lives, co-existing with and understanding their disabilities, while others may indulge in feelings of hopelessness and engage in self-defeating ways of coping (Brooks, 2001).

To illustrate the purpose, this study recognizes the complexity of student experiences as well as the implications for risk and protective factors, internal and external influences, and the consideration of individual circumstances that students with LD experience. Current educational literature (e.g. Margalit, 2003; Wong, 2003) suggests that new studies place less emphasis on isolated factors of risk and resiliency
and focus more on understanding the experiences of the students from a multi-
dimensional perspective. Hence, the central purpose of this study is to gain a better
understanding of how students with LD develop resiliency.

Resilience research has moved away from lists of attitudes and attributes and has
moved toward connecting contexts, characteristics, and processes that lead to overcoming
adversity (Doll & Lyon, 1998). Proximal and distal developmental influences are now
the suggested forms of resiliency research and value is now given to individual
experiences of success and failure, personal history, and social supports (Margalit, 2003).
An important part of describing how students with mild LD develop resiliency is to
determine how students’ proximal and distal developmental influences affected their
transition into adulthood. Understanding proximal and distal experiences may highlight
the importance of students’ feelings and emotional well-being and may reveal some of
the resilient traits and characteristics students with LD need to possess to sustain resilience
into and throughout adulthood (Brooks, 2001; De Civita, 2000; Margalit, 2003).

Therefore, the research questions for this study are:

I. How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through school
   experiences?

II. What influence did these experiences have on students’ career or post-
    secondary choices?

Beyond the identification of traits and characteristics, Wong (2003) suggests that
research focuses on proximal and distal developmental influences: “Using a risk and
resilience framework to study LD allows one to account for individual differences with
the population, while identifying factors related to both positive and negative outcomes” (Cosden, Brown, & Elliott, as cited in Wong, 2003, p. 69).

Theoretical Framework

The foundation for this study’s theoretical framework focuses primarily on the risk/resilience theory and the importance of proximal and distal developmental influences. Risk and protective factors are used as a way to navigate through the personal experiences of each student and help to identify certain times in each student’s life when resiliency was evident. The identification of risk and protective factors throughout each student’s academic experiences help to illustrate the presence of resilience in each student’s life, to determine how resilience was developed and whether it had an impact on the student’s post-secondary or career goals.

The risk/resiliency theory and proximal and distal developmental influences are the overall concepts that frame this research study. Studies on resilience (Werner & Smith, 1982; 1992) and research from developmental psychology (Martin & Martin, 2002) were used to construct the larger frame. However, it is the current literature from Wong (2003), Margalit (2003), Bryan (2003), and Wiener (2003) that illustrate the impact the risk/resiliency model and proximal and distal developmental experiences have on the field of education, particularly in the area of special education and LD. Their works illustrate the connection between the over-riding concepts that are framing this study and the field of education, and the need for current research to focus on the complex relationship between student’s reactions to their experiences and the development of resiliency.
Risk and protective factors are the constructs of the study and were used in conjunction with students’ personal stories to uncover the events that have helped to promote resiliency. The constant interplay between these factors is observed through the students’ experiences, emotions, and feelings of control, and identified examples of resiliency. These examples were used to determine the impact that perceived risk and protective factors had on the post-secondary and career choices of students with LD. The research questions were designed to uncover this connection and frame the proposition that perceived risk and protective factors coupled with personal experiences influence the development of resiliency in students with LD, which ultimately impacts the post-secondary choices that students make.

The theoretical framework of this research study is comprised of five major concepts. Those concepts include notions of students being at-risk, at-promise, risk and protective factors, the risk/resiliency theory, and proximal and distal developmental influences. These five concepts are discussed independently; then are discussed in terms of how they are integrated to construct the theoretical framework. This section concludes with a description and graphic organizer that illustrates how the concepts interrelate.

At-Risk

As stated in the introduction, the term at-risk has its roots in the field of medicine. It is the application of a medical model to education (Brown, D’Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007). Brown and colleagues (2001) used cholesterol as an example of how the risk factor model was used in medicine to help identify a person’s predisposition for heart disease. They explained that high cholesterol is a risk factor for heart disease. Therefore, if the risk factor of high cholesterol can be
minimized or removed, then a person’s chances of suffering from heart disease are significantly reduced. The same theory holds true when the risk factor model is applied to the field of education.

Researchers looked hard at which life factors contributed to young people’s failures to respond to given educational expectations. As risk factors were identified, educational policies and programs were developed using the specific risk factors, as if they, like cholesterol, were direct causes of a child’s inability to meet educational expectations. Educators of every sort now use measures of risk as a means to try to predict failures of all sorts. (Brown et al., p. 3-4)

Based on the information from Brown and colleagues (2001), educators have used risk factors as a way to identify a student’s potential for social and academic failure. The students are identified and categorized so educational professionals can develop intervention programs with the necessary counseling and curriculum components to prevent social and academic failure. Identifying students’ risk factors is intended to serve as a type of screening mechanism to aid in the prevention, treatment, and possible remediation of academic failure. In theory, the purpose of identifying students’ risk factors is to provide educators with the needed information to assist students who are thought to have certain predispositions to academic and social failure (Brown et al., 2001).

Using risk factors for this purpose sounds harmless enough. In fact, it sounds like a proactive approach to addressing the needs of students to prevent academic failure. However, when the focus becomes the students’ perceived vulnerability to certain risk factors rather than the student’s actual response to the risk; difficulties arise. Assuming
that certain students are more likely to fail based on a predetermined set of characteristics rather than addressing why the students may succeed emphasizes the negative aspects of the risk factors.

*At-Promise*

The term at-promise is the general recognition of a student’s chance to be successful despite certain risk factors (Franklin, 2000). The notion of students “at-promise” focuses on the factors that intercede in a student’s life to help reduce the negative effects of the potential risks. For example, a student may be identified as having LD in the area of mathematics and may struggle to understand the general education curriculum. However, just because that student is identified and struggles in mathematics does not mean that he or she is destined to live a life full of academic failure, frustration, and despair. Through inclusive practices, the student is given academic support services within the general education classroom to help alleviate frustration and to promote academic success. Thereby emphasizing the promise rather than the risk.

Associating students with certain sets of risk factors alone ignores environmental factors that they may experience to ameliorate the risk. In fact, many students with academic risk factors have supports within the school system to help address their learning needs. Franklin (2001) described this as the difference between the epidemiological model and the ecological perspective when identifying at-risk/at-promise students. He stated:

The epidemiological/medical model used in risk discourse may be helpful in identifying general student and familial characteristics that make academic achievement difficult. But when used alone, the focus is on risk and vulnerability,
not promise, protection, and resilience. The ecological perspective recognizes that in most student environments there is likely to be a continuum of risk and protective factors. (p. 8)

Therefore, the terms at-risk and at-promise should be used together to get a true picture of the student’s academic experiences. Franklin (2001) continues to describe the protective factors as “…those processes that interact with risk factors to decrease the probability that an individual experiences an adverse outcome” (p. 8). Academic support and assistance within the general education classroom is one way of protecting students from the potentially harmful effects of LD.

If students with LD can be identified by their risk factors, then it only stands to reason that equal consideration must be given to the resilient factors that they possess as well. Failure to identify resiliency in these students emphasizes the negative aspects of the student’s LD and ignores other life experiences and personal characteristics that may offer the student some protection from risk.

Risk/Protective Factors

Risk factors present a threat to a person’s development while protective factors tend to buffer the negative impact of the risk and promote positive development (Cosden 2001; Wiener, 2003). These factors are thought to be experienced on a continuum (Franklin, 2000); tend to have a cumulative effect on student outcomes (Margalit, 2003); and are intertwined with societal and cultural influences (Wong, 2003). So what does this mean for the student with LD? It means personal, cultural, and environmental factors all contribute to the perception of risk or protective factors. Therefore, a risk factor for one student may actually be perceived as a protective factor for another. A protective
factor today could be considered a risk factor tomorrow if the student’s attitude or circumstances change. And when considered as part of proximal and distal experiences, the relationship between risk and protective factors could have a lasting effect on post-secondary and career outcomes.

Risk/Resiliency Theory

Some students with LD have positive outcomes in adult life, while others have negative outcomes. Some students with LD are adversely affected by the risk factors associated with the disability while others become resilient (Werner & Smith, 1992). Most students however, experience a combination of risk and resilient factors that help to shape the outcomes that they experience as adults. The risk/resilience model highlights the complex interactions among contextual factors that are relevant to student outcomes (Sorenson et al., 2003). This model has helped researchers to understand both the successes and failures of students with LD and has helped to make sense of the individual experiences that students have as they pass through various stages of development (Margalit, 2003).

Understanding the application of the risk/resiliency model sheds a new light on previous definitions of resiliency. Csikszentmihalyi and Schmidt (1998) described resiliency as “the ability of an organism to turn negative conditions into positive ones” (p. 2). Swanson, Spencer, and Peterson (1998) defined resiliency as “the ability to utilize self-righting tendencies during sensitive periods or in response to negative feedback” (p. 22). Calderon (1998) defined resiliency as the way an individual responds to risk. She gave three ideas of how resiliency is manifested: (1) overcoming the odds; (2) sustained competence in the presence of acute or chronic life stresses; and (3) recovery from
trauma (p. 69). In light of the risk/resiliency model, more recent definitions of resiliency identify it as a general personality trait that is developed across contexts and is manifested as a stable characteristic (Margalit, 2003). These definitions along with the risk/resiliency model were used to identify the significance of the positive and negative experiences of students with LD as their personal stories unfolded.

**Proximal and Distal Developmental Influences**

Martin and Martin (2002) defined proximal developmental influences “as recent experiences or resources in the life of individuals” (p. 78) and define distal developmental influences as “experiences that reach farther into the personal history of individuals” (p. 79). Examples of proximal events could include experiencing success or failure on a school test, or the development of a social support relationship. These types of developmental events tend to affect student resiliency (Margalit, 2003). Examples of distal experiences include salient childhood memories, or adolescent experiences, and are derived from the personal history of individuals and affect the outcome of current events (Margalit, 2003; Martin & Martin, 2002).

The correlation between proximal and distal developmental influences is crucial to identifying how resiliency is developed in students with LD because, “past experiences show proven ways by which individuals adapt to new circumstances” (Martin & Martin, 2002, p. 87). The closer the match between proximal and distal events, the more influential a person’s past may be; “If the match is strong as in the case of events in the same domain, then proximal events may mediate the lasting effects of the past; if the match is weak, then distal events may remain influential through personal and social resources” (Martin & Martin, p. 84).
From a developmental systems perspective, Pianta and Welsh (1998) described resiliency as a process that involves multiple factors interacting over time. Student perception of risk and protective factors, personal experiences, and emotional well-being all interact in the process of resiliency and potentially impact post-secondary outcomes. These concepts, constructs, and propositions serve as the map to navigate this research study (see figure 1.1). They should be used as a guide to bring clarity and understanding to the complex dynamic of student experiences, risk and protective factors, resiliency, and post-secondary outcomes. From the onset of academic difficulties and the formal identification of LD, to the decision to pursue post-secondary and career goals, each student is subjected to a personalized blend of risk and protective factors that influence their experiences and predisposition for resilience.

Figure 1.1: Risk Factors and Protective Factors Connection
Methodology

Designed as a qualitative study, this research focuses on the participants’ personal stories of their own experiences. A combination of interpretive and descriptive multiple case study design (Merriam, 1998) was used to retell each story and describe the categories that conceptualize the different approaches to student resiliency. Data was collected during two interview sessions using partially structured interview questions, and one focus group. A follow-up interview was conducted prior to the focus group. The focus group was conducted as it pertained to the central research questions, specifically the participants’ ability to identify the risk and protective factors that they experienced as students with LD and how those experiences affected their post-secondary or career decisions. Additionally, a document review was conducted to gather data from individual cumulative files.

The research design followed the guidelines of practitioner research with the practitioner being a full participant in the research process, keeping in mind that in practitioner research, the research is closely tailored to the needs of the practitioner (Hammersley, 1993). The rationale for choosing practitioner research was to help special educators develop resiliency in students with LD as a way to help facilitate their transition into adulthood.

Interviews were conducted on two separate occasions to determine if the participants were able to identify the risk and protective factors that they experienced as students with LD. Semi-structured interviews (See Appendix A) were used. Each interview was approximately ninety-minutes in length. The first interview consisted of gathering background information about the participant’s career choice, post-secondary
education or training, and their specific learning difficulties. The second interview focused on the participant’s experiences in a special education program as well as their positive and negative academic experiences as they related to their academic performance. The follow-up interview was approximately fifteen minutes in length and focused on individual definitions of success. Due to the nature of the interview questions and the method of data collection, face to face interviews were preferred and took place at a mutually agreed upon research site.

In addition to the individual interviews, the students were asked to participate in one focus group session to identify common experiences. The focus group was used to generate additional thoughts and gather more information from the participants as they shared their stories and experiences with each other. The focus group was also approximately ninety-minutes in length. Information obtained through the interviews and focus group was tape-recorded and transcribed. Data collection began in the fall of 2006 and continued throughout the summer and fall of 2007.

The participants selected for this study were chosen through a combination of criterion and purposive sampling as well as snowball sampling (Gay & Airasian, 2000). Individuals that were selected were students with LD who participated in the general education curriculum but received supplemental aids and services for academic support. Three individuals who met the criteria were selected to participate in the study.

Significance

Nationally, this study demonstrates significance in two areas; (1) it addresses how individuals develop resilience through their experiences in inclusive school settings and
it addresses individuals’ transition into adulthood by exploring their post-secondary and career choices.

The current trend in special education is to move away from isolated, homogeneous classes of students with LD, towards heterogeneous groupings and the integration of students with disabilities into general education classes (IDEA, 2004). Nationally, this trend is called inclusion and it is impacting the way supplemental aids and services are delivered in schools across the country. The fact that this study addresses how individuals develop resiliency through their positive and negative school experiences in inclusive settings makes its link to current trends in research (Bryan, 2003; Margalit, 2003; Wiener, 2003; Wong, 2003) and federal laws (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; The Americans with Disabilities Act 1990; Section 504 of The Vocational Rehabilitation Act, 1973) significant.

This study also has national significance in the fact that it addresses the importance of students’ transition into adulthood. ADA (1990), Section 504 (1973), and IDEA (2004) mandate that special education programs focus on students’ transition into adulthood (Martin, 2005). The transition into adulthood is so important for students with LD that transition services are becoming a driving force behind individualized education programs (IEP’s). Yet, according to Martin (2005), attention to transition is often ignored in many IEP meetings, particularly for students with mild LD. Identifying the experiences that interfere with students’ post-secondary goals is a crucial element to their successful transition into adulthood, and significantly contributes to the field of special education by having the potential to improve transition planning for students with LD (Trainor, 2007, 2005; Lipsky, 2005; Williams, 2005).
The timeliness of this study is also significant for two reasons; (1) it addresses issues raised in the current literature that focuses on student resiliency and personal experiences rather than deficits, and (2) it addresses issues regarding students’ transition into adulthood. Wong (2003) traced the original application of the risk/resiliency model back to Werner and Smith (1982, 1992) indicating that they were the only researchers relating the risk/resiliency model to individuals with LD. Wiener (2003) agreed with Wong, suggesting that valuable research in the area of resilience among students with LD should be longitudinal in nature and should be conducted within groups rather than between groups; emphasizing the variation within the sample of students with LD. Trainor (2007) also suggested the need for within group studies that address how individual characteristics based on group membership impact student’s transition into adulthood.

Considering Wiener (2003) and Trainor’s (2007) suggestions for future research, this study is timely and significant due to the fact that it attempts to address student resiliency and transition to adulthood through each individual’s proximal and distal developmental experiences in an inclusive setting. Although the participants all have LD, their paths to post-secondary success varied. Resiliency is demonstrated through acknowledgement of each student’s personal history and the impact those individual experiences had on their post-secondary and career choices as they transitioned into adulthood. Significance is also noted in the fact that this research has the potential to become a longitudinal study by conducting follow-up interviews to determine if resilience was sustained throughout adulthood.
Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations of this study include the small number of participants and the lack of gender diversity. All three participants were male. A limited number of responses to the research invitation were received thus limiting the choices of participants to those who responded. Further limitations include incomplete cumulative files from the school district that agreed to participate. Since the participants were past graduates, their cumulative files were limited to what the school district chose to archive.

Delimitations include the severity and range of LD. Due to purposive sampling, only students with LD who participated in the general education curriculum with supplemental aids and services were considered. An additional delimitation includes the fact that a multiple perspective approach was not used. Risk and protective factors and their affect on post-secondary and career decisions are viewed only from the individual’s perspective. Future research could look at risk and protective factors for individuals with LD from the perspective of the parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Summary

Using a multiple case study design, this research study explores how individuals with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences. Attention is given to risk and protective factors through the proximal and distal experiences of each individual and how those experiences affected their post-secondary and career choices. The theoretical framework is comprised of the risk/resiliency model and the impact that past and present experiences have on the development of resiliency, indicating that the development of resiliency is a process rather than a product.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Not all students who are diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD) are destined to live a life of academic struggles, missed opportunities, and unfulfilled dreams. Not all students fit the stereotypical idea of troubled, underachievers who will drop out of school, aspire to low-level jobs, and remain financially dependent (Miller & Fritz, 1998). Some students with LD become resilient to the negative effects and attributes that are often associated with having LD, and despite the odds, make it in life (Werner, 1992). In addition, not all special education programs offer the same, unchallenging, basic education curriculum that the students complete year after year (Poplin & Rogers, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2007). By keeping students in the general education classroom with the necessary accommodations and curricular modifications, inclusion programs are meant to prepare for a successful transition to life after high school (IDEA, 2004). Poplin and Rogers (2005) questioned special education programs. They wondered,

…whether blocks of very intensive, highly structured, and well researched instruction might be a better special education intervention than the slow, drawn-out one that consists of several hours per day or week of a lower intensity special instruction that we currently prescribe almost without thinking. (p. 161)

With the right combination of support factors, such as proper instruction, caring adults, persistence, and positive life experiences, students with LD can develop a resilient attitude. They can experience academic success, take advantage of opportunities that are presented to them, and fulfill their dreams as adults. They may have to work harder than a student without LD, but they can set and reach their post-secondary or career goals.
To completely understand the complex nature of resilient students, a thorough investigation of the existing literature was completed. Case study research on resilient students was reviewed as well as information on risk and protective factors, and proximal and distal developmental influences. In addition, literature on inclusion, collaborative consultation, transition services, and the history of LD and special education was reviewed. An in-depth review of the literature illustrates the various attitudes and experiences that shape resilient students. The literature that helps to explain resiliency as a phenomenon is broken down into six sections titled; History of Resilience, History of Special Education and LD, Students with LD, Identification and Placement, Student Experiences, and Resiliency.

Section One, History of Resiliency, focuses on the work of Werner and Smith (1982) who conducted a 30-year longitudinal study on the island of Kauai identifying characteristics of resilient people as they developed from childhood to adulthood. Section Two, History of Special Education and LD, is divided into two parts. Part one identifies the foundations and early research in the field and part two addresses the federal laws and definitions that impact LD. Section Three, Students with LD, is also divided into two parts. Part one discusses the characteristics of students with LD and the effects of the LD label; and part two recognizes the prevalence of LD in public schools today.

Section Four, Identification and Placement, is broken down into three parts. Part one addresses the shift in the identification process from the sole use of the discrepancy model to the increased use of the response to intervention model (RtI) that is currently being used in many schools today. Part two defines inclusion and the process of
collaborative consultation and part three discusses the importance of transition services as part of the driving force behind IEP development.

Section Five, Student Experience, is also broken down into three parts. Part one, risk factors, addresses the notion of at-risk students, the use of the discrepancy model as a risk factor, and the link between LD and the at-risk term. Part two discusses the notion of students being at-promise; it identifies various protective factors that students with LD possess, and the link between protective factors and LD. Part three talks about proximal and distal developmental influences and the definition of each term, the link to LD, and the link between personal experiences and resiliency.

Section Six, Resiliency, begins with the definition of resiliency and a description of the risk resiliency model. This section continues with a synthesis of the current studies and concludes with an explanation of resiliency and the link to my study. Chapter Two concludes with a summary of the reviewed literature and a table illustrating the connection between the literature and the theoretical framework that is used as the foundation of this study.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. This chapter will not only be used to identify the literature that supports the identification of resilient students, but it will also be used as the lens through which I will define resiliency among students with LD.

History of Resiliency

Werner and Smith’s (1982) longitudinal study stands out as one of the most notable research studies on resiliency. Werner and Smith started their study in 1954 on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. At the start of the research project, their primary interest focused on children with developmental disabilities such as physical disabilities, mental
retardation, and serious school achievement problems. Their major concern was with prevention and early intervention. Their first book titled, *The Children of Kauai*, was published in 1971 and identified the magnitude of fetal and perinatal stress, poverty, and disordered care giving on the development of children from birth to age ten.

Their second book, *Kauai’s Children Come of Age*, was published in 1977 and highlighted the mental health problems and antisocial behaviors of these children during their childhood and adolescent years. This study identified issues such as social class, vulnerability, caretaker-child relationships, and socialization as key factors in the children’s development. Of the 698 children born in 1955 (all participants in the longitudinal study), “204 children developed serious behavior or learning problems at some time during the first two decades of their lives” (Werner & Smith, 1982, p. 2). Werner and Smith found that chronic poverty and disorganized family structures contributed to the children’s inability to cope with life stressors.

However, Werner and Smith (1982) could not help but notice that despite that fact that 204 children were unable to cope with their life stressors, there were other children, faced with the same set of vulnerabilities, who were able to cope. They seemed to be resilient to the stress in their lives. These children, the resilient ones became the focus of their next book, *Vulnerable but Invincible*, which was published in 1982 and is the focus of this section of the literature review on resiliency and case study research.

Werner and Smith (1982) had three objectives when they decided to research the vulnerable, yet resilient youth that they identified during their original research study. The first objective was to provide a long-term perspective on children’s capacity to cope with perinatal stress, poverty, and parental psychopathology (1982). The second
objective was to examine the differences between boys and girls regarding vulnerability and resilience in the first and second decades of their lives, and the third objective was to identify the protective factors within the child and their environments that differentiated high-risk children who became resilient from those who developed serious learning and behavior problems. All three objectives were crucial to understanding resilient youth, however, for the purpose of this study, the third objective which focuses on the protective factors within the child and the child's environment is a central idea in understanding the resilient individuals that were interviewed.

There are several characteristics of Werner and Smith’s (1982, 1992) works that make them particularly noteworthy. The length of the studies, the number of participants involved, and the use of both quantitative and qualitative data make them formidable pieces of research that contribute significantly to the field. Werner and Smith’s methodology was remarkable due to the fact that it was extensive and blended many research styles. The following is a brief explanation of the types of information that they gathered.

Werner and Smith’s (1982) research began with a census report and campaign to identify women in the early stages of pregnancy. They continued with an assessment of pre and perinatal complications and home visits within the first year after the babies were born. The home visits consisted of public health and social workers interviewing the mothers and rating the infants on a number of temperamental characteristics. During this first home visit, the social workers also used a checklist to describe mother-infant interactions. Throughout their second year of birth, the children participated in pediatric and psychological examinations and the mothers were questioned. Following the second
year, pediatric and psychological exams, and an assessment of the family environment was conducted which included information on the mother’s educational level, the family’s socio-economic level, and family stability. At the ten year follow-up, information was obtained from physician and school records, and new information was obtained through questionnaires filled out by the child’s teacher, another home interview with the child’s mother, and psychological testing using the Bender Gestalt and the Primary Mental Abilities test. Another assessment of the family environment was also completed at ten years. The study continued with an 18-year follow-up, where all records on the participating child were searched, group testing and questionnaires were administered, and semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted, which yielded the necessary information for the case studies that were included. Again an assessment of the environment took place focusing on the family between years ten and eighteen.

Once the information was collected, Werner and Smith organized their findings into several chapters in their book. Chapter 4 identified what it meant to grow up vulnerable. Noted vulnerabilities included poor physical or intellectual development, the need for long term remedial education and mental health services, placement in special education classes, delinquencies, chronic long term environmental stress such as poverty, and chronic long term family stress such as involvement with distressed caretakers. Werner and Smith identified that the children who experienced these risk-factors either developed a lack of coping skills leading to serious and often persistent learning and behavioral problems, which they identified as maladaptation, or they developed in spite of the risk factors becoming resilient or invincible. Werner and Smith (1982) noted,
In both poor and middle class homes, infants with ‘difficult’ temperaments who interacted with distressed care takers in a disorganized, unstable family, had a greater chance of developing serious and persistent learning and behavior problems than infants who grew up in stable, supportive homes. (p. 32)

When discussing vulnerabilities among children with LD, Werner and Smith found that four out of five students with LD noted academic under-achievement, confounded absenteeism, truancy, a high instance of repetitive, impulsive acting-out behavior that led to problems with the police for boys and sexual misconduct for girls. When the group was reassessed at age 18, test results showed continued difficulties with perceptual-motor skills, verbal deficiencies, and serious underachievement in reading and writing. Self-reports indicated that there was a lack of self-assurance, and interpersonal competency, and a general inadequacy in utilizing their intellectual resources. They were also noted to have a high “external” locus of control.

One of the benefits of doing a long-term study is that the researchers were able to identify characteristics of resilient children at different life stages. Characteristics of resilient infants were one of the first things that Werner and Smith (1982) were able to identify. According to their study, resilient infants tended to be first-born. This characteristic was especially noted in males. Resilient infants survived some birth complication such as low birth weight, but had few or no congenital defects. Caretakers perceived the infants as very active and socially responsive. They elicited and received a great deal of attention during their first year of life and rarely experienced prolonged separations from their primary caretaker during that period of time. Of the characteristics identified, the amount of attention that the resilient infants received from their primary
caretakers seemed to be the most significant trait that separated them from their non-resilient peers.

Continuing their research by studying resilient toddlers, Werner and Smith (1982) noted that, “by the end of the second year of life, resilient boys and girls have evolved coping support patterns that combine the ability to provide their own structure with the ability to ask for support when needed” (p. 68). Having had more opportunities to face some of life’s stresses than infants, resilient toddlers were characterized by attributes such as not being defensive and eliciting positive social responses from others. They were also noted for their independence and ability to quickly and easily process information. In addition to their personality traits, Werner and Smith found that resilient toddlers had more positive interactions with their mothers, and were separated from their parents less often than their peers who developed serious coping problems.

By the time the children in the study were ten years old, more noticeable differences were identified between children who were resilient and children who were not. Resilient children did better on verbal comprehension, reasoning, and problem-solving tasks than their peers who developed serious coping problems. They also performed better on perceptual-motor coordination tests. In addition to the testing data, home-visits, interviews, and observations continued in the homes of the children in the study. In the case of Theresa, a ten year old girl, whose family of eleven continued to be burdened with financial hardships, it was evident that the mother-child relationship, emotional support, and clear expectations were important factors in her development. Theresa’s mother was quoted as saying,
I’ve taught my children to help work. I’ve taught them what’s good and what is bad and trained them when they were little, and so they are good when they get older. I spank Theresa if she needs it. Not often though. I prefer to tell her she can’t go out to play. (Werner & Smith, 1982, p. 73).

Theresa’s mother also indicated that Theresa received a lot of positive attention at home. She said, “We praise her about her work and what she does. She likes attention. I give them all attention. The father, he always tickles her and plays with her….She is not a problem child” (1982, p. 73). These quotes indicated that Theresa’s home life is positive and supportive despite the financial difficulties that the family faced.

Another case of resiliency focused on a set of resilient twins, Ellen and Darlene. Ellen and Darlene endured perinatal stress and were not permitted to come home from the hospital for several weeks following their birth. In addition, the socio-economic and educational level of their parents was considered to be very low. However, by the time the girls were one year old, their mother, described as resourceful, energetic, affectionate, responsible, and good humored, described the twins as “very active, good-natured, and easy to deal with” (1982, p. 75). At age two, both girls continued to do well and were described as agreeable, feminine, and healthy. By age ten, both girls were doing well in school and had no behavioral difficulties. Although the socio-economic status of the family and their parents’ education was rated as low, the family stability was rated satisfactory. Due to their financial situation, the mother had to start working full-time by the time the girls were seven, but in her absence, the older sister took responsibility for the care of the children and the older brothers helped the girls with their school work. Werner and Smith (1982) noted, “This environment provided support and the opportunity
for the girls to draw on their own skills and resources” (p. 75). In addition to their academic expectations, the girls were also expected to help around the house completing chores. The family support system and well-defined expectations helped to contribute to their “independence, competence, and autonomy – characteristics the twins shared with the other resilient children in the study” (1982, p. 76).

As adolescents, the study continued by identifying resiliency through the personality attributes of resilient boys and girls. Werner and Smith (1982) noted the following: (1) Resilient boys were not particularly gifted, nor did they possess outstanding scholastic aptitudes; what intelligence they did have, they put to good use. (2) Resilient boys were responsible, had an internalized set of values, and demonstrated social maturity. (3) Resilient boys displayed a strong need for achievement and appreciated structure in their lives. (4) Resilient boys shared more interest in “feminine” matters such as being appreciative, gentle, nurturing, sensitive, and more socially perceptive.

Several case studies illustrated these characteristics. One such case was that of a young man named Paul. Paul displayed sensitivity to interpersonal relationships and expressed his desire to care for his parents when they got older. These character traits demonstrated Paul’s social maturity, his sense of responsibility, as well as his development of “feminine” qualities such as appreciation, nurturing, and sensitivity.

Werner and Smith (1982) noted the following traits as characteristics of resilient girls: (1) Resilient girls were more assertive, autonomous, and independent. (2) Resilient girls were poised, self-assured, and vigorous. (3) Resilient girls also made good use of the talents and abilities that they had. (4) Resilient girls thrived when independence,
originality, and autonomy were valued. Resilient girls felt that their own actions controlled the positive or negative reinforcement that they received in their lives.

Again, Werner and Smith (1982) identified several case studies that emphasized these traits. One case, Susan, displayed several of these qualities. Susan said, “Senior year is exciting…I’ve enjoyed it. I’m quite popular…I like to get good grades, too. School is very important” (p. 90). Susan’s test scores revealed that she was of average ability, but had a very high internal locus of control. She was motivated and driven to do well in her future. She said,

My personality is good enough for people to like me. I can control myself pretty well…I try to think things out calmly and try to think of a solution to things. I feel I want to do something important and get the most out of life. (Werner & Smith, 1982, p. 91)

Susan was clearly self-assured, and independent. Her average ability coupled with her high expectations of herself illustrated that she was able to make the most of the abilities that she had as well as she was willing to take control of her own actions and her future.

Comparing the lists of characteristics for both resilient boys and girls with the case studies of Paul and Susan, it was clear that resilient boys and girls were able to develop both their masculine and feminine sides. Werner and Smith (1982) articulated that point in the following statement:

The resilient youth in our longitudinal study, and in others as well, appear to have come as close as any people we know of to a healthy androgyny. This goal still eludes most of their peers and many of their elders who try to live within the constraints of societal stereotypes that define men and women. The resilient ones
have become whole persons instead, their own persons, and they were well on the road to that wholeness and individuality as infants and young children. (1982, p. 93)

In summary, Werner and Smith (1982) determined that the resilient youth in their study suffered from fewer cumulative life stresses in their family environments than youth who developed serious coping problems in adolescence. In addition to the personality traits of the resilient boys and girls, they also noted that each child had some combination of protective factors that helped to reduce the ill effects of the risk factors that they experienced. For example, parental attitudes, family closeness and stability, and the quality of the relationship with their father were all noted as protective factors in these children’s lives. In addition, Werner and Smith noted that parents who were able to cope with life stresses tended to raise children who were able to cope with life stresses, and defensive parents tended to raise defensive children. Therefore, having a parent or another adult role model who is able to cope with life stress is also a protective factor. Regarding resilience and protective factors, Werner and Smith summarized their findings by saying, “As disadvantage and the cumulative number of stressful life events increased, more protective factors in the children and their care giving environment were needed to counterbalance the negative aspects in their lives and to ensure a positive developmental outcome” (p. 132).
History of Special Education and Learning Disabilities

The idea of educating students with various disabilities is not a new concept that has emerged in the twenty-first century. Both the field of special education and the development of the LD category have had a rich and controversial history that dates back to the nineteenth century (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1995). Contributions from the fields of medicine and education have had a major impact on the development of the special education programs and practice that educators, researchers, parents, and students are familiar with today (Bradley et al., 2002; Brown, D’Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001; Kavale & Forness, 1995). Therefore, this section is a synthesis of two centuries’ worth of research and legislation that has impacted current federal laws and the definition of LD.

Foundations and Early Research

The foundations of LD and special education have been dated back to the 1800’s (Kavale & Forness, 1995). Early research regarding language disorders has been linked to Gall and his study of patients with brain damage (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007; Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). Gall’s research linked brain injury and aphasia and laid the foundation for future research on language disorders (Bradley et al., 2002). In the 1820’s, Bouillaud was credited with identifying the specific lobes of the brain that controlled speech; and in the mid 1800’s, Broca and Wernicke were noted for their work on speech functions (Kavale & Forness, 1995; Bradley et al., 2002).

Around 1870, research on reading disabilities began to emerge. Broadbent was one of the first to document symptoms of a reading disability in an adult who had completely lost the ability to read written or printed characters. However, Broadbent
noted that although his subject could not read written words, he was able to write correctly and readily from dictation or spontaneously (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). The remainder of the nineteenth century brought developments such as identifying and labeling specific reading disabilities as well as the recognition that males were predominately identified with reading disabilities. Between 1890 and 1920, Hinshelwood continued to explore the possible link between heredity and the identification of a reading disability (Fletcher et al., 2007; Hallahan and Mercer, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1995).

During the 1900’s research on reading disabilities continued with Orton’s work on dyslexia and phonemic awareness. Orton also noted that his students who struggled to read, had near-average, average, or above average intelligence. This discovery became the foundation of the discrepancy model. However, it was Monroe in the 1930’s who was credited with introducing the notion of a discrepancy between actual achievement and expected achievement among students with reading disabilities (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). Emphasis was also being placed on remediation and the importance of refining assessments for determining specific disabilities.

Research on perceptual, perceptual-motor, and attention disabilities began with Goldstein during the late 1930’s and progressed into the 1940’s with the Straussian Movement (Fletcher et al., 2007). The Straussian Movement is a significant time period because it has been linked to the recognition of LD as a general category formally recognized in the field of education (Kavale & Forness, 1995; Fletcher et al., 2007). Around 1950, research shifted towards classroom modifications and well-designed intervention procedures for students with disabilities. And in 1960, Kirk was credited
with originating the actual term, learning disabilities. Kirk was also noted for his speech identifying LD as a special education label (Fletcher et. al, 2007).

The 1960’s continued with Bateman reintroducing Monroe’s notion of discrepancy. This also became a significant contribution to the field as most states eventually adopted an achievement discrepancy model of identifying LD (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). During the 1960’s research continued with the involvement of the federal government. Federal committees were formed, legislation was adopted, and parent and professional organizations were developed regarding the subject of LD (Fletcher et al., 2007; Hallahan and Mercer, 2002). The 1970’s and 1980’s were a relatively stable time period in the field of LD. Major universities began receiving federal funding to conduct research and developed intervention programs for students with LD (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

From 1985 to the present date, changes have continued to occur in the field. Due to the overwhelming amount of information that is available on the history and development of special education and LD, a chronological table (Table 2.1) was developed to address the evolution of the field in a more succinct, detailed fashion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Contribution to the field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European Foundation Period</td>
<td>1800-1920</td>
<td>Gall</td>
<td>First to explore the relationship between brain injury and mental impairment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                             | 1800’s | Gall              | Furthered Gall’s work asserting that the frontal anterior lobes of the brain control speech.
<p>|                             | 1820  | Bouillaud         | Worked with patients whose speech was slow, laborious, and dysfluent. This became known as Broca’s aphasia. |
|                             | 1860  | Broca             | Worked with patients whose speech was fluent, and unlabored, but the sentences were meaningless. This became known as Wernicke’s aphasia. |
|                             | 1870  | Wernicke          | Conducted research on reading disabilities – documented a case of an intelligent adult who had lost the power to read printed or written characters, but could write readily and correctly from dictation or spontaneously. |
|                             | 1877  | Kussmaul          | Gave birth to the idea of a specific learning disability.                                  |
|                             | 1890-1920 | Hinshelwood     | Noted the preponderance of reading disabilities among males and noted that reading disabilities were potentially inherited. |
| U.S Foundation Period       | 1920-1960 | Orton            | Noted for his work on dyslexia and phonemic awareness – also noted that his students had either near-average, average, or above average intelligence. One of the first to introduce the idea of multi-sensory training. |
|                             | 1925  | Orton             | Based on Orton’s multi-sensory, phonics based approach to reading instruction, wrote a book titles – Remedial Work for Reading, Spelling, and Penmanship. |
|                             | 1930’s | Gillingham &amp; Stillman | Opposed Orton and Gillingham’s phonetic approach and emphasized reading and writing words as wholes. |
|                             | 1930’s | Fernald           | Emphasized the need for intensive instruction by well-trained teachers. Also introduced the notion of discrepancy between actual achievement and expected achievement as a way of identifying students with reading disabilities. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>1930’s</th>
<th>1940’s</th>
<th>1950’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kirk</td>
<td>Emphasized the importance of remediation and worked on refining an assessment approach for determining specific disabilities – the result – The Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goldstein</td>
<td>Worked with WWII soldiers with head injuries and determined that the soldiers’ distractibility was due to a deficiency in their ability to discriminate a figure from the background (figure background confusion).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strauss &amp; Werner</td>
<td>Their work with students with mental retardation (MR) and hyperactivity is directly linked to the emergence of the general category of LS as a formally recognized field.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cruickshank</td>
<td>Focused on classroom modifications and well-designed intervention procedures for the remediation of disabilities.</td>
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### Emergent Period 1960-1975

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kirk</td>
<td>Credited as the originator of the term learning disabilities and noted for his speech identifying LD as a special education label.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task Force I &amp; II: Goal – To determine a definition for LD</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC): Developed the definition that was eventually adopted by the federal government in P.L. 94-142</td>
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<td>Development of parent and professional organizations</td>
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<td>Reintroduced Monroe’s notion of discrepancy between achievement and potential (considered an historic contribution)</td>
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### Solidification Period 1975-1985

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<tr>
<td>Congress passed P.L. 94-142 – the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. LD finally achieved official status as a category eligible for funding and special education services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Office of Education adopted NACHC’s definition of LD and used it in the implementation of P.L. 94-142. P.L. 94-142 also included the ability-achievement discrepancy formula for identification of LD in the regulations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developed a number of intervention programs for language, reading, and</td>
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Direct instruction was found to be highly effective. Universities received federal funding to focus research on developing educational methods for students with LD.

**Turbulent Period 1985-2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980’s</td>
<td>Major U.S. universities – Columbia University, University of Illinois at Chicago, The University of Kansas, University of Minnesota, University of Virginia</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985-1990’s</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990’s</td>
<td>Fletcher, Vallutino, and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990’s</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990’s</td>
<td>Laski, Fuchs and Fuchs, CEC</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
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**Federal Laws and Definitions**

“It has been approximately half a century since learning disabilities were first recognized in the United States” (Rueda, 2005, p. 168), and since then about one half of all students receiving special education services are students with LD (Fletcher et al., 2007). However, the recognition of LD as a disability requiring special education services did not occur until Congress passed Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Martin, 2005). Prior to P.L. 94-142, government involvement and federal laws were focused on developing definitions for LD (Fletcher et
al., 2007; Martin, 2005; Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1995) and to this
day, “No single problem has plagued the study of LDs more than the problem of
definition” (Fletcher et al., 2007).

In the early 1960’s, the federal government implemented two task forces with the
goal of developing definitions of LD (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). Task Force I was
comprised of researchers from the medical profession and Task Force II was comprised
of educators. Task Force I’s definition focused on minimal brain dysfunction identifying
the range of disability from mild to severe and attributed the dysfunction to deviations of
the central nervous system from unknown causes (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). Task
Force II could not agree on a single definition, thus creating two definitions. The first
definition stressed the notion of intra-individual differences, while the second stressed
discrepancy between intelligence and achievement (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

In 1963, P.L. 88-164 authorized federal support for training and research in the
field of special education and a definition of “handicapping conditions” eligible for
special education services was developed (Martin, 2005). However, the definition of
“handicapping conditions” did not include LD. By 1967, The Education of the
Handicapped Act (Title VI, Elementary and Secondary Education Act, P.L. 89-750) was
passed which approved federal grants to expand and improve special education programs
for children with disabilities (Martin, 2005).

With the approval of federal grants to improve special education programs, the
U.S. Office of Education (USOE) formed the National Advisory Committee on
Handicapped Children (NACHC). The goal of the NACHC was to develop a definition
of LD that could be used for legislation and federal funding purposes (Bradley et al., 2002). The NACHC’s definition of LD stated,

> Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken and written language. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling, or arithmetic. They include conditions, which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do not include learning problems that are due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantage. (U. S. Office of Education, as cited in Hallahan & Mercer, 2002, p. 25)

With a formal definition of LD developed, P.L. 91-230 was passed in 1970, consolidating several federal grant programs related to the education of children with disabilities (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002). However, P.L. 91-230 still did not recognize LD as a formal category of disability requiring special education services. Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973, but it was not until P.L. 94-142 in 1975 that LD achieved official status as a category eligible for federal funding (Fletcher et al., 2007; Martin, 2005; Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Lyon, Gray, Kavanaugh, Krasnegor, 1993). In 1977, NACHC’s definition of LD was adopted as part of P.L. 94-142 (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002).

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was developed, and in conjunction with Section 504, provided strong support for students with LD (Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2002; Martin, 2005). Also in 1990, P.L. 94-142 was amended to
create the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990). IDEA was implemented to support the development of educational programs that spanned the continuum from early childhood interventions from birth to age five, to transition plans that supported the preparation of high school students for vocational success (U.S Department of Education, 2007). IDEA was amended in 1997 and again in 2004. Prior to the 2004 amendment to IDEA, Congress amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and renamed it the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Lipsky, 2005). The 2004 amendment served to align IDEA to the updates of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1973 (FERPA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The No Child Left Behind Act, which reauthorized the ESEA, incorporates the principles and strategies proposed by President Bush. These include increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools; greater choice for parents and students, particularly those attending low performing schools; more flexibility for States and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the use of Federal education dollars; and a stronger emphasis on reading, especially for our youngest children. (U.S. Department of Education, 2004)

The President’s strategy was divided into four pillars of accountability. Pillar One consisted of closing the achievement gap. NCLB was aimed at making sure all students achieve academic proficiency, even students with disabilities. Schools that do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP), an individual state’s measure of progress towards all students achieving a minimum level of proficiency in reading/language arts, and math (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), are required to take corrective action.
that may result in making changes in how the school is run. Pillar Two allows states and communities to exercise more flexibility in how they allocate federal education funds. Schools can now use up to fifty percent of their federal funding in areas such as hiring new teachers, teacher training, or increasing teacher pay without seeking separate approval from the government. Pillar Three places emphasis on emerging best practices that have demonstrated as effective through rigorous scientific research. Finally, Pillar Four focuses on parent choice, which provides parents of children in low-performing schools the right to transfer their children to better-performing schools or charter schools if the original school fails to meet state standards during two consecutive years. The expense of the transfer, including transportation is the responsibility of the original school. The same option is offered for students who attend persistently dangerous schools or are the victims of a violent crime (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Together, the combination of NCLB and IDEA (2004) has made an impact on the field of education. IDEA focuses on the individual needs of students and NCLB focuses primarily on the schools with accountability being the common thread that links both laws. Both NCLB and IDEA hold schools accountable for the progress of students with disabilities, making sure not only that the students achieve, but that they achieve to a high standard (U.S. Office of Education, 2008). Lipsky (2005) specifically points out some of the similarities between NCLB and IDEA 2004. Both Laws:

- emphasize access for all students to the general education curriculum;
- focus on outcomes – what students know and can demonstrate;
- require inclusion of all but a few students in general education assessments and reports. When students with disabilities are not included
in the regular assessment, they must be provided an opportunity for alternative assessments;

- express a strong preference – indeed presumption – for students with disabilities to be educated with their non-disabled peers;
- emphasize prevention (IDEA allows local districts to spend up to 15% of their federal funds on prevention);
- emphasize parental involvement and opportunities for choice;
- emphasize the importance of teacher (and para-professional) qualifications, especially in the subject matters being taught; and
- embrace standards based reform efforts (p. 157).

“Both laws share the goal of improving academic achievement through high expectations and high-quality education programs” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Figure 2.1 is a timeline that describes the changes in and developments in federal laws and definitions effecting LD.
Figure 2.1: Federal Laws, Outcomes and Definitions

Government involvement: Federal Laws

Outcomes and Definitions

46
Students with LD

Students who are identified with LD tend to possess a certain set of characteristics that make the acquisition and retention of knowledge difficult for them. This identification is often met with certain perceptions about how students will perform socially, emotionally, and academically. Students who are labeled LD make up approximately 50% of all students receiving special education services under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These preconceived notions or labels tend to have a life-long impact on a substantial number of students. Therefore, the identification and labeling of students with LD should not be taken lightly. This section will discuss the most common characteristics of students with LD as well as the positive and negative effects of the LD label. In addition, this section will also address the prevalence of students with LD.

Characteristics and Labeling

LD is one of 13 disabilities recognized by IDEA. In the past, students were classified as having LD based on the identification of a discrepancy between their academic achievement and their academic potential or ability (Fletcher et al., 2007; Bradley et al., 2002; Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2002; Kavale and Forness, 1995). The classification of LD is considered to be a mild disability for two reasons; (1) many of the characteristics of LD overlap with other groups of students; and (2) many of the students with LD can still be educated in the general education classroom (Henley et al., 2002). IDEA 2004 (I.A.602.30) states that LD is,

A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest
itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematic calculations. (U.S Department of Education, 2005)

For example, unexplained difficulties in education and an average IQ can be indicators of LD. However, the diagnosis of LD is rarely that simple and is often linked to one or more of the basic psychological functioning processes used in understanding or using spoken or written language. LD may also affect a person’s ability to think, listen, speak, read, write, or do mathematical calculations (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). As a result, the characteristics of students with LD are similar to the characteristics of students with other types of mild disabilities such as mild mental retardation or emotional disturbance.

Henley and colleagues (2002) grouped the general characteristics of students with mild disabilities into three categories, psychological characteristics, educational characteristics, and social characteristics. They noted that the combination of specific characteristics may vary from student to student, but the list is generally the same for students with LD, mild mental retardation, or behavior disorders. They identified the most common psychological, educational, and social characteristics of students with mild disabilities. Common psychological characteristics included the fact that a mild disability could remain undetected until beginning school years, and the cause is often difficult to detect. Students with mild disabilities usually do not differ in physical appearance from their general education peers and students with mild disabilities often suffer from a poor-self concept.

According to Henley and colleagues (2002), common educational characteristics included a lack of interests in schoolwork, a preference for concrete rather than abstract
lessons, weak listening skills, low achievement, and limited verbal or written skills. Students with mild disabilities also have a preference for right hemisphere learning activities, they respond better to active rather than passive learning activities, and have areas of talent that are overlooked by their teachers. They also prefer to receive help in the general education classroom and have a higher tendency to drop out of school than their general education peers. Students with mild disabilities tend to achieve in accordance with their teacher’s expectations, require adaptations to classroom instruction and are often distractible.

Henley and colleagues (2002) also noted the following social characteristics of students with mild disabilities. They said students with mild disabilities experience friction when interacting with others. They function better outside of school than in school. They need adult approval and have difficulties finding and maintaining employment after high school. Finally, students with mild disabilities tend to be stereotyped by others and may exhibit behavior problems.

In addition to identifying the characteristics of students with mild disabilities, Henley and colleagues (2002) also noted characteristics specific to students with LD which sometimes include hyperactivity, distractibility, disorganization, difficulty following directions, poor coordination, problems with short-term memory, perceptual problems, limited concentration, speech deficits, inadequate verbal skills, and/or frustration. Learned helplessness or apathy, decreased confidence, low motivation, attention problems, and maladaptive behaviors have also been considered potential characteristics of students with LD (McDermott, Goldberg, Watkins, Stanley, & Glutting, 2006). Any combination of the traits listed above can be found in students with mild
disabilities, and are often used to tailor educational programs to fit the specific needs of each student.

The LD label and the characteristics that are attached have both positive and negative implications for the educational experiences of a student with LD. Positively speaking, the LD label allows federal and local funding to be allocated for programming needs. “Labeling has led to the development of specialized teaching methods, assessment approaches, and behavioral interventions that are useful for teachers of all students” (Henley et al., 2002, p. 43). The label also allows professionals to communicate about students easily because the category conveys a general idea about a student’s learning patterns (Henley et al., 2002).

However, the LD label is not one to be taken lightly, as it has a lifelong impact on students that extends beyond the classroom setting (Gallego et al., 2006; Henley, et al. 2002; Roffman, 2000). The label potentially impacts the way students and their teachers perceive their ability and educational programs.

Once a child is categorized with mental retardation, behavioral disorders, or learning disabilities, that information will be forwarded to every new teacher in the child’s cumulative folder. Along with the label comes the stigma of being deficient (Henley et al., 2002, p. 35).

Once LD is diagnosed and the label is attached, certain expectations for the child’s performance occur. Teachers and administrators begin to make assumptions about achievement and behavior, sometimes exaggerating and overreacting to incidents that occur. According to Henley and colleagues (2002), “Studies on teacher expectations
have demonstrated that what teachers believe about student capability is directly related to student achievement” (p. 35).

Other disadvantages of the LD label include: (1) a clear message that the learning problem is within the student (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Hallahan and Mercer, 2002; Henley et al, 2002); (2) an emphasis on deficit (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Henley et al, 2002, Lipsky, 2005); and (3) students not being able to receive special education services until they are identified and labeled, thus focusing on the wait to fail approach rather than preventative interventions (Henley et al., 2002).

An interesting fact about the LD label is that it was not originally considered to be a stigmatizing label (Fletcher et al., 2007). Parents were more comfortable with the LD label because it did not imply low intelligence or behavioral problems, nor did it imply that they were at fault for their child’s laziness or lack of motivation in school (Fletcher et al., 2007; Henley et al., 2002). In fact, the LD label gave parents hope that with the right instructional techniques their child’s disability could be conquered (Fletcher et al., 2007).

**Prevalence**

Identifying the prevalence of students with LD is a difficult task due to the multiple factors that affect it (Bradley et al., 2002; Henley et al, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1995). Kavale & Forness (1995) defined prevalence as the total number of existing cases in a population at a given point in time. Factors such as differing criteria from state to state and misdiagnosis make it difficult to get an accurate account of the number of students in the LD population.

The federal definition of LD is broad stating that a child may be determined to have a learning disability if he or she does not achieve commensurately with his or her
age and ability when provided with appropriate learning experiences; or if a severe discrepancy is found between the student’s achievement and intellectual ability (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Currently, the federal government has not determined a specific set of criteria to address when the discrepancy between ability and achievement is severe enough to identify a student as LD. As a result, this lack of criteria has allowed individual states to set their own standard for what constitutes a severe discrepancy.

Henley and colleagues (2002) wrote, “The more stringent the criteria [for determining a discrepancy], the fewer students with LD are identified. Therefore, a student determined eligible for services in one school district or state might not meet the requirements in another” (p. 150). For example, in the state of Georgia, less than 3% of students are eligible for special education services under the LD label, while 7% of the students in Rhode Island qualify (Bradley et al., 2002).

The vagueness of the federal definition promotes the discrepancy between states regarding criteria, as well as the possible misdiagnosis of students with LD. One instance of misdiagnosis includes over identifying underachieving students as students with LD. This misdiagnosis raises the question: Do the vast majority of students identified with LD truly have a disability, or are they simply identified as a way to treat underachievement (Bradley et al., 2002; Dreshler, 2002; Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, Lipsky, & Roberts, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1995)? Henley (2002) stated,

In a relatively brief period of time, the field of learning disabilities has emerged as a major explanation for underachievement in school. Unless school systems become more adept at varying instruction to meet individual needs and the different learning styles in the regular classroom, students identified with learning
disabilities will continue to fill special education classrooms. These students will overtax special education resources and make it difficult to provide adequate services to students with more severe disabilities. (p. 138)

In addition, researchers have noted that the preference of the LD label over other labels such as mental retardation and behavior disorders, has contributed to the number of students labeled with LD (Bradley et al., 2002; Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Henley, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1995). Kavale and Forness (1995) wrote, LD covers not only students experiencing academic difficulties, but also those who have an overlay of lowered intellectual ability or behavior disorders. LD’s ill-defined boundaries make it quite simple for a recombination of quantitative data to qualify a student for LD services. These are students who have been classified as LD because of their obvious need for special education and their abandonment by the MR and BD fields. The LD category, thus, becomes a catch-all classification. The perception that LD is a ‘better,’ less stigmatizing classification compounds this further (p. 10).

Despite the reasons why students are being identified with LD, the fact remains that the LD category is the largest and fastest growing category in special education (Henley et al., 2002; Kavale & Forness, 1995). According to the Twenty-Fifth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), approximately 50% of all students receiving special education services under IDEA are students with LD; a number that has been increasing over the past ten years. Approximately 96% of students with disabilities are being educated in the general education school building with almost half being educated
in general education classrooms. The proportion of high school students being educated at their typical grade level for their age has increased from 32% in 1987 to 53% in 2001 (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2005).

These statistics reflect the number of students who have been identified (regardless of the reason) with LD. These statistics do not represent the number of children or adults who have LD but have never been formally identified. “Many children and adults remain undiagnosed and go through life with this ‘hidden disability’” (Henley et al., 2002, p. 151). Recognition of the unidentified population further contributes to the difficulty in determining the prevalence of students with LD.

Identification and Placement

Identifying students with LD has changed over the last few years due to the implementation of IDEA (2004). IDEA suggests that in addition to using the discrepancy model as a way of identifying students with LD, that schools may also consider a child’s lack of progress to meet state approved grade-level standards in one or more areas when using a process based on the child’s response to scientific, evidenced-based interventions as a way of determining LD (IDEA 2004; 34 CFR 300.309). Response to Intervention (RtI) is one way of determining if a child is not making sufficient progress to meet grade-level standards. This section will discuss the methods used for identifying students with LD as well as the placements where students may receive their specially designed instruction. An emphasis will be placed on inclusive models. The section will conclude with a discussion on transition services and the impact transition plans have on students’ development of self-determination and postsecondary goals.
Discrepancy Model and RtI

The discrepancy model has been identified as the traditional and most widely used method for identifying students with LD (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Henley et al., 2002; Kavale, Holdnack, & Mostert, 2005; Ofiesh, 2006). The discrepancy model or formula, emerged from the 1977 Federal definition of LD which stated, a multidisciplinary team may determine that a child has LD if the child does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability levels or shows a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the areas; oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, and mathematics problem solving, when provided with learning experiences appropriate for the child’s age and ability level. The team may not identify a child as having a specific learning disability if the severe discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of; a visual, hearing, or motor handicap, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (U.S. Office of Education, as cited in Henley et al., 2002).

The discrepancy formula, which focuses on the gap between a student’s academic achievement and intellectual functioning, has been widely accepted as a way of determining LD because both intelligence and achievement can be measured by testing (Henley et al., 2002). However, during the past decade, the discrepancy model has been criticized for several reasons. First, the use of the discrepancy model has been blamed for the over-identification of students with LD. Henley et al. (2002) wrote,

Too many referrals to special education programs are a major problem that has evolved from the discrepancy notion. Many students are under grade level. If
teachers take ‘below grade level’ to mean that students need special education referrals are quick to follow. (p. 149)

Second, the criteria for eligibility using the discrepancy model varies from state to state making it difficult to determine which students truly have a processing problem and which students are slow or under achieving learners (Kavale et al., 2005). Finally, the discrepancy model insinuates that LD is an intrinsic deficit that exists within the child rather than a result of the child’s environment (Harry & Klingner, 2007).

In theory, the discrepancy model seems to be a reasonable way to screen students for LD. However, the ambiguity of the process as well as the stigma that is attached to the LD label has negative effects on the students who are identified. Use of the discrepancy model has contributed to the over identification of students with LD, but it has also prevented some students from receiving appropriate interventions because a discrepancy between the student’s achievement and intellectual ability was not evident (Henley et al., 2002). Using the discrepancy model, students cannot receive the academic support services that they need until they are formally diagnosed with LD. Harry and Klingner (2007) stated that, “Students shouldn’t need a false disability label to receive appropriate support. They also shouldn’t acquire that label because they had inappropriate or inadequate opportunities to learn” (p. 18).

The reauthorization of IDEA 2004 addresses the concern of unnecessary labeling, and allows for a change in the use of the discrepancy model as a way of identifying students with LD. “The law now recommends tiered interventions by which schools can screen students for early signs of difficulty and provide more intensive and individualized instruction in needed areas without applying a special education label” (Harry &
Klingner, 2007, p. 20). This tiered intervention approach, known as RtI, is “…proposed not only as a method to influence and inform scientifically based instruction but also as a [key] part of the identification process for identifying students who have a specific learning disability” (Ofiesh, 2006, p. 884).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, OSEP (2006), IDEA regulations identify the criteria adopted by a state to determine if a child has a learning disability as defined in section 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10). The regulations state that the discrepancy model is no longer required as a means of determining whether a child has LD, and permits the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention or any other alternative research-based procedure for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability (IDEA, 2004; [34 CFR 300.307] [20 U.S.C. 1221e-3; 1401(30); 1414(b)96]). The regulations suggest the use of scientific, research-based interventions as a way to determine that underachievement in a child suspected of having LD is not due to a lack of appropriate instruction in reading or math (IDEA, 2004; [34 CRF 300. 304 through 300.306]).

The RtI model is a multi-tiered process that monitors students’ responses to high quality instruction and academic interventions. Harry and Klingner (2007) describe RtI as a three-tiered process. The first tier involves quality instruction and on-going monitoring within the general education classroom. In the second tier, schools provide intensive intervention support for students who have not met expected benchmarks. In the final tier, students who do not respond to second-tier-interventions are evaluated for possible placement in special education. (p. 21)
The RtI process allows teachers to monitor all students who may not be making adequate progress, not just students who are identified with LD. It also allows students with and without disabilities the opportunity to receive the specialized instruction that they need to be successful in the general education classroom. However, it can be used to produce the necessary evidence to diagnose LD and qualify a student for special education services if necessary.

Ofiesh (2006) suggests that RtI should be used in combination with the discrepancy model when identifying LD and argues that neither model should be used as the sole criteria for diagnosing LD.

Clearly, the field has been in need of a better way to qualify children for services under the category of LD; however, just as with RtI models, nothing in the regulations ever suggested that the discrepancy between ability and achievement was to be the sole determinant in the identification of an SLD. The discrepancy simply addresses one way of operationalizing one part of the construct. It was never intended to define the entire construct of SLD or to be used as the sole criteria for placement decisions. (2006, p. 885)

**Inclusion and Least Restrictive Environment**

As with all previous special education laws, IDEA (2004), mandates that all students with disabilities must receive academic accommodations and specially designed instruction in their least restrictive environment (LRE), which includes all students with LD. LRE is determined on an individual basis to ensure that the student’s specific needs are met within the general education curriculum with students without disabilities to the greatest extent possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Although a continuum of
placement options is available, students with LD are usually educated in one of two places: in either the general education classroom with accommodations and support services or in special education resource rooms (Salend & Duhaney, 1999).

The implementation of IDEA has had an impact on where students receive their special education services. Zero reject and free and appropriate public education (FAPE) are two assurances rooted in IDEA that have made a significant impact on public education (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, and Williams, 2000). Zero reject means no student can be excluded from public education because of the severity of his or her disability, and FAPE means that every student who qualifies for special education services is entitled to receive appropriate services at no cost.

These concepts mandate that students are provided with access to the general education curriculum in environments as close to their general education peers as appropriate. When students are educated in the general education classrooms alongside their peers without disabilities, it is known as inclusion. Inclusive environments imply that students, regardless of ability or disability, feel a sense of belonging, are accepted, are supported, and have their educational needs met by all members of the educational community (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). Walther-Thomas and colleagues stress that inclusion does not mean that all students study the same curriculum, but it does mean that all students learn together with curricular adjustments made to meet individual needs.

Participation in the LRE and curricular adjustments vary from student to student, which means inclusive practices vary as well. Collaborative consultation is one way to provide special education services in an inclusive environment. Collaborative consultation originated in the 1960’s from the concept that students with disabilities
could be educated in general education classes under a full continuum of services which included specialized services from three major areas of consultation including: mental-health consultations, process consultations, and behavioral consultations (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000).

Today, collaborative consultation is recognized as a process where individuals with various backgrounds and expertise come together in an effort to solve problems and design plans to provide appropriate programs that are in the best educational interests of the student involved (Kampwirth, 2006; Walther-Thomas et al, 2000). Kampwirth (2006) and Walther-Thomas and colleagues (2000) agree that collaborative relationships are non-hierarchical in nature. They are based on mutual respect and support and a willingness to share information, responsibility, and resources.

The process of collaborative consultation encompasses three salient points that have been identified as foundational concepts for this research study. Resiliency, discrepancy, and transition are all addressed in the implementation of collaborative consultation. First, collaboration in inclusive schools promotes resiliency. According to Walther-Thomas and colleagues (2000), collaboration builds caring genuine relationships and a sense of belonging for all students; two essential characteristics needed for the development of resiliency (Werner & Smith, 1992). Collaboration encourages positive relationships, belonging, and resiliency by (1) cultivating caring and supportive relationships among students, (2) setting high expectations for student cooperation, peer support, and personal responsibility, (3) creating on-going opportunities for students to become capable, skilled individuals, (4) teaching students fundamental communication skills, (5) teaching skills such as making and keeping friends, working together, problem-
solving, and resolving conflict, and finally through (6) teaching, modeling, practicing, and reinforcing interpersonal skills (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). These skills are in alignment with Werner & Smith’s (1982, 1992) characteristics of resilient individuals.

Second, collaboration serves as a possible alternative to using the discrepancy model as a way of identifying students with LD. “The goal of collaborative consultation is to dramatically change the refer-test-place process” (Kampwirth, 2006, p. 18). The process that Kampwirth refers to is the traditional method of identifying students with LD, which focuses on student deficiencies. Through collaboration, students’ academic needs can be met by supporting the classroom teacher, keeping students who are having academic difficulties in the general education classroom longer, potentially diminishing the need to assign unnecessary labels (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). In some cases, the goal of collaborative consultation is to forestall placements outside the general education track as often as possible and to increase both special and general educator’s ability and willingness to accommodate to the needs of at-risk students through jointly designed interventions. In this way the practice of collaborative consultation may serve to enhance the probability of there one day being one system of education for all students instead of the two-tiered system that has prevailed for so long. (Kampwirth, 2006, p. 18)

Finally, collaborative consultation helps to address student transition into adulthood. Walther-Thomas and colleagues (2000), talk about the fact that students in special education often remain at home, socially and emotionally dependent on their families long after their typical peers. They attribute this dependence to few or poor relationships. By encouraging the skills that build relationships and resiliency,
collaborative consultation could possibly eliminate the unsatisfactory transition skills that students in special education often possess.

Transition

In 1990, IDEA replaced P.L. 94-142 and mandated that transition services were written into IEP’s (Henley et al., 2002). Transition services are a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child to facilitate movement between natural transition points (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Natural transition points include the periods of transition between preschool to elementary grades, elementary grades to middle school grades, middle school grades to secondary school, and between secondary school to post-secondary activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). For the purpose of this research study, the emphasis is placed on students’ transition from secondary school to post-secondary activities.

By the age of 16, or earlier as determined by the IEP team, a statement of transition needs is a required component of the IEP. These components include addressing instruction, employment, community, and post-school adult living services (IDEA, 2004). By age 16, transition services must be embedded within the IEP and must consist of a coordinated set of activities that also include interagency responsibilities if necessary (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Madaus and Shaw, 2006). These activities are designed to help students reach their post-secondary goals and must take into consideration the student’s strengths, preferences, and interests. The activities may consist of instruction, community experiences, the development of employment or other post-school adult living objectives, and if appropriate, the acquisition of daily living
skills. Like IEPs, transition plans require an annual review and at the secondary level students are required to be involved in the decision-making/planning process (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

For students who are planning to attend college, transition plans might consist of a coordinated set of activities that include the traditional academic coursework that is scheduled, the improvement of study skills and test-taking strategies, and the exploration of colleges and the academic services that are offered at each institution (Henley et al., 2002; Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). For students who are entering the work force, coordinated services might include the vocational technical coursework that is scheduled, and the development of job related skills such as seeking employment opportunities, completing job applications, and developing interview skills (Henley et al., 2002). Punctuality, dependability, and getting along with others are additional skills that may be addressed in either plan.

Through the identification of student strengths, preferences, and interests, transition plans could be used as vehicles to develop self-determination and resiliency in students with LD. Transition plans are designed to assist students as they transition from one phase of their lives to another, helping them to set clear, realistic goals for their future. They have the potential to help students build self-confidence and self-esteem as they successfully move into young adulthood. However, not all schools give the transition process the time and attention that it deserves. Trainor (2007) addressed this in her article, *Perceptions of Adolescent Girls with LD Regarding Self-Determination and Postsecondary Transition Planning*. 

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Trainor (2007) interviewed seven racially/ethnically diverse adolescent girls who were at least 16 years of age or older. One of the issues she focused on in her study was the involvement of adolescents in the transition planning process. Her findings indicated that although some attempt was made at transition planning, she found that “Participants were generally unfamiliar with the formal transition process” (p. 38). She also noted that there was a consistent lack of discussion with school personnel regarding postsecondary plans. “Participants’ comments revealed a lack of vocational, education, career development, and postsecondary educational opportunities” (p. 39). She found that transition planning and instruction consistently failed to meet the needs of the girls in her study. The lack of attention to the transition process denied the girls the support and attention that they deserved at a critical transition point in their lives.

In theory, the transition planning process is a logical way to facilitate the shift from secondary education to post-secondary schools or careers. However, researchers have criticized and demonstrated, like Trainor (2007) did, that transition planning is not receiving the time and effort that it deserves. In their article, *The Impact of the IDEA 2004 on Transition to College for Students with Learning Disabilities*, (2006) Madaus and Shaw wrote, “there appears to be a lack of focus on students with disabilities who want to attend postsecondary education” (p. 279). They quote Hitchens et al. (2005, p. 3) stating, “transition planning is taking a backseat to the priority of ensuring student success on standardized tests” (p. 279). Walther-Thomas et al. (2000) also expressed concern for the transition process, indicating that despite years of special education services and attention to transition, students with LD are still exiting high school unprepared for their post-high school experiences. With IDEA in place, the framework
for transition planning exists, but researchers and educators alike need to continue to emphasize the importance of transition services for building successful, resilient young adults.

**Student Experiences**

For the purposes of this research study, student experiences are broken into three categories; risk factors, protective factors, and proximal and distal developmental influences. Student experiences fall into one of two categories; they are labeled as either risk factors or protective factors and may be viewed differently by different students. For example, one student may consider involvement in the special education program as a risk factor due to the negative connotation associated with the LD label; while another student may feel involvement in the special education program was a protective factor due to the specialized instruction and individualized attention that was offered.

In addition, experiences also differ depending on when they occur in a person’s life. Distal developmental influences are past experiences that shape students’ perceptions and attitudes; and proximal influences are recent or current experiences that influence students’ choices. Both have an impact on the decision making process. Each of the three sections will consist of a brief discussion of each term along with an example of the current literature that showcases each concept.

**Risk Factors**

Risk factors are biological or psychosocial hazards that threaten normal development and increase the likelihood of a negative outcome such as the development of an emotional or behavioral disorder (Cosden, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1992). Biological risk factors include physical or intellectual handicaps, which require long-term
specialized medical, educational, or custodial care (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Psychosocial risk factors include poverty, severe marital discord, low social status, overcrowding or large family size, paternal criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, and admission of the child into the community (Segal, 1988).

Identified as an adverse condition that predisposes an individual to risk due to the individual’s academic difficulties or failures and distorted perceptions and interactions with the world (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005), LD is a biological risk factor that predisposes the students who are identified to a unique set of psychosocial or environmental risks. Psychosocial risk factors for students with LD include: increased anxiety, depression and suicide, reduced social competence, and behavior problems (Sorenson et al., 2005; Henley et al, 2002). Further risk factors for students with LD include lower expectations for achievement, poorly designed and implemented programming (Henley et al., 2002), and societal negativity regarding the LD label (Hehir, 2007).

In his work, *Confronting Ableism*, Hehir (2007) uses the term “abelism” to describe society’s negative attitude toward disabilities. He wrote, “negative cultural attitudes toward disability can undermine opportunity for all students to participate fully in school and society” (p. 2). He illustrated his point using examples of students with disabilities who were described as confident and curious as they entered school, but lost their confidence and curiosity as they were subjected to a world that was “unwelcoming and inaccessible for people with disabilities” (p. 2). He emphasized the tragedy in excluding students due to disability and indicated that when students are identified with a
disability it is often viewed as something that needs “overcoming” rather than an acceptable fact of the student’s existence.

Hehir (2007) quoted Bilken (1992) when he identified the purpose of special education as “minimizing the impact of disability and maximizing the opportunities for students to participate in schooling and the community” (p. 3). Through this lens, special education can be viewed as a protective factor rather than a risk. “The purpose of special education programs is not to “cure” the disability, but rather to provide students with the supports, skills, and opportunities needed to live as full a life as possible with their disability” (Bilken, as cited in Hehir, 2007, p.3). This framework assumed that students with disabilities would be educated within the general education curriculum with their general education peers to the fullest extent possible. Hehir continued by identifying students with LD as a large and growing school population that is equally subjected to attitudes of ableism. He specifically referred to inappropriate instruction that exacerbated student disabilities, thus identifying the special education program as a risk factor rather than a protection.

Hehir’s work (2007) concluded with seven guidelines for special education decision-making that confronted ableism and minimizing the impact of student disabilities. First, he suggested that people recognize that diagnosis is important. Identifying that a student has a problem reading is one thing, but recognizing that the problem is due to mental retardation, dyslexia, or attention difficulties, sheds a different light on the intervention and methods of instruction used with each student. Consideration of family capacity and desires was his second guideline. Family desires are important, as the parents should be an equal contributor to the educational program of
a student with a disability. In alignment with the family’s desires, Hehir’s third guideline suggested that students with disabilities should be involved in educational decisions whenever possible. Fourth and fifth, students should be encouraged to develop and use skills and modes of expression that are most effective for them and integration into the general education environment should be a priority. Finally, Hehir’s last two suggestions consisted of promoting high standards, and employing concepts of universal design. Promoting high standards requires early intervention for students experiencing academic or behavioral difficulties in the general education curriculum whenever possible.

With the recent trend in special education moving towards inclusion, Hehir’s (2007) guideline for promoting high standards made his work timely. However, it is his suggestion of developing a universal design for school curriculum that makes it unique. A universal design for a multi-media curriculum would enable all students to gain access to information regardless of disability, thus transforming ableism from a potential risk factor to a possible protective factor.

Protective Factors

Protective factors, as defined by Werner and Smith (1992), are evident only in combination with risk factors. They modify a person’s reaction to a situation that in ordinary circumstances leads to maladaptive outcomes. Protective factors are directly linked to student resiliency and are identified through desirable characteristics found in students, classrooms, and schools. The works of Garmezy and Rutter (1988) and Werner and Smith (1982, 1992) identified certain characteristics within the students that acted as protective factors. According to Werner and Smith (1982), resilient students (1) displayed temperamental characteristics that elicited positive responses from caregivers;
(2) possessed special skills or talents and had the motivation to use whatever abilities they had; (3) had realistic education and vocational plans; (4) had regular responsibilities as children and adolescents; and (5) had mothers who nurtured self-esteem by providing a sense of security through well-defined rules and structure within the home. In addition to the students’ characteristics, opportunities at major life transitions were also identified as a protective factor.

Garmezy and Rutter’s (1988) work also identified individual temperament and family context (e.g., the presence of a caring adult) or the presence of external support such as a teacher or school as possible protective factors. Cosden’s (2001) work added school and work environments to the list. She wrote,

Although the severity of one’s disability is an internal risk factor, school and work environments can be protective to the extent that they help the individual identify their strengths and create experiences in which he or she can achieve success. Thus, the risk associated with having a more severe disability could be addressed by developing programs that allow individuals with LD to obtain successful educational and work experience. (p. 355)

The notion of school and work environments acting as protective factors was discussed in the work of Morrison and Allen (2007), *Promoting Student Resilience in School Contexts*. Their work also recognized the school as a protective factor that promoted resiliency. The purpose of their article was to provide a variety of specific actions that could be executed daily by educators to reduce risk through the development of resiliency. According to Morrison and Allen, protective environments provided developmental opportunities through emotional, motivational, and strategic supports.
Characteristics of protective environments included: fostering caring relationships, holding high expectations for student achievement, and providing students with opportunities to participate and contribute to the school environment. In addition, Morrison and Allen also noted that protective environments increased student bonding with pro-social individuals, they set clear and consistent boundaries, and taught life skills such as cooperation, healthy conflict resolution, resistance and assertiveness skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and healthy stress management skills. Their work suggested “protective possibilities” for the classroom, peer context within the classroom, school-wide context, and family context.

In the classroom, the teacher can capitalize on protective possibilities by building self-confidence among students, becoming more engaged and invested in students’ learning, helping to develop autonomy and independence in students, and emphasizing learner centered practices by tailoring instruction, using experiential learning, and emphasizing individual choice. Regarding peer contexts, Morrison and Allen (2007) suggested that a positive classroom environment could provide a number of protective possibilities. They wrote, “Students can develop social skills, respect for individual differences, and teamwork when they work in cooperative groups on academic activities that are structured with mutual goals and equal status participation for all members of the group” (p. 165). Students were able to build and improve their self-concept when they shared their strengths and talents with their classmates and when they were permitted to make decisions that affected the entire class.

Protective factors were not limited to the classroom. They could be developed at the building level and within the family as well. School-wide activities offered the same
benefit as classroom activities and had the added impact of bringing students together. School-wide interventions enhanced student adjustment and social skills as well as provided a vehicle for positive behaviors. Within the family context, protective factors could be promoted through a close partnership between the school and the family. Morrison and Allen (2007) stated that parents could also play a key role in developing student resilience and suggested that educators target family resilience. They described targeting family resiliency through interactions between the school and family that (1) reinforced or developed the family’s orientation toward the importance of school, (2) emphasized family communication around the tasks and expectations of being a student, and (3) developed a collective sense of the family’s purpose and meaningful participation in the process of schooling.

Another way to encourage protective factors was to engage the entire school community in change. Morrison and Allen (2007) suggested that schools focus on positive issues other than academic achievement characterized by test scores. They recommended school personnel enhance protective possibilities by developing autonomy, a sense of purpose, social competence, problem solving, and achievement motivation among all school professionals. Autonomy included encouraging administrators to involve staff in decision making and allowing them to voice their concerns. A sense of purpose meant educating school leaders about environmental resiliency and ways to think about students’ strengths. Social competence was achieved through mentoring programs where new teachers were teamed with veteran teachers to encourage professional development. Problem solving could be achieved through setting up relationships between teachers, and teachers and administrators where activities were created to
encourage collaboration. With these activities in place, student resilience could be promoted at various levels within the school environment. Morrison and Allen (2007) wrote,

There are protective possibilities or opportunities to reduce risk and enhance resilience. These opportunities occur in the classrooms, in relationships with peers, on a school-wide level, and in partnership with families. While formal prevention and intervention programs provide a valuable scaffold for the development and reinforcement of resilience building skills, individual educators play a powerful role simply through their day-to-day interactions with students. (p. 168)

Student resilience could be encouraged through positive, protective environments in school context, but it could also be promoted through individual interactions with students. Interviewing students, having an open, honest dialogue with them about their strengths and weaknesses, and identifying what they do well, could help students to identify various protective factors that promote an attitude of resilience.

Using the appreciative inquiry method, the work of Ryan, Margot, Smither, Sullivan, & Vanbuskirk (1999), Appreciative Inquiry: Using Personal Narrative for Initiating School Reform, could be adapted to address the identification of student protective factors. In this study, appreciative inquiry was used to promote school reform under the premise that an organization could understand and deal with problems easier if it could first identify and appreciate what it does best, in other words de-emphasizing its short-comings (Ryan et al., 1999).
Ryan and colleagues (1999) describe appreciative inquiry as an ethnographic method of interviewing. Not only was the appreciative inquiry method good for initiating school reform, but the process also reconnected teachers and administrators to their passion for teaching. The process helped to foster the positive bonds that students had with peers and teachers and helped them to reconnect to education. The appreciative inquiry method counteracted the negativity that often surrounded the organization and “de-energized” the staff. Appreciative inquiry focused on what the school was doing well and what it wanted to do more of, instead of what it was doing wrong.

Adapted to address the needs of students with LD, the appreciative inquiry model could be used as a way to promote resiliency in students by focusing on what they are doing well, focusing on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. It could be used to help students who generally do not experience much school success recognize the things that they do well. It could be used to place a positive spin on student behavior to counteract the negativity that often “de-energizes” the students and help them to make the positive connections they need for school success, thus focusing on the protective factors that they may experience.

Ryan and colleagues (1999) stated that the appreciative inquiry method was both affective and analytical, and it helped to provide a deeper understanding of the organization’s mission and goals. If used on an individual level, the appreciative inquiry method has the potential to help students develop a deeper understanding of their goals; possibly helping them to set attainable goals and develop a personal mission statement which Werner and Smith (1982) describe as a protective factor.

Proximal and Distal Developmental Influences
Proximal and distal developmental influences are part of the developmental adaptation model, which attempts to integrate personal history and individual development through proximal and distal developmental influences (Martin & Martin, 2001). Proximal developmental influences are recent experiences or resources in the lives of individuals (Margalit, 2003; Martin & Martin, 2001). Examples of recent experiences or current life events for adolescents or young adults include success or failure in school or social support provided by a peer (Margalit, 2003). Distal developmental influences are “experiences that reach farther into the personal history of individuals. Most obviously, these would be salient childhood or adolescent experiences, such as the loss of a parent early in life or success in school” (Martin & Martin, 2001, p. 79). Proximal and distal events are relative to the individual’s current age and developmental stage. For instance, job related experiences and events related to marriage might be considered proximal influences for individuals in early adulthood, however, the same events would be considered distal events for older individuals in midlife.

Martin and Martin’s (2001) work, Proximal and Distal Influences on Development: The Model of Developmental Adaptation, discussed the need to include information regarding proximal and distal developmental influences in light of three models of adaptation. Each of the three approaches emphasized an area of development from how individuals reacted to the loss and gain of physical and cognitive functioning (the selective optimization with compensation approach), to successful aging as determined by an individual’s physical condition and well-being (the successful aging approach), to how individuals adapted to stress across their lifespan (the stress and coping approach). Martin and Martin cited multiple researchers, Baltes and Baltes (1990), Rowe
& Kahn (1997), and Pearlin & Skaff (1996), who each indicated the need to improve the effectiveness of the three developmental approaches through consideration of distal influences. In reference to Pearlin and Skaff (1996), Martin and Martin wrote,

Their timely call for more integration underlies the fact that so very few study designs in adult development include important personal history data, describing aspects from earlier phases of life that continue to exert important influences. Developmental models need to consider that experiences from the distal past can continue to influence resources and adaptation in later life. In addition, distal events can also influence proximal life experiences. (2001, p. 80)

Martin and Martin believed that the integration of proximal and distal influences provides a more comprehensive view of an individual’s development, and proposed that their model of developmental adaptation was one that “relates past experiences to current experiences and outcomes; emphasizing the need to assess important mediators between distal influences, proximal influences, and developmental outcomes” (2001, p. 82).

Martin and Martin (2002) identified the first component of their model, distal influences, as adverse childhood events such as the loss of or separation from a parent, sexual or physical abuse, parental divorce, and school failure. They went on to discuss that the mere occurrence of an event is not what makes it an adversity, but rather the individual’s perception of the event that determines whether it had an impact on development. Individual perceptions included whether the event was viewed as negative or positive, challenging or threatening, and/or controllable or not controllable. Their suggestions for including adverse childhood events into studies of development and outcome consisted of four areas: (1) assess whether the events actually occurred, (2)
determine the intensity of the events, (3) determine how the events were perceived, and (4) determine whether the cumulative effects of more than one event had an impact on resources and developmental outcomes.

Their discussion of proximal events, the second component of their model, was not as concise as their discussion of distal events. Rather, they emphasized proximal events in terms of distal influences indicating that distal influences could directly impact proximal events, making it difficult to determine the individual effects of each on development. Referencing Wheaton’s 1996 document, Martin and Martin (2001) wrote, Recent life events are directly influenced by childhood traumas and earlier adult life events. High levels of stress in childhood would alter the chances of successful performance in key social roles affecting educational attainment, career opportunities, and marriage, which in turn increases the probability of stress exposure during life course. What needs to be more considered is the fit between distal and proximal events. The closer the match, the more influential the past may continue to be. If the match is strong, as in the case of events in the same domain, then proximal events may mediate the lasting effect of the past. If the match is weak, then distal events may remain influential through personal and social resources. (p. 84)

The third component involved individual and social resources such as personality traits and cognitive competence, social support systems, and social networks. Individual and social resources should be seen a factors that facilitate coping skills (Pierce, Lakely, Sarason, & Sarason as cited in Martin & Martin, 2001, p. 85). The fourth component involved aspects of coping, which included individual reactions to current or recent
experiences. And finally, the fifth component identified the individual’s well-being as the developmental outcome. “It is the criterion reflecting a short- or long-term impact of experiences from the recent or the distant past. Developmental outcome typically includes mental and physical health as well as subjective well-being and competence” (Martin & Martin, 2001, p. 86). Although developmental outcomes focus on various aspects of health, well-being, and family opportunities, Martin and Martin suggested that a developmental approach should attempt to assess change over time as a result of proximal and distal developmental events. They suggested that developmental approaches highlight aspects of personal growth, individual strengths, autonomy, levels of achievement, positive self-regard, and self-determination.

Martin and Martin (2001) described development as the “processes of adaptation that are dependent on the interplay between present circumstances, as well as past resources and experiences” (p. 87), and believed that their model of developmental adaptation had several advantages because it could be implemented and tested easily. Distal events could be assessed either prospectively or retrospectively through event history calendars. Proximal events and individual and social resources could be identified through various coping instruments found in the standard stress literature, and developmental outcomes were measurable through health, mental health, and subjective well-being variables. Their model could address developmental influences across a person’s lifespan and leave room to predict the long-term impact of proximal and distal events.

Finally, Martin and Martin (2001) identified four trajectories to assist in making predictions regarding the long-term impact of distal developmental events. First, they
defined a trajectory as “the stable component of a direction toward a life destination” (Wheaton & Gotlib, as cited in Martin & Martin, 2001, p. 88), and indicated that the trajectories described how individuals developed through integrating their current experiences with their past. They also noted that their propositions (trajectories) could work for both positive and negative distal experiences. In summary, their four trajectories indicated how developmental outcomes were influenced directly by distal life experiences, stating that adverse childhood events had a negative impact on developmental outcomes by diminishing and weakening coping behaviors.

Martin and Martin (2001) continued by proposing, “if distal events have lasting effects, then these effects should be first noticeable in young adulthood” (p. 90).

In her work, *Resilience Model Among Individuals with Learning Disabilities: Proximal and Distal Influences*, Margalit (2003) agreed with Martin and Martin and discussed the link between personal life histories (distal influences) and the study of resilience and adaptation. She talked about three waves of resiliency research, emphasizing the third wave as the future of resiliency research. The first wave of research, the phenomenological wave, focused on identifying resilient children. Research during this time highlighted individual and family characteristics of resilient children trying to determine which children would thrive in the face of adversity. The second wave of research, the wave of protective factors, attempted to identify how resilient qualities were acquired through developmental stages. This wave of research focused on the risk and protective factors that contributed to positive outcomes and presented resiliency in a linear model as individuals passed through various developmental stages. The third wave, the conceptual wave of research, emphasized individual’s feelings of
control and responses to success and failure. The conceptual wave is considered the post-modern wave and presented the theory of resilience in a non-linear construct highlighting the importance of individual experiences and distal developmental influences, rather than developmental stages.

As identified by Margalit, this third wave of research, the post-modern, conceptual wave, which addressed proximal and distal developmental influences, is the foundation for this study on resilience. Therefore, Margalit’s work will be revisited later in this chapter in a discussion of how her work directly relates to the study of resilience in students with LD.

**Resiliency**

The following section discusses resiliency in terms of its definition and how it can be developed in students with LD. The section continues with several research studies that have been completed using the risk/resiliency model and a synthesis of their findings. Finally, the section concludes with a discussion of the current literature that directly impacted the development of this research study.

**Definition**

There is no universal definition of resilience (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005), however, most definitions include ideas on coping and emphasize adaptation to stressful life events (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Gardynik & McDonald, 2005; Werner & Smith, 1992). Brooks and Goldstein (2001) provided a thorough definition and explanation of resiliency as both a term and a concept. They defined resiliency as the capacity to cope and feel competent, and continued with a detailed explanation of the term. They wrote,
Resilience embraces the ability of a child to deal more effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to bounce back from disappointments, adversities, and trauma, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to relate comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect.

(Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, p.1)

As a concept, Brooks and Goldstein defined resilience as a powerful force. “Resilience explains why some children overcome overwhelming obstacles, sometimes clawing and scrapping their way to successful adulthood, while others become victims of their early experiences and environments” (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001, p. 1). In addition to their definition of resilience, they identified qualities of resilience, which helped to paint a clear picture of what resiliency is and how it could be manifested within individuals. According to Brooks and Goldstein (2001), qualities of resilience included, “empathy, hope, optimism, problem-solving ability, reflection, coping ability, ease in interpersonal situations, self-worth, appropriate risk taking, and a sense of control or ownership over one’s life” (p. 38).

Brooks and Goldstein (2001) described resiliency, as a process of parenting that is essential if children are to be prepared for success in all areas of their lives. Parents were the targeted audience for their book, Raising Resilient Children (2001). However, many of their theories were applicable to the field of education. In fact, Brooks and Goldstein had a section in their book dedicated to how teachers could use their eight guidelines to develop resilient children within the school context. Those adapted guidelines included: practicing empathy, changing negative scripts, helping all students feel welcomed and appreciated, develop realistic expectations for each child and make accommodations.
when necessary, discuss the role of mistakes in the learning process, develop
responsibility and compassion, teach students how to solve problems and make decisions,
and use discipline to promote self-discipline. Each guideline was explained in depth and
teachers and students were used to illustrate each point.

Since teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors, like parents, have a
significant amount of influence over the development of children and adolescents,
resiliency could be taught through identifying and exploring various experiences in the
child’s or adolescent’s life. Brooks and Goldstein (2001) believed that the guiding
purpose in all interaction with children should be to strengthen their ability to be resilient
and to meet life’s challenges with thoughtfulness, confidence, purpose, and empathy.
Whether a parent or an educator, the everyday experiences in a child’s life provide
countless opportunities to teach resiliency:

Each interaction with our children provides an educational opportunity to help
them weave a strong and resilient personal fabric. While the outcome of a
specific issue may be important, even more vital are the lessons learned from the
process of dealing with each issue or problem. The knowledge gained provides
the nutrients from which the seeds of resiliency will develop and flourish (Brooks
& Goldstein, 2001, p 4).

Brooks and Goldstein (2001) viewed resiliency as a mind set. Children with a
resilient mindset possessed high self-esteem, a sense of control over their lives, and
believed that they were the masters of their own destiny. Experiencing some of the joy
and excitement that comes from success in a particular area was an essential element for
developing a resilient mindset. However, success is only one way a child can develop
resiliency. Resiliency is developed through the way a child chooses to respond to their mistakes or failures:

When youngsters view mistakes as temporary setbacks and as opportunities for learning rather than as indictments of their abilities, we as parents [or teachers] will have helped them to develop a resilient mindset filled with hope and problem-solving skills (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, p. 181).

When children are taught to learn from their mistakes, successes and failures, they are on target to develop responsibility, caring, and resilience, which all shape the resilient mindset. Brooks and Goldstein identify the key characteristics of a resilient mind set as follows:

- The ability to be empathetic and understand the needs of others
- The willingness to demonstrate compassion
- The capacity to see oneself as a contributing member of the family and society
- The capability to solve problems that may arise in the helping role
- The feeling of ownership
- A sense of satisfaction in the positive impact of one’s behavior
- A more confident outlook as islands of competence are displayed (2001, p. 193).

Of the characteristics listed above, the last one requires further explanation. Brooks and Goldstein identify islands of competence as activities that children enjoy doing because they do them well. When these activities generate positive responses and are identified as areas of personal strength, they become islands of competence. These seven
characteristics emphasize responsibility and caring as key factors in developing resiliency in children. With an emphasis on responsibility and accountability, children will begin to demonstrate a resilient mindset as they take responsibility for their lives.

In addition to Brooks and Goldstein’s characteristics of a resilient mind set, Werner and Smith (1992) identified characteristics that support resiliency at various stages of life. Characteristics identified during infancy included a personality that elicited positive responses from parents and other caregivers. At preschool age, children acquired a coping style that combined the ability to ask for help with autonomy. In adolescence, children demonstrated good communication and problem-solving skills, and had an internal locus of control with a positive self-concept. In addition, children frequently had a talent or hobby that was valued by their peers or elders. The resilient child was able to establish a close bond with caring adults within the extended family and was able to seek out positive role models in the community, such as a favorite teacher. Resilient adults understood their strengths and weaknesses and were able to delay accepting challenges until they felt ready to respond. They were also able to elicit, accept, and appreciate support from their families.

Although resilient characteristics may look different from infancy to adulthood, there are underlying similarities such as the ability to communicate effectively, build close relationships, identify strengths and weaknesses, and solicit help when needed. Even at infancy, when the only identifiable characteristic of resiliency is the baby’s ability to elicit positive responses from parents and caregivers, the baby is building a close relationship, communicating effectively, and seeking help and support to meet basic
needs. Developing a resilient mindset can take a lifetime, but research shows (Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992) that it can begin as early as infancy.

Current Research: Risk/Resiliency Framework

Cosden’s study (2001), *Risk and Resilience for Substance Abuse Among Adolescents and Adults with LD*, was a within group study that focused on identifying the risk factors among students and adults with LD that potentially led to substance abuse. Using the risk/resiliency model as the framework for her study, Cosden’s goal was to determine how risk and protective factors for substance abuse were either the same or different for individuals with or without LD. She also attempted to determine the effectiveness of treatment programs and how they could become more effective for individuals with LD.

Her research suggested a number of environmental risk factors for early substance abuse among adolescents. Those risk factors included, persistent behavior problems, low commitment to school, peer rejection, and experiences of school failure. She also noted that self-esteem was considered either a risk factor or a protective factor for children and adults with LD. Through her research Cosden (2001) determined that children and adults who understood the nature of their disability were more likely to have positive self-esteem and were more likely to make a successful adjustment to adult life than children and adults who did not understand the nature of their disability. This difference was primarily attributed to the individual’s ability or willingness to seek assistance when needed.

Another contributing factor to self-esteem was the severity of one’s disability. However, she noted that school and work environments could act as protective factors
that would improve self-esteem by helping the individual to identify their strengths, thus
creating positive experiences where the individual could achieve success. Poor peer
relationships, loneliness, and depression were also considered risk factors, with social
support through friends and family members identified as a protective factor. Cosden’s
(2001) findings indicated similar risk and protective factors for individuals with and
without LD, but also noted a possible link to hyperactivity among individuals with LD
and alcoholism. In regards to determining how risk and protective factors for substance
abuse were either the same or different for individuals with or without LD, Cosden
(2001) found,

A variety of risk and protective factors – internal and external – may be associated
with substance abuse by individuals with LD. The same risk and protective
factors may have different meanings for individuals with and without LD, and
some risk factors are more likely to occur in the presence of LD. (p. 357)

Surprisingly, Cosden (2001) found a lack of data to answer her query about the
effectiveness of treatment programs for individuals with LD. Part of the difficulty in
identifying the effectiveness was due to the similarities in the symptoms associated with
substance abuse and LD. Withdrawal, poor concentration, poor academic performance,
and poor attitudes toward school were reflected in both individuals with LD and those
with substance abuse. Therefore, rather than discussing the effectiveness of the treatment
programs, Cosden identified program effectiveness as an area for further study.

Gardynik and McDonald (2005) also used the risk/resiliency framework to guide
their study, *Implications of Risk and Resilience in the Life of the Individual Who is
Gifted/Learning Disabled*. The intent of their work was to further understand how the
concepts of risk and resilience affected individuals who were dually identified as gifted and LD. Their work acknowledged the risk factors that made the individual more vulnerable to adverse life conditions, as well as the protective factors that served as a buffer to adversity. Their work concluded with suggestions for interventions that could be used to foster resiliency in students who are gifted and learning disabled (G/LD).

Like many other studies, Gardynik and McDonald’s (2005) research identified chronic poverty, parental psychopathology, divorce, and abuse as general risk factors. Since LD could be described as an adverse condition that increases the individual’s vulnerability to distorted perceptions, they also identified the diagnosis of LD as a potential risk factor. Unique to their study, they also defined potential risk factors that were specific to gifted students. Those risk factors included (1) asynchronous development across cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains that potentially resulted in a misfit between the child who is gifted and his or her peer group; (2) unrealistic expectations and a general misconception of giftedness by parents, teachers, and significant others; (3) undue pressure caused by the over-involvement of parents, which may cause feelings of anxiety or depression in the student; (4) a disparity between the instructional environment and the capabilities of the child, resulting in boredom, disengagement from school, or behavior problems; and (5) vulnerability to social and emotional problems due to trouble identifying and gaining acceptance to appropriate peers groups.

General protective factors were also identified in the study and included the individual’s temperament, the family context, and the presence of an external support system. The identification of protective factors specific to students with LD were based
on Werner and Smith’s (1992) work and included temperamental characteristics that elicited positive responses from caregivers, special skills and talents, realistic educational and vocational plans, self-esteem, and opportunities at major life transitions. Ironically, many of the protective factors that were identified in children who were gifted were directly attributed to their giftedness, such as increased verbal ability, intelligence, risk taking, high self-concept, good self-efficacy, academic achievement, reflectiveness, maturity, an internal locus of control, and self-understanding. These increased intellectual abilities often lead to problem solving which improved their abilities to cope with life’s stressors.

Described as paradoxical learners, Gardynik and McDonald (2005) identified a unique combination of risk and protective factors for students who are identified as G/LD. Their dual diagnoses is a risk factor that threatens their self-concept as students wrestle with the fact that they can comprehend at a superior level in one area, but struggle to acquire basic skills in another. This risk is compounded when significant adults such as parents or teachers view this paradox as stupidity or laziness. Most students who are gifted with LD also have the ability to hide their learning problems from others, which often increases their sense of anxiety and lowered self-esteem. Protective factors for these students mirror the characteristics of resilient students and include an intense motivation to achieve goals, adaptability, persistence, and curiosity.

Gardynik and McDonald (2005) suggested that encouraging and nurturing student abilities rather than focusing on basic skill remediation would do more to promote success in life. Early diagnosis and interventions are key components to developing resilience among students who are gifted with LD. Often students do not receive services
until they have experienced some type of difficulty. By this time, significant damage to the student’s self-concept has already occurred. Serving as the caring adult in students’ lives, teachers need to reconsider their traditional roles as conveyors of knowledge and consider themselves as protective factors in the lives of their students. Gardynik and McDonald recommended a mentoring type relationship between teachers and students as one way to promote resilience.

Gardynik and McDonald’s (2005) research concluded with the suggestion of mentoring relationships as one way schools and teachers could promote resiliency in students who were labeled gifted learning disabled. Brooks’ (2001) work, *Fostering Motivation, Hope, and Resilience in Children with Learning Disorders*, also discusses how schools and teachers could promote resiliency in students, particularly those with LD. Brooks’ work begins with the identification of how students develop self-defeating ways of coping with stressful situations. Once a child believes that a situation will not improve, they tend to engage in self-defeating ways of coping such as quitting, avoiding, blaming, or bulling, thus setting a negative cycle in motion, which eventually only intensifies their feelings of defeat (Brooks, 2001). Brooks continued with his discussion stressing the need to address students’ feelings of hopelessness and low self-worth, and providing students with realistic experiences that foster hope and optimism is as essential to education as providing students with an award-winning curriculum. He stated, “Addressing the social-emotional needs of a student is not an extra curriculum activity” (Brooks, 2001, p. 10). A student’s sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence within the confines of the classroom provides the supports necessary to increase positive
traits such as increased learning, motivation, self-discipline, responsibility, and the ability
to cope with mistakes.

Brooks’ work (2001) focused on how teachers can foster resilience in students with LD. He talked about the mindset of effective educators and what they can do to promote resilience. Characteristics of the effective teacher’s mindset are similar to the characteristics of resilient students and include areas such as addressing the social-emotional needs of children. Brooks identified this as an essential element of education and noted that educators have a lifelong impact on students and the development of resilience. Caring for children, avoiding labels, teaching children in ways that they learn best, developing relationships with parents, and initiating an orientation period at the beginning of the year to develop a positive mindset among parents and educators are all ways teachers can encourage resilience in students with LD.

Figure 2.2 attempts to synthesize the research of Cosden (2003, 2001), Gardynik and McDonald (2005), and Brooks (2001) in a way that highlights self-esteem as either a risk or protective factor in the development of resilience.
Figure 2.2: Self-Esteem; A Risk or Protective Factor

The previous literature that was selected and discussed in this chapter was chosen because it specifically addressed issues of historical significance as well as the concepts and constructs that were used in the development of the theoretical framework for this study. However, the following body of research is particularly noteworthy due to the fact that Wong (2003) and Margalit’s (2003) studies directly impacted the design of the theoretical framework used in my study.

**Distal Influences.** These two articles focused on using the resiliency model as a way of understanding the social development of students with LD. Both articles focused on risk and protective factors and the fact that students may perceive risk and protective factors differently.

Individually, both Margalit and Wong gave examples of how risk and protective factors can be manifested differently in students with LD. In one example of how these factors influence student outcomes, Margalit (2003) discussed the impact student mood had on the perception of risk or protective factors. She wrote,

Mood may affect the content of cognition and tasks will be considered either as a challenge or a threat depending on the affective reaction. A challenge may be conceptualized when the individual experiences sufficient or nearly sufficient resources to meet situational demands. A threat may be conceptualized when the individual experiences insufficient resources to meet situational demands. This differentiation between emotions may have a clear impact on the effort students are ready to invest in learning tasks, thus leading to different outcomes (2003, p. 84).

The student’s mood can have an impact on whether learning is considered to be a threat or a challenge and whether the student’s effort will have a positive or negative outcome.

Emphasizing societal and cultural influences, Wong (2003) addressed another example of how risk and protective factors can be perceived differently. She identified the learning support classroom as a potential risk factor highlighting the possibility for negative outcomes, and the lack of positive role models. Past practice in special education focused on the delivery of instruction to students with LD in small, segregated
group settings with other students with similar learning disabilities. However, the current
trend in special education today supports inclusion as a way of delivering special
education services to students with LD. In keeping with these theories, my theoretical
framework has components that address risk and protective factors, as well as the impact
inclusion has on students’ school experiences.

Although Wong’s (2003) work on risk and resiliency in students with LD was the
initial piece of literature that grabbed my attention, it was Margalit’s (2003) work that I
found to be particularly compelling. Margalit’s work embodied all of the concepts that
shaped my research study. She identified the connection between risk and protective
factors and the identification of proximal and distal developmental influences in the
development of resiliency in students with LD. She also suggested that research in the
field of resiliency move away from deficiency models that focus on students’
maladaptive behaviors and move towards empowering models that address how students
negotiate risk factors and cope with stress across various domains, developmental stages,
and contexts.

Her theory of resiliency was significant to the development of my study because
she identified resiliency in the form of three waves, the phenomenological wave, the
described the phenomenological wave as focusing on identifying internal and external
characteristics of students thought to be resilient. She emphasized that the focus of this
wave was to determine “who are the individuals who will thrive in the face of adversity
and difficult conditions” (p. 83). She identified Werner and Smith’s work (1982) as a
foundational piece of research. My study is linked to the first wave in the fact that
emphasis is placed on Werner and Smith’s work as traits and characteristics of resilient children are identified. Phenomenological interviewing also links my study to the first wave because it was used as a way to describe the resilient individuals who participated in the study.

According to Margalit (2003), the second wave, the protective factors wave, is a linear model that identifies risk and protective factors and depicts individuals passing through developmental stages interacting with life prompts. The emphasis on risk and protective factors as well as the individual recollection of school experiences creates a strong link between the second wave and my study. Finally, Margalit described the third wave, the conceptual wave as a non-linear construct of resilience that examined the experiences that foster the activation of personal resources through integrating proximal and distal developmental influences within an individual’s personal history. The third wave is perhaps the most obvious link to my study as the interview process was intended to identify salient points in each individual’s life history that either encouraged the development of resiliency or showcased the resilient characteristics that the individual already possessed. Margalit’s work is the cornerstone of my research study not only because she articulated the concepts that were used for my theoretical framework, but also because she emphasized the need for continued research in the area of resilience that focuses specifically on the experiences of students with LD.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the key pieces of literature that gave life to my theoretical framework. From a historical perspective, emphasis was given to the development of special education and the evolution of the federal laws that identified LD
as an official category of special education. Emphasis was also given to how LD is identified and how students receive special education services within the general education curriculum. The chapter continued by acknowledging the risk and protective factors that the students could experience while in school and identified the impact proximal and distal developmental influences had on the development of resiliency. Chapter Two concluded with a thorough explanation of resiliency, several current research studies that use the risk/resiliency framework and seminal studies that connected each concept to the theoretical framework that is the foundation for this study.
Chapter 3
Methodology

This chapter describes the methods used to address the two research questions; I. How do students with mild learning disabilities develop resiliency through their school experiences? II. What influence did those experiences have on students’ post-secondary and career choices? Understanding how students with mild LD develop resiliency is significant because the identification of LD can have a profound, life-long impact on a student’s academic performance and post-secondary or career choices (Lipsky, 2005; Williams, 2005). Furthermore, this research attempts to counter the preponderance of literature that focuses on student deficits (e.g. Harry & Klingner, 2007; Lipsky, 2005), by addressing resiliency through the identification of risk and protective factors and the integration of proximal and distal experiences (Bryan, 2003; Margalit, 2003; Wiener, 2003; Wong, 2003).

This chapter will discuss how these research questions will be answered through a series of semi-structured interviews, a document review, and one focus group session with Kirk, Dennis, and Phil; three adults with LD who graduated from high school and are pursuing either post-secondary education or a career. The chapter begins with a rationale for choosing phenomenological interviewing and a multiple case study design. A thorough discussion of the research design follows, which includes (1) a brief introduction of the participants, and a description of the sample selection procedures which included a mass mailing and snowball sampling, (2) a discussion of how my interest in student resiliency was used to develop the research and interview questions, (3) a description of the data collection process, the interviews, the focus group, and the
document review, and finally, (4) a detailed account of the analysis process, which included pairing down several large transcripts and synthesizing the findings from all three sources of data. Chapter Three concludes with a discussion on how reliability and validity are accomplished through triangulating the data collected from the individual interview sessions, the focus group session, and the document review.

Rationale for Choosing Phenomenological Interviews

In-depth, phenomenological interviewing was chosen as the primary form of data collection for this research study because it combines life history interviewing with focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology (Seidman, 1991). By carefully guiding Kirk, Dennis, and Phil through a recollection of their past, phenomenological interviewing encouraged them to make sense of their proximal and distal experiences to determine if there was a connection between the risk and protective factors that they experienced in school and the development of resiliency. One assumption of in-depth phenomenological interviewing is that the meaning people make of their experiences affects the way they carry out the experience (Seidman, 1991), which could shed some light on how student resiliency affects post-secondary and career choices.

Phenomenological interviewing requires the researcher to primarily use semi-structured, open-ended questions to ensure the participants logically recall their experiences. Siple (2008) chose to use phenomenological interviewing in her research study because she was not looking for specific answers, but rather shared experiences from her participants. Siple chose phenomenological interviewing because she was curious to find out what lived experiences the participants of her study would share based
on their unique standpoint as women. Curious to see which school experiences Kirk, Dennis, and Phil would highlight as risk or protective factors, I chose to use phenomenological interviewing as well.

Siedman (1991) recommended a series of three interviews as the best approach to conducting phenomenological interviews because participants are asked to reconstruct specific details of their experience. The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ distal experiences, the life-history portion of the data collection. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were asked to tell as much about themselves as possible in light of the research topic. The second interview allowed them to reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context in which they occurred, and the third interview, which presented as a focus group session with all three participants, encouraged Kirk, Dennis, and Phil to reflect on the meaning they derived from their experiences.

The focus group was a slight deviation from Seidman’s three-interview structure, but still allowed the participants to reconstruct their experiences within the context of their own lives. This deliberate interview design allowed the participants to give accounts of their distal experiences in order, which may or may not be causally linked (Wengraf, 2001). Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were guided through a recollection of their educational experiences, were encouraged to identify their experiences as either risk or protective factors, and were asked to identify how those experiences affected their post-secondary decisions.

The focus group session addressed the intellectual and emotional connections between Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s experiences and their current situations (proximal experiences). According to Seidman (1991), “Making sense or making meaning requires
that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (p. 12). For some, constructing meaning from their experiences might be easier when support is offered from others who had similar life experiences. For example, Phil rarely initiated discussions when a direct question was asked. However he did not seem to have a problem offering his opinion once the conversation was started.

The focus group interview was used as a way to illicit more in depth, detailed information from Kirk, Dennis, and Phil regarding their school experiences. “Focus groups provide insight into beliefs and attitudes that underlie behavior. [T]he rationale [is] that with proper guidance from the focus group leader, group members can describe the rich details of complex experiences and the reasoning behind their actions, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes” (Carey, 1994, p. 225-226). For example, the following passage from the focus group session illustrates how Phil and Dennis interacted with each other describing how they felt about having LD.

Q: In what ways did your learning disability affect your self-esteem?

Phil: It’s not like normal that people are in it. But, like, high school’s not the nicest place. Like there’s a lot you gotta deal with.

Q: Like what?

Phil: Peer pressure, everyone else is doing this, you gotta do that. They dress this way, you dress that way. Like one person wore Timberlands, now the whole school wore Timberlands. You know what I mean? One person shows their butt, they all show their butt. It’s like follow the leader.

Dennis: Its high school. Once you get out of high school, it’s over. You just don’t think about it as much cause you’re not in it.

Q: Do you feel better about yourself now than you did then?

Dennis: Yeah. Because I felt stupid being in there. Cause you always need help with something and no one else does. You just don’t feel very
smart. Now that I am out of there and doing it on my own, I just feel a lot better.

Q: Those are all kind of negative thoughts. Why didn’t you give up?

Dennis: Cause if you give up you’re never going to be anything. You have to keep moving and if you want to do anything with your life, you just have to keep going.

Phil: You just keep going. If you give up what are you going to do, live at home for the rest of your life? No one wants to do that. It’s kind of like, it all depends on how bad you really want it. I mean like, I’m sure he (points to Kirk) wanted it really bad to be a firefighter, and I’m sure he had to overcome a lot more than I did, staying in school. I kind of had it easy. It just kind of happened. I mean, like getting a job and stuff, they (points to Kirk and Dennis) actually had to work for it. Dennis had to take tests and get good grades, and run. You don’t see me taking no tests or running.

The discussion format was chosen not only to obtain a more complete understanding of the responses to the individual interview sessions, but it was also chosen as a way to verify the range of responses that were given during the individual interviews (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). The focus group was not chosen as a way to build a consensus among Kirk, Dennis, and Phil, but rather as a way to validate their individual responses. Therefore, in addition to serving as another method of data collection, the focus group interview also served as a way of interpreting and triangulating the individual data that was collected in the interview sessions. For example, Kirk described the difficulties he experienced becoming a firefighter in the first interview session as well as the focus group.

Kirk: “I was taking civil service tests all through college and they just weren’t working out, I wasn’t scoring high enough, and things like that. I took like seven tests in different places within Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland. I wasn’t scoring high enough on the test. I mean, I was passing them, but I wasn’t
getting (pause)...the problem with civil service, uh, with the military points, you have to complete the first half of your enlistment before you get the points. So up until my third year in the military, I wasn’t getting my points. So if I was getting a hundred and not getting the points, there was everybody with the points getting like a hundred and five” (11/13/2006).

Kirk: “I set my goal, like I always knew I wanted to be a fireman. Like, I set it early, like when I was in high school. But, I started taking it seriously, I can’t remember the date, but I took a test in Harrisburg and I thought I knew everything about the job, and I thought it would be fairly easy to get a job. And I took the test and I never heard back. I got a letter about a month later, saying that I was no longer being looked at in the process. I was like, wow, this is going to be harder than I thought. It kind of got me in gear to go on and do better at taking the test and get further along in the process to get hired” (9/22/2007).

There are a few limitations to the focus group interview that need to be taken into consideration. First, psychosocial factors such as group interaction, censoring, and conforming cannot be dismissed and potentially limit the quality of the data (Carey, 1994). These factors were considered in the interpretation of the data, but given the desire to obtain rich, detailed responses, the benefits of the focus group interview outweighed the potential risks. For example, as discussed earlier, Phil rarely initiated discussions during the focus group, but spoke easily and with confidence during the individual interviews. Therefore, at the beginning of the focus group session I repeated the question to give Phil an opportunity to respond. He eventually became more comfortable with the process and his responses became more frequent and elaborate. Once the interviews and the focus group discussion were completed, the case studies were designed in a way that described the real-life academic experiences of Kirk, Dennis, and Phil.
**Rationale for Choosing a Multiple Case Study Design**

According to Yin, (2003) case studies are best used when the investigator is interested in complex social phenomenon; when a “how” or “why” question is being asked. Given the fact that the research question asks how students develop resiliency through their school experiences, presenting the data as three separate case studies is appropriate.

Case studies involve a bounded system where the case is seen as a single entity that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). A case is considered bounded if it can be “fenced in” according to what is going to be studied. Consideration of restrictions in data collection, the limited number of persons to be interviewed, or the amount of time needed for observation and data collection all help to determine if a case or phenomenon is bounded (Merriam, 1998). The case is considered to be a single phenomenon or entity and the goal of the study is to deliberately cover contextual conditions that are thought to be highly pertinent to the phenomenon of study (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

Merriam (1998) defined three characteristics of case study. First, case studies can be particularistic, where the case focuses on a particular situation, event, program or phenomenon. Second, they can be descriptive, where the end product is a rich, thick description including as many variables as possible, which portray the interaction of the variables over a period of time. And finally, they can be heuristic, meaning that they illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. Case studies can either bring about new meaning or confirm what is already known.
Merriam (1998) acknowledged several aspects of the descriptive nature of case study. Descriptive case study demonstrates the complexities of a situation. It shows the influence of the passage of time on the issue and illustrates how the preceding decades led to a situation. Descriptive case study has the advantage of hindsight, yet is relevant in the present and shows the influence of personalities on the issue. It uses vivid material in the form of quotations and interviews, and spells out the differences of opinion on the issues suggesting how these differences have influenced the end result.

In addition to the descriptive case study, an interpretive approach was used in an attempt to support the theoretical assumption that proximal and distal experiences affect the development of resiliency in students with mild LD. Interpretive case studies use “descriptive data to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data collection” (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). An interpretive case study design allows the researcher to develop categories that conceptualize different approaches to the phenomenon. Therefore, a combination of descriptive and interpretive case study was used to illustrate the multiple case study design employed in this study.

A multiple case study design, also known as collective case study, involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits embedded (Merriam, 1998). The current trend in resiliency research is to conduct within-case studies on students with LD where proximal and distal experiences as well as emotional well-being are highlighted and emphasized as factors in the development of resiliency (Margalit, 2003; Wong, 2003).
A multiple case study design was used to investigate resiliency for two reasons, (1) Investigating multiple cases within the same population makes the findings more compelling (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003), (2) identifying how, where, and why a phenomenon occurs through a range of similar and/or contrasting cases strengthens the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A multiple case study design that is descriptive and interpretive was chosen for this study because the study intends to trace the sequence of interpersonal events over time. It intends to describe a subculture that has rarely been the topic of previous studies; and it intends to discuss a key phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were asked to give a detailed account of their educational experiences from the diagnosis of their LD to their decisions to pursue post-secondary and career goals. Furthermore, the study focuses on a subculture of resilient students. As stated earlier in Chapter One and in alignment with current research trends in the area of resilience, Margalit (2003) and Wong (2003) suggest the exploration of resilience in students with LD should be treated as a subculture, since students with LD have not often been researched from the perspective of resiliency. This study also attempts to uncover the phenomenon of how resiliency is developed through school experiences and how it affects post-secondary and career decisions.

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil

Kirk is a 2001 high school graduate and was identified as having LD in elementary school. His disability is in the areas of reading and language arts. Kirk was not aware of the fact that he had a learning disability, but he knew that he had to work harder than his peers. He was not embarrassed by his learning disability, but felt
frustrated in middle school when he had to explain to others why he left the general education classroom to take tests and receive other special education services. He used that feeling of frustration as a motivator to “get into the regular routine of everyone else,” and was completely mainstreamed with the exception of his study skills class by the time he was in high school.

After high school, Kirk joined the National Guard and trained to be a fire fighter. When his basic training was completed, he continued to serve in the military as a reservist and enrolled in a four-year university majoring in recreational administration. He continued at the university for three years until he landed his dream job as a professional fire fighter. Because his job was located out of state, he was unable to finish his last year of college. However, he does have plans to earn his college degree after he completes the required course work and training at the fire academy. When asked about his college experience, he said he took it seriously, but his main priority was to land a job as a professional fireman. Going to college was his fall back plan. It was something he did “in the meantime” while he was pursuing his dream.

As an adult, Kirk feels that he is living his dream as a professional firefighter. He describes himself as having an easy-going personality and rolls with the punches. He feels he is patient and knows how to deal with people. Regarding his career choice, he said he loves working with other people and being part of a team. He said, “I couldn’t stand sitting in an office space, by myself, typing on the computer. I like being around other people.”

Dennis is a 2005 high school graduate and was also identified as having a learning disability in reading and language arts early in his elementary career. Like Kirk, Dennis
was unaware of his learning disability. His parents and his teachers noticed that he was having the same learning problems as his brother who also had a learning disability. Dennis liked school until 4th or 5th grade. He said his feelings started to change, because “It wasn’t too popular being in learning support.”

As a high school student, Dennis did not feel that his support services were helping him. In fact, he felt his involvement in the learning support program had a negative impact on his high school experience, especially when he was mainstreamed for all of his academic classes. Dennis expressed that he had a hard time working at grade level in English class. He attributed that difficulty to the fact that he spent so much time in learning support English classes.

As an adult, Dennis is enrolled in a state university for accounting and has joined the National Guard. Dennis chose his college major because he excels at math and feels he is too far behind in English to catch up. At the college level, Dennis continues to struggle with reading comprehension. It takes him a little bit longer to read and comprehend things than the other students, but he does not receive academic support services. He said, “I applied for it (academic support). I took the test for it. They sent all my tests in from high school, but I never went to the office to get help with it.” When asked why he does not receive academic support at the college level he replied, “I like to do things on my own. I don’t accept help from a lot of people. I don’t like people helping me. I got too much help in high school and elementary school. I just don’t want it any more. I’m sick of it.”

Dennis describes himself as relaxed and easy going. He said he is an outgoing person and likes to do whatever his friends are doing. He feels that success in general is
accomplishing a lot of things, doing what needs to be done, owning your own home, and being able to meet your basic needs. Regarding his own success, Dennis feels that he is successful for his age. He earned a scholarship to go to college, is working on his education, and owns his own car.

Phil is also a 2005 high school graduate and was identified as having a learning disability in first grade. Phil remembered having problems learning, particularly with reading, writing, and spelling. He talked about his feelings when he was asked to read out loud in class. He said, “…we had to read out loud, and I was always stuttering and not doing great. I remember having problems then, it kind of made you afraid to go to school, you don’t want to go because you’d look stupid.”

Throughout his high school career, Phil’s personality was always his strength. Teachers and administrators continually noted his likeable personality, and his ability to get along well with others, including adults and peers. His personality is a strength that continues to serve him well in the work force.

As an adult, Phil is learning to be a master plumber and is working for a national plumbing company. He is very happy with his career choice and loves what he is doing, but he feels his learning disability is still a factor in his daily life. Before he started training to be a master plumber, Phil felt like he had no future. He did not feel he was smart enough to accomplish anything. Now, since he started working for the plumbing company, he is trying to make accommodations for his learning disability and is trying to better himself.

Phil describes himself as an outgoing guy who tries to do things the right way. Regarding success, he feels that he is not successful yet because he does not own his own
home and has not earned enough time or money at work to take vacations. But he feels that he has the potential to be successful and knows that he will be successful because he “wants it so bad.”

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil attended the same high school in Western Pennsylvania. Although Kirk graduated in a different year than Dennis and Phil, all three experienced the same type of academic support services while in high school. All three students were enrolled in the learning support program at their high school. As stated in the school district’s 2002-2008 strategic plan, the learning support program is a progressive program that focuses on student achievement in light of individual academic and social needs. Students in the learning support program are included and participate in the general education curriculum for 80% or more of their school day (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008), but may receive instruction in the learning support classroom with other students with similar learning disabilities for classes such as English and mathematics (Strategic Plan, 2002-2008).

By the time they were in high school, Kirk, Dennis and Phil were mainstreamed for all of their academic classes. However, they continued to receive learning support services through a course titled study skills where they received individualized and small group instruction that offered remediation for regular education classes. In addition to remediation, they also received support and instruction to improve their study habits and test taking strategies (Strategic Plan, 2002-2008).

Sample Selection and Size

A detailed selection process guided this study. The process involved creating a detailed protocol, which conformed not only to the participating school district’s research
procedures, but also to the current HIPPA and FERPA laws, which were designed to protect individuals’ identity and ensure confidentiality. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibit school districts from releasing students’ names with descriptors of any type. Therefore, soliciting only students who were identified with LD is prohibited. However, school districts are permitted to release the names and addresses of all students in a particular graduating class as a matter of public record. I chose the graduating class of 2001 since the students were over eighteen and had time to pursue post-secondary goals. The preliminary selection process began with the decision to contact the graduating class of 2001.

The selection process officially began in the summer of 2006 with a letter to the participating school district requesting the names and addresses of the 2001 graduating class. The letter consisted of the research abstract as well as the research instrument that was used (see Appendix B). Permission was granted at the September 2006 school board meeting and the names were released within the week. The research letter was copied and a mail merge database consisting of 262 names and addresses was created. The research letters, screening questionnaires, and self-addressed, stamped, return envelopes were sent out on October 27, 2006 to all 2001 graduates. In the weeks that followed I received four (4) phone calls from parents, two (2) of which were from irate parents. The parents were upset that I was able to contact their children and were concerned about how I was able to receive their personal information. I explained the procedure that I used to obtain the names and addresses, and referred them back to the participating school district if they needed further clarification.
In the following weeks, responses were returned. The rigorous procedure that was described above yielded the following results: A total of 262 research letters were sent. Thirty letters were returned to sender due to invalid addresses. A total of eighteen graduates responded, with five of them responding that they would like to participate in the study, and thirteen responding that they would not like to participate in the study. Of the five who did want to participate, only one, Kirk, fit the criteria.

Kirk was selected for this study through a combination of criterion sampling and purposive sampling. “Purposive sampling is a procedure by which researchers select a subject based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which the selected subjects could contribute to the research study” (Vaughn et al., 1996, p. 58). The criteria for this study required that eligible individuals were diagnosed with LD, participated in the general education curriculum, and received additional academic supports. Originally, I proposed three to five candidates would be needed to conduct this study, and at this point, I sent follow-up letters, but received no responses. After several months, a rigorous selection process, and follow-up letters, I still had only one eligible participant. I made the decision to start the data collection process with Kirk and utilized snowball sampling hoping he could lead me to two more participants.

Kirk’s involvement in the selection process was crucial. His suggestions for additional participants led me to Dennis and Dennis led me to Phil. Kirk suggested that I contact Dennis and gave me his phone number. When I contacted Dennis by phone, he said he was willing to participate in the study. During Dennis’ first interview, I asked him if he knew of anyone else that might be interested in participating in the study, and he suggested Phil. Dennis gave me Phil’s phone number and I contacted him. Like
Dennis, Phil was willing to participate. Although Dennis and Phil graduated in 2005, they fit the criteria because both were diagnosed with LD and participated in the general education curriculum with academic supports.

At this point, the final phase of selection consisted of purposive and snowball sampling where candidates were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. An attempt to identify a sample that had maximum variability among the participants was made. However, with only one candidate from the original mailing that fit the criteria, I decided not to make this a priority. Ultimately, Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were selected for the study because they fit the criteria and were willing to participate. Figure 3.1 is a complete timeline of the research procedures.
Recruitment of Subjects and Informed Consent

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were recruited based on the fact that they were students with mild LD who participated in the general education curriculum with academic supports. They were also selected because they were interested in the study, and were willing to participate in two one-on-one interviews and one focus group. The selection process began during the summer of 2006. Kirk was selected upon completion of the preliminary screening questionnaire and Dennis and Phil were selected through snowball
sampling. Dennis and Phil were contacted directly to determine if they were interested in participating. Completing the preliminary screening questionnaire did not obligate Kirk to participate in the study in any way. Dennis and Phil were also not obligated to participate in the study. All three participants were given a description of the research study and requirements for participation. They were made aware of the interview procedures and focus group requirements, and were aware that the interviews and focus groups would be tape recorded and transcribed. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were asked to sign an informed consent letter prior to the first interview, which further explained the nature and purpose of the study (see Appendix C). They were also asked to sign a release form to obtain their cumulative files from the participating school district’s archived records.

Practitioner Research – The Role of the Researcher

This study was conducted as a form of practitioner research. Known as insider research, practitioner research “is done by practitioners using their own site as the focus of their study. It is a reflective process, deliberately and systematically undertaken, and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions” (Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, 1994, p. 2). Practitioner research has been criticized for its subjective nature in comparison to traditional academic research, and noted for the difficulty in taking a step back to take a dispassionate look at the setting (Anderson et al., 1994). However, when subjectivity is properly addressed and considered as part of the research design and data analysis, practitioner research can be beneficial. Anderson et al. write, “There is no way an outsider, even an ethnographer who spends years as an observer, can acquire the tacit knowledge of a setting that those who must act within it
daily posses” (1994, p. 4). The authors recommend that the researcher openly address subjectivity within the research by making the audience aware of both preconceptions and post-conceptions regarding the study.

“Practitioner research techniques and approaches must always be tempered by practice and seen through a filter of one’s own environment and needs” (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 107). Therefore, it is important that the researcher take the time to address the dual role that he or she will be playing as both researcher and practitioner. The researcher must take into account the subjects’ ability to identify who they are talking to. Are the subjects talking to the researcher or their teacher? This burden falls on the practitioner and the practitioner must see things both as a researcher and a staff member. Anderson writes, “The practitioner needs to balance his or her ‘observer bias’ with the ‘reactivity of the participants’” (1994, p. 111).

Once issues of bias and researcher role are addressed and the study is underway, consideration must be given to the various practitioner research techniques or modes. Anderson discusses four assumptive modes that are connected to practitioner research. It should be noted that practitioner research could be qualitative or quantitative, or a combination of both. The first mode is induction to deduction. Here, qualitative research starts with observation then seeks an appropriate theory, where quantitative research starts with a theory then seeks an appropriate investigation and proof. The second mode is generalization to verification. Qualitative research does not attempt to generalize one study to all other similar studies or to verify beyond the scope the single study as in quantitative research. Qualitative research seeks to explain behaviors in one setting only. If this explanation reminds the reader of his or her setting, then it has been a success. The
third mode is construction to enumeration. Qualitative researchers construct categories based on the data collected and move the data into theoretical constructs. Quantitative researchers derive units of measurements and count the data within these units. The fourth and final mode, subjective to objective, has already been touched upon. Qualitative researchers work in natural settings where they must balance their dual role of researcher/practitioner, addressing their subjectivity. Quantitative researchers tend to “exhume it (subjectivity) from themselves and their study by design and statistics” (LeCompte & Preissle, as cited in Anderson et al., 1994, p. 86).

As a special education teacher for the past thirteen years, I conducted this research study as a practitioner. I solicited the school district of which I was employed to participate in the study. I chose my school district because I had an intimate knowledge of the special education program and how the services were offered during the time that Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were students. At that time, the school district primarily offered special education services in the learning support resource room. Students who were mainstreamed for their academic classes were offered remedial instruction in the learning support classroom through a study skills class. Although Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were students during the time that I was employed at the school district, Kirk was the only one that I instructed. As a senior in high school, Kirk was enrolled in my study skills class. I never had Dennis or Phil for class, but I was responsible for maintaining Dennis’ special education file and wrote several of his reports, including his reevaluation report (RR) and his IEP during his senior year.

During my tenure as a special education teacher I observed that some of the students who were mainstreamed for their academic courses attended college and had
clearly defined career paths, while others seemed to have little or no direction. Even though the IEP team required by law (IDEA) to design an individualized transition plan for each student with a disability, I was surprised to see how many students did not follow through with the post-secondary goals that they set. These observations and pre-conceived notions were used to design this research study.

Given the fact that I chose to solicit past graduates, it was not difficult to focus on my role as a researcher. I was no longer Kirk’s teacher and no longer responsible for Dennis’ special education file. I held no authority over Kirk, Dennis, and Phil at all. Therefore, I believe that their responses were honest and accurate. Furthermore, given the fact that I had to present my research proposal to the school board for a full board review and was required to conduct a mass mailing of the entire 2001 graduating class, I was not afforded any special treatment as an employee. Any researcher could follow the same process to obtain the names of the 2001 graduating class.

Once Kirk, Dennis, and Phil agreed to participate, I chose to interview each one in an attempt to determine how they developed resiliency through their school experiences. Through their personal narratives, I also wanted to learn how their school experiences affected their post secondary and career choices. With only three participants, I was not looking to generalize my findings. I was only looking to understand how these three students developed resiliency.

Development of Research, Interview, and Focus Group Questions

The development of the research questions for this study came from my decade long interest in student resiliency. As a practicing special education teacher I have had an interest in student success. Recognizing that the diagnosis of LD has life-long
implications for students, I noticed that some students with mild LD are successful while others are not. Some students with mild LD graduate from high school, often attend college, technical schools, or enter the work force obtaining careers in fields that they have chosen despite the negative effects of their LD; while other students with mild LD do not experience the same level of success and are exiting high school with unsatisfactory transition skills (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). Some students with LD find it hard to see the relevance of education, and face a constant battle with motivation and attendance issues throughout their academic careers often struggling to graduate. When the latter group of students do graduate, they have insufficient plans in place to help them transition into adulthood (Trainor, 2007).

I have always wondered about the contributing factors that cause one student to be successful and another to struggle. One contributing factor that cannot be ignored is the fact that the dominant perspective in the field of special education and LD is one of deficiency (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Rather than approaching students with LD from a strength perspective, the initial impression of students with LD is one of deficiency. It is my interest in student success and vulnerability that has led my research towards resiliency, risk and protective factors, and proximal and distal developmental experiences as they influence post-secondary and career choices.

Research from authors such as Cosden (2001), Werner and Smith (1982, 1992), and Gardynik and McDonald (2005), shows that risk factors among children and adolescents fall along a wide spectrum. This spectrum includes biological and environmental issues such as pre and perinatal complications, mental illness, physical disabilities, parental illness, family discord, and poverty (Werner & Smith, 1982). A
large amount of research exists that identifies the results of these risk factors in children’s
lives and identifies specific protective factors that help to lessen the negative effects.
Werner & Smith (1982, 1992) identify children who do not succumb to the negative
outcomes of their risk factors as resilient. However, it has been my experience that not
all resilient students face biological and environmental factors such as mental illness and
poverty. Some students face adversity in other areas specifically related to their ability to
learn and their levels of academic achievement. What about children who do not
experience these biological or environmental issues, but are still vulnerable to risk factors
due to a learning disability?

Werner and Smith (1992) defined resilience and protective factors as the positive
counter-parts to vulnerability and risk factors. They identify vulnerability as an
individual’s susceptibility to a disorder, and risk factors as hazards that increase the
likelihood of a negative developmental outcome. In other words, individuals who are
vulnerable to specific risk factors have a certain level of adversity to overcome. When
individuals are not resilient to risk factors and cannot overcome the adversity in their
lives, maladaptive behaviors begin to manifest as a way of coping with stress. Resilience
varies from person to person and is not easily defined with a set of common
characteristics (Rutter, 2000; Werner and Smith, 1992). Resilience reflects a process
(Pianta & Welsh, 1998; Rutter, 2000) that involves certain mechanisms before, during,
and after certain life stressors; therefore, it is important to identify the contextual factors
that influence experiences and foster resilience. Sustained resiliency in adulthood is
based on the range and quality of coping skills that are experienced (Rutter, 2000;
Werner & Smith, 1992).
It is my interest in student success and resiliency that has been the driving force behind this study. The development of the research questions used in this study can be mapped following a modified version of Stake’s guidelines for the “Evolution of Issue Questions” (Stake, 1995, p. 20-21). The language of Stake’s guidelines are modified to reflect the language used in this study, which aligns with the theoretical framework. According to Stake, topical questions progress into a foreshadowed problem, that evolve into the issue pursued, which eventually leads to the assertions that became the driving force behind this research study. For the purpose of this research study, the topical question will remain as the topical question. However, the foreshadowed problem is identified as the problem statement, the evolved issue pursued is identified as the research questions, and the assertions are identified as the propositions. The initial thoughts used to generate this research study began as ethic issues, which combined a natural interest in student success and resiliency with the demand for current research to explore resiliency in students with LD.

Through continued research in the area of student success and resilience, “the topical question”; why do some students with mild LD succeed despite their disability while others do not, helped to identify “the problem statement”; many students with LD function successfully in both school and the community (Cosden, 2001), despite the life-long impact of having a learning disability. From “the problem statement” came the “research questions”; I. How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences? II. How do those experiences influence their post-secondary and career choices? Finally, the proposition states that students with mild LD develop resiliency as a result of their reactions to positive and negative experiences
which have a cumulative effect on their present day outcomes for post-secondary and career choices was developed. (See Figure 3.2).

**Figure 3.2: Evolution of the Research Questions**

| **Topical Question:** Why do some students with mild LD succeed despite their disabilities while others do not? |
| **Problem Statement:** Research shows that many students with LD function successfully in both school and the community (Cosden, 2001), and are resilient despite the life-long impact of having a learning disability. |
| **Research Questions:** How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through school experiences? How do those experiences influence their post-secondary and career choices? |
| **Propositions:** Students with mild LD develop resiliency as a result of their reactions to positive and negative experiences, which have a cumulative effect on their present day outcomes for post-secondary and career choices. |

Once the research questions were defined, interview questions were developed based on the following topical information subcategories: background information and student history, identification of specific experiences, identification of specific thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and reactions, and current situations pertaining to post-secondary or career choices. These subcategories served as a framework for developing the interview questions and served as a preliminary guide for coding the data. (See Table 3.1). An “X” indicates that the question specifically addressed a particular subcategory used for the initial coding phase. The “S” and “T” used in the specific experiences category
Table 3.1: Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Background Info/History</th>
<th>Specific Experiences (S) or (T)</th>
<th>Attitudes, Feelings, Reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 What do you do for a living?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.2 What did you do after you graduated from high school? Did you attend college? A tech school or training? Did you join the work force?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Did you run into any problems getting accepted or finishing college or tech school? Did you have any trouble finding a job? Explain.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.4 Do you know what you’re learning disability is? Did you know what it was in high school? When did you realize that you had a learning disability?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Did your learning disability have any effect on the career or education choices that you made after high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.6 Did your learning disability have any effect on the educational or job related opportunities that you have had?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Do you feel that you have overcome your learning disability? Why or why not and how do you know?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 Are you still affected by your disability? In what way? Describe.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.1 Can you recall when you first experienced difficulty in school? Was it academic, social, or emotional? How did you feel about school? How did you feel about being diagnosed with a learning disability?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.2 How did you feel about being a part of the learning support program, especially in high school?</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Do you feel being a learning support student</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

delineates school experiences from post-secondary or career experiences, which are coded with a “T” to indicate transitional experiences.
had a positive or negative impact on your high school and adult experiences and decisions?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Can you identify or recall any specific challenges that you faced as a learning support student? Do you still face those same challenges? Why or why not?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Can you identify any specific opportunities that you benefited from as a learning support student? Do you still benefit from those opportunities? Why or why not?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Can you identify the positive and negative aspects of the program and the services that you received?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Thinking back, would you change anything about the learning support program?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Can you recall anything specific about the program that you have used since you graduated? Any services or skills that you obtained?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus group questions were designed in a similar manner to the interview questions. However, they were specifically designed to probe deeper into certain areas where the participants either had similar or contrasting experiences, or areas where more information was needed to answer the research questions. (See Table 3.2).
### Table 3.2: Focus Group Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Questions</th>
<th>Background Info/History</th>
<th>Specific Experiences (S) or (T)</th>
<th>Attitudes, Feelings, Reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FG.1 = Focus group, 1st question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG.1 How would you describe yourself? What are your strengths and weaknesses? At what point did you realize these things about yourself?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG.2 At what point did you set a post-secondary goal for yourself?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG.3 Do you feel that your involvement in the special education program helped to prepare you for your post-secondary goals?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG.4 Do you feel that the diagnosis of your LD and your involvement in the special education program hindered the preparation for your post-secondary and career goals?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG.5 Can you identify either encouraging or discouraging events that happened during your educational career?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG.6 Would you consider your LD to be a risk factor in your life?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG.7 Did your LD affect your self-esteem in any way?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Interview Procedures

Six semi-structured interviews (See Appendix A for a guide to the interview questions) were used to obtain the necessary information from Kirk, Dennis, and Phil. All three participants were interviewed twice and each interview was approximately ninety-minutes in length. The first interview consisted of gathering background information about the participant’s career choice, post-secondary education or training,
and their specific learning difficulties. The second interview focused on their positive and negative experiences and how those experiences related to their post-secondary and career choices.

Upon review of the transcripts from the individual interviews, a brief follow-up interview was also conducted. The follow-up interview was approximately fifteen minutes in length and focused on collecting data that was not part of the initial interview. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were asked to meet briefly, on an individual basis, to describe their personality traits and discuss their definition of success. This information was not discussed in the initial interviews and was necessary to collect prior to the focus group session.

The focus group was not only used to generate additional thoughts as Kirk, Dennis, and Phil shared their stories and experiences with each other, but it was also used as a way to help interpret the findings from the individual interviews. The focus group was conducted with all three participants present on September 22, 2007, and was used as a way to expand on the individual interview responses. Focus group questions were designed to further investigate participant responses as they related to the two research questions. The focus group interview was also approximately ninety-minutes in length.

Information obtained through the interviews and focus group was tape-recorded and transcribed, and memos were used to document interactions between Kirk, Dennis, and Phil. The interview schedule is noted in Table 3.3.
Table 3.3: Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Follow-up Interview</th>
<th>Focus group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The interview process began during the fall of 2006 with the first interview conducted with Kirk on November 13, 2006. Kirk’s first interview took place after school in my classroom. This was a mutually agreed upon site that was quiet and comfortable for both of us. Kirk was approximately 20 minutes early for his interview, and my last class was not over for the day. Kirk sat quietly in the back of the room and waited. I viewed his punctuality as an indication that he was eager to talk about his experiences. I was correct, Kirk spent the first few minutes of the interview discussing what he “had been up to” in the last five years. He told me about his upcoming wedding and his new job as a professional firefighter. I gave him some background about the research study and talked briefly about what I teach. Kirk’s first interview was successful.

Kirk’s second interview was conducted at a private home on December 4, 2006. This site was chosen to accommodate Kirk’s schedule. Kirk was also several minutes early for this interview. We started this interview with a brief review of our last meeting and a quick discussion of how this interview would be slightly different. At the end of the interview, a brief review of the data that was collected revealed that the tape recorder was not functioning properly. As a result, we had to conduct the interview again. Kirk
was a good sport about this and had no problems staying an extra hour. In fact, as he was leaving, he introduced himself to my parents and spent approximately 30 minutes talking to my father about his military experiences. Kirk’s willingness to introduce himself to my father and talk about his experience in the National Guard was an indication that he is a very social person who interacts easily with others.

Dennis’ first interview was conducted on April 13, 2007, also at a private home. Dennis’ interviews were conducted on the weekends to accommodate his class schedule at the university. His interviews were also scheduled to accommodate his commitments with the National Guard. Several days before the interview, I called Dennis to confirm the date and time of our meeting. Although I cannot identify a specific reason why I chose to confirm the interview session with Dennis, my initial conversation with him led me to believe that a confirmation call would be both helpful and necessary. Dennis was approximately ten minutes late for the interview. We spent several minutes informally talking about what he had been doing since high school and discussing the interview procedure. Dennis presented himself as a willing participant. Although he was both polite and friendly, I did not get the sense that Dennis was as comfortable with small talk as Kirk, so I moved to the interview questions more quickly. Dennis seemed relaxed during the interview session and answered the questions promptly and thoroughly.

Dennis’ second interview was originally scheduled for April 19, 2007. I called Dennis to confirm our date and he said he could make it. However, I began to feel uneasy when he did not show up. Noting that he was late for our first meeting, I waited until he was approximately thirty minutes late before I called his cell phone to reconfirm our meeting. Dennis apologized for the delay and asked if we could reschedule the
meeting because he was having car trouble. Together we decided that it would be best to meet the next day.

Dennis’ second interview took place on April 20, 2007. Dennis was approximately ten minutes late for the second interview as well. He arrived around 5:10 PM wearing his military fatigues. He apologized for missing the original interview time and explained that he was delayed because he had to pick up a rental car. Given the fact that Dennis worked all day fulfilling his military commitments, responded to unexpected car trouble, and still made it to the interview within a reasonable time frame, showed his commitment to participate in this research study and his ability to transition between daily tasks. Considering his previous commitments and the demands on his time, I was impressed with his ability to focus on the interview questions and talk easily about his school experiences in special education. In addition to yielding rich descriptions of his feelings and attitudes as a student with LD, the second interview was an indication that Dennis honors his commitments, and is skilled at shifting his attention and focus to different topics and tasks as needed throughout the course of a single day.

The interview process continued into the spring/summer of 2007 with Phil’s first interview occurring on June 15, 2007. Phil’s first interview was conducted at a private home. Due to his work schedule, I called Phil to confirm the date and time of our meetings. This step was necessary for Phil due to the fact that his work hours are not set. Therefore, it was difficult for him to commit to specific times ahead of schedule. I worked my schedule around Phil’s, thankful that he was willing to participate. Phil arrived to the interview casually dressed and presented himself as a friendly young man who enjoyed talking to others. During the first interview, Phil’s responses often
elaborated on experiences that he had with customers and how he was able to handle not so typical situations. He seemed to enjoy telling stories of his work experiences and showed a great deal of pride for the work that he did. I was intrigued by his stories and found it necessary to draw our attention back to the interview questions on several occasions. Like Kirk, Phil’s personality was also identified as an area of strength. His pleasant personality and ability to tell compelling stories puts people at ease and makes them feel comfortable, which is a necessary skill for his job. In addition, his motivation to do well was evident through the enthusiasm he showed for his job.

Phil’s second interview was conducted on June 21, 2007 and took place in my classroom. Again, I contacted Phil prior to the interview to confirm the date and time. Phil arrived to the classroom talking about how weird it was to be in a high school again. The second interview started promptly and Phil began answering the questions. However, during the second interview he was distracted several times by cell phone calls and text messages. On one occasion he left the room for several minutes to take a call but later returned. I asked if he was able to complete the interview or would it be better to reschedule. Phil responded that he would be able to finish the interview and began chatting freely about his experiences in the special education program. When the interview was completed, he apologized for the interruptions and told me if I needed anything else from him to give him a call. Although Phil chatted freely and easily during the second interview, he was obviously distracted by the phone calls and messages. However, I was impressed with his ability to refocus and respond after each interruption.

After a careful review of the interview transcripts and my memos, I realized that I needed some addition information before I could conduct the focus group. My memos
pointed to certain personality traits for each participant, but I was interested to find out how they would describe their own personalities. I also wanted to know how each one defined success. I contacted Kirk, Dennis, and Phil and asked if they would be willing to participate in a brief follow-up interview. All three participants agreed and met me for the follow-up interview.

Kirk was in town and agreed to meet for his follow-up interview on August 15, 2007. Again, he seemed eager to participate and talked about the final stages of preparation before his wedding that coming weekend. The fact that Kirk was willing to meet with me several days before his wedding showed his commitment to the research study as well as his ability to focus on several events at one time. Dennis, who was also in town for Kirk’s wedding, agreed to meet on August 16, 2007. Dennis was on time for the follow-up meeting and arrived in his fatigues. He commented that he was originally scheduled to work on Saturday, the day of Kirk’s wedding, but traded days with another soldier so he could attend. Again, Dennis showed his commitment to the research process while juggling other responsibilities. Phil was the only one who was not able to meet prior to the focus group. Therefore, I conducted his follow-up interview individually on the day of the focus group session. Phil answered the additional questions, but did not elaborate on his answers like he did during the first two interviews.

Once the focus group started, I noticed that Kirk and Dennis answered readily. At first, Kirk seemed to have a more dominant personality as observed through the fact that he initiated the discussion on the first three questions. Dennis replied easily to Kirk’s response, but Phil needed some encouragement to respond. It seemed to take Phil several minutes to get comfortable with the discussion format of the focus group. I encouraged
him to answer the questions by repeating the question to him specifically after Kirk and Dennis responded. Both Kirk and Dennis were respectful, giving Phil enough time to respond before they added their own thoughts. About twenty minutes into the group discussion, I noticed that Kirk backed off. He did not answer as quickly, which gave Dennis and Phil an opportunity to initiate the conversation. It was as if he could sense that he was dominating the conversation, however, he continued to be an active participant. I was impressed with Kirk’s ability to adjust to this social situation.

It was interesting to note that as Kirk backed off, Phil became more engaged, offering more responses and interacting with Dennis easily. I was surprised to notice that Phil seemed to have some difficulty initiating the discussions. Since he was obviously comfortable with the individual interviews I never anticipated that he may not be equally as comfortable with the focus group format. However, once Kirk gave the others the opportunity to respond first, Phil became more involved with the process. Phil received a phone call, which required him to leave the focus group for several minutes, but he was able to regroup and participate once he came back. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil responded well to the focus group questions and to each other giving rich descriptions of their school experiences as well as their thoughts and feelings about having LD. While some censoring was noticed between Kirk and Phil initially, the issue seemed resolved when Kirk became less assertive.

Document Review

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s cumulative special education files were obtained from the participating district’s archives. These files included Individualized Education Plans (IEP), Evaluation and Reevaluation Reports (RR), IQ and standardized test scores,
transition plans, graduation plans, attendance and discipline records, as well as teacher, parent, and other school professional comments on the student’s strengths, weaknesses, achievement, and progress.

Each file was reviewed in its entirety and occurred in conjunction with the first two individual interviews. A Document Review Data Collection Form (Figure 3.3) was designed to organize the information and begin the preliminary analysis.

**Figure 3.3: Document Review Data Collection Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Form</th>
<th>Permanent Record</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Initials:</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collection Date:</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Document:</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type:</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date:</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle School</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Original Date of Referral:</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IQ:</strong></td>
<td>_____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age:</strong></td>
<td>_____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade:</strong></td>
<td>_____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referred by:</strong></td>
<td>__________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific Diagnosis:</strong></td>
<td>__________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reason for referral:

Documentation of academic struggles:

Documentation of positive and negative behaviors:

References to specific attitudes/personality traits:

Recommended interventions:

The first section of the data collection form was used to collect basic identifying information, name, date, type of document, date of document, age and grade of student, original referral information, and specific diagnosis. The second section of the form was
used to record any anecdotal information pertaining to the student, the student’s experiences, or the student’s attitude and personality. These sections were utilized to devise a timeline of events that occurred for each student from the diagnosis of the LD to high school graduation. This timeline was used to verify the data that was collected in the individual and focus group interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

In an attempt to gain a better understanding of how students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences, two semi-structured interviews and one follow-up interview were conducted during mutually convenient times. I used semi-structured interviews to allow for some flexibility to follow the thought process of each participant. The interviews allowed me to take an in-depth look at Kirk, Dennis and Phil’s thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and concerns regarding their school experiences. The focus group allowed all three participants a chance to discuss their thoughts regarding the risk and protective factors that they faced within a small group where they could share their experiences and discuss their thoughts collectively. The interviews and focus group were key methods of data collection.

I analyzed the data throughout the collection process. Gay and Airasian (2000) suggest reading and memoing as the first step of analysis, and describe memoing as a form of thinking on paper that addresses the researchers’ ideas, themes, hunches, and reflections. Considered an early and on-going form of analysis, memos and journals are reflective in nature and serve to keep the data collection focused (Gay and Airasian, 2000). My memos helped me to keep track of my initial thoughts and reactions to my observations as each participant arrived to their respective interviews and responded to
the interview questions. As I described each of the three participants and began to design each case, I realized that it would be helpful to know how Kirk, Dennis, and Phil would describe themselves.

For example, after a review of my notes and the transcribed data, I realized that additional questions needed to be asked regarding Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s individual definitions of success. Therefore, my memos and descriptions were useful in determining the need for an additional, follow-up interview with each participant. I also used this early phase of analysis to guide the development of the focus group questions, which were based on the results of the first two interviews. Once the data was collected, I coded and categorized it to help make the large amount of data more manageable. My initial codes were then used to begin the final phase of analysis.

I used Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) method of coding not only as a way to organize the data and draw conclusions, but also as a way to create a reliable, transparent qualitative study. Text was identified as relevant if it aligned with the research questions. Auerbach and Silverstein suggest reading the text with two thoughts in mind: (1) what do I want to learn, and (2) why do I want to learn it. I wanted to learn how Kirk, Dennis, and Phil categorized their school experiences and I wanted to learn how those experiences impacted their post-secondary decisions. If the text answered either of those two questions in connection with the general research questions, then I initially categorized it as relevant text. I reviewed the relevant text to identify repeating ideas. Within the repeating ideas, themes emerged which consisted of categories such as positive and negative experiences, feelings, and responses, feelings about LD, continued
effects of LD on adult life, personality traits, influences on post-secondary and career choices, and continued evidence of resiliency.

All three participants identified experiences that fell into those specific categories and as I read, I coded their responses accordingly. The themes helped to identify the theoretical constructs that tied into the research that served as the foundation for the study. I was able to identify specific themes that addressed both the positive and negative experiences that Kirk, Dennis, and Phil associated with their LD label. I was also able to identify consistent themes regarding their feelings about having LD and how it continued to have an effect on their adult lives. The first two stages of coding were used to write each individual case as I described in detail the proximal and distal developmental experiences of each individual.

Once the coding phase was completed, I used analytic induction in the final phase of analysis to review the emerging themes. “Analytic induction helps build units of compiled data into constructs that hold true and do not damage the truth of the data” (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994, p. 166). The themes were used to help identify the theoretical constructs. Once the theoretical constructs were identified, I made a series of inferences regarding the connection between the proximal and distal experiences that were identified as risk and protective factors and how Kirk, Dennis, and Phil developed their resilient characteristics individually. Those inferences were used to identify the following theoretical constructs, (1) risk factors associated with LD, (2) protective factors associated with LD, (3) the development of resiliency, and (4) the influence of past experiences on post-secondary and career choices. The theoretical constructs were then used to develop the theoretical narrative.
Carefully coded and analyzed data provided me with a valid, reliable qualitative study. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) propose that a qualitative study is valid and reliable if it is transparent so that other researchers can follow the researcher’s interpretation, is easily communicated, and is coherent so that it fits with the theoretical construct. They also indicate that a valid study is transferable, so that another researcher should be able to follow the same procedures and find similar patterns in a different subculture.

Non-verbal information such as body language, group interaction, censoring, and conforming, was addressed during the analysis of the data collected during the focus group interview. The methods of data collection and analysis described in this section protected the rights of all three participants.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity was achieved in this study through verification of the research design and the identification of a bounded system. Yin (2003) identified five components of research design that are necessary to conduct a valid, reliable study. First, he suggested that when a how or why question was being asked, a multiple case study design was appropriate. This research study fits this criterion by attempting to answer the question of how students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences and how resiliency affects post-secondary and career decisions. Second, the study’s proposition that proximal and distal developmental experiences help to shape student resiliency and have an effect on post-secondary and career decisions reflects the theoretical framework of the study and begins to suggest broad categories of relevant information.
Third, in addition to shaping the research questions and propositions, Yin discussed the identification of the unit of analysis, or the “case” as a way of determining reliability. Identification of the individual case(s) is important to keep the data analysis within feasible limits. Without feasible limits, the reliability of the study can be questioned in terms of what data is being analyzed and how it is being analyzed. This study’s proposition, that students with mild LD develop resiliency as a result of their reactions to positive and negative experiences, which have a cumulative effect on their outcomes for post-secondary and career choices, is specific enough to help identify the relevant information that is found within the boundaries of each individual case. Risk and protective factors are being analyzed to determine how resiliency is developed through students’ proximal and distal developmental influences. This multiple case study design is bounded by the individual’s own account of the risk and protective factors that they encountered through their school experiences. It is further bounded by how those experiences helped to develop resiliency and how resiliency affected the individual’s post-secondary outcomes.

Fourth, identifying the patterns and consistencies within each case that are related to the theoretical framework is critical to linking the data to the original propositions. These patterns are identified within and between each case. Construct validity is achieved by the selection of multiple cases and multiple sources of evidence, which include each student’s cumulative file. Construct validity is also established through the chain of evidence that is provided by the detailed recollection of the students’ academic experiences and supported by evidence found in their cumulative files, which help to link the data that was collected to the theoretical framework.
Reliability was also achieved through triangulation and careful documentation of the procedures that were followed in the data collection and analysis phase of the study. Finally, member checks were conducted as each participant was asked to review his own case study for accuracy. All three participants reported that they felt that they were accurately portrayed in their respective cases. A combination of Gay and Airasian’s (2000) method of analysis and Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) method of coding produced a transparent study that would allow another investigator to arrive at similar conclusions. See research design flow chart (Figure 3.4).
Figure 3.4: Research Design Flow Chart

Development of Research Questions and Propositions

Develop Interview Questions

Sample Selection

ID Possible Candidates

Schedule Interviews

Follow-up Interview

Interview # 1

Interview # 2

Focus Group

Transcribe Data

Preliminary Analysis

Determine need for follow-up interview

Design focus group questions

Continued Analysis

Final Analysis

Coding

Relevant Text

Repeating Ideas

Themes

Theoretical Constructs

Theoretical Narrative

- What do I want to learn?
- Why do I want to learn it?

- Neg. experiences and feelings
- Pos. experiences and feelings
- Feelings about having LD
- Description of personalities
- Continued effects of LD
- Continued evidence of resiliency

- Risk factors associated with LD
- Protective factors associated with LD
- Development of Resiliency
- Influence of past exp. on post-sec. & career choices

Mail letters to perspective participants

Receive responses

2nd mailing

Informed consent

Contact candidates

Purposive sampling

Snowball sampling

• Purposive sampling
• Snowball sampling
Summary

In summary, this chapter focused on the rigor and rationale behind the research design. Through a combination of purposive, criterion, and snowball sampling Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were selected for this study. Using phenomenological interviewing to create a multiple case study design, each participant was interviewed individually on two separate occasions with one additional follow-up interview scheduled prior to the focus group session. The focus group was used as a way to elicit more in-depth information from the three participants regarding their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about their school experiences, and was used in conjunction with the document review as a way to triangulate the data that was collected.

The data that was collected was analyzed using inductive reasoning. Memos and descriptions were used in the initial phase of analysis, followed by the coding process, which was used to identify relevant text, repeating ideas, and emerging themes. This coding process produced a transparent research design by developing a bounded system. Reliability and validity was achieved through the creation of a transparent research design and a bounded system. Triangulating the data through the use of multiple sources, and asking the actual participants to verify each individual case for accuracy strengthened the findings. The methodology used for in this research study was ultimately designed to answer the central research questions, but it was also used to illustrate the link between the research questions, interview questions, theoretical framework, and literature review, that has already been developed. (See Table 3.4).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview and Focus Group Questions</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Literature Review</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences?</td>
<td>1.4 Do you know what your LD is? When did you realize you had LD?</td>
<td>Risk / Protective Factor Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Identification of LD, Labeling, and Characteristics of LD (Kavale &amp; Forness, 1995; Bradley et al., 2002; Henley et al., 2002; Fletcher et al., 2007)</td>
<td>Interview Document Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1 Can you recall when you first had difficulty in school?</td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Identifying risk and protective factors through proximal and distal influences (Margalit, 2003; Wong, 2003; Martin &amp; Martin, 2001)</td>
<td>Interview Document Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 How did you feel about being part of the special education program?</td>
<td>Risk Factor LD as a stigmatizing label (Fletcher et al., 2007; Henley et al., 2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3 Do you feel having LD had a positive or negative impact on your school experiences? Explain</td>
<td>Risk / Protective Factor Risk and Protective Factors (Werner &amp; Smith, 1982, 1992; Garmezy, 1988, 1991; Cosden, 2001; McDermott et al., 2006; Werner &amp; Smith, 1982, 1992; Segal, 1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.4 Can you identify any specific challenges that you faced in school because of your LD?</td>
<td>Risk Factor Risk Factors (McDermott et al., 2006; Werner &amp; Smith, 1982, 1992; Segal, 1988; Cosden, 2001; Gardynik &amp; McDonald, 2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.5 Can you identify any specific opportunities that you had in school because of your LD?</td>
<td>Protective Factor Protective Factors (Werner &amp; Smith, 1982, 1992; Garmezy, 1988, 1991; Cosden, 2001) Interventions (Hallahan &amp; Mercer, 2002; Henley et al., 2002; Gallego et al., 2006, Harry &amp; Klingner, 2007)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.6 Can you identify the positive and negative Distal Developmental Influence Interventions (Hallahan &amp; Mercer, 2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2. Thinking back, would you change anything about the special education services that you received in school?

2.7 Thinking back, would you change anything about the special education services that you received in school?  

Interventions (Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Henley et al., 2002; Gallego et al., 2006, Harry & Klingner, 2007)

### FG. 1 How would you describe yourself, your personality? What are your strengths and weaknesses? At what point did you realize these things about yourself?

Resiliency  

Characteristics of Resiliency (Gardynik & McDonald, 2005; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992)  

Interview

### FG. 5 Can you identify either encouraging or discouraging events that happened during your educational career?

Risk / Protective Factors Distal Developmental Influences Resiliency  

Identifying risk and protective factors through proximal and distal influences (Margalit, 2003; Wong, 2003; Martin & Martin, 2001)  

Focus Group

### FG. 7 Did your LD affect your self-esteem in any way?

Risk / Protective Factors Resiliency  

Risk and Protective Factors (Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992; Garmezy, 1988, 1991; Cosden, 2001; McDermott et al., 2006; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992; Segal, 1988)  

Focus Group

### II. What influence did these experiences have on students’ post-secondary and career choices?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.1 What do you do for a living?</th>
<th>Proximal Developmental Influence</th>
<th>Proximal Developmental Influence (Martin &amp; Martin, 2001)</th>
<th>Phenomenological</th>
<th>Interviewing, Focus Group, Document Review, Multiple Case Study Design</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.2 What did you do after you graduated from high school?</td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence (Martin &amp; Martin, 2001)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Document Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Did you have any problems getting accepted to college or finding a job?</td>
<td>Risk / Protective Factor Distal or Proximal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Transition Planning (IDEA 2004; Walther-Thomas et al., 2000; Trainor, 2007)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Document Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Did your LD have any effect on your career or education choices that you made after high school?</td>
<td>Risk Factor Resiliency</td>
<td>Transition Planning (IDEA 2004; Walther-Thomas et al., 2000; Trainor, 2007)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Document Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Do you feel that you have overcome your LD?</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>Life-long impact of LD (Roffman, 2000; Henley et al., 2002; Gallego et al., 2006)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Risk Factor</td>
<td>Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 Are you still affected by your LD?</td>
<td>Risk Factor</td>
<td>Proximal</td>
<td>Life-long impact of LD</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental Influence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG. 2 At what point did you set a post-secondary goal?</td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>Transition Planning</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>(IDEA 2004; Walther-Thomas et al., 2000; Trainor, 2007)</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG. 3 Do you feel that the special education services that you received in high school helped to prepare you for your post-secondary goals?</td>
<td>Risk / Protective Factor</td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>Interventions (Hallahan &amp; Mercer, 2002; Henley et al., 2002; Gallego et al., 2006, Harry &amp; Klingner, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>Transition Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distal Developmental Influence</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>(IDEA 2004; Walther-Thomas et al., 2000; Trainor, 2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4

Results

Chapter Four begins with a description of how the data was analyzed. However, the chapter focuses on the results from the data sources, primarily the individual interviews, the focus group interview, and the document review. Two charts are included to summarize the data that was collected from the document review. The chapter continues with an explanation of how the case studies were designed. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s stories are introduced with a narrative of their present circumstances and continue to unfold through a series of flashbacks, which sequence their past school experiences as students with LD. The case studies conclude with a discussion of how each student’s past experiences influenced their post-secondary or career decisions. Repeating ideas and themes were identified as they emerged through each case and are expressed in detail in Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s own words. Finally, this chapter concludes with a theoretical narrative describing the findings that ultimately address the two research questions: I). How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through school experiences? II). What influence did these experiences have on students’ career or post-secondary choices?

Analysis, Coding, and Interpretation

Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) technique for analyzing data was followed closely in the coding and interpretation stages of this research study. Their method of analysis was useful in producing a transparent study where readers can clearly identify the steps used to organize, code, and interpret the data. First, Auerbach and Silverstein describe the steps of coding as a staircase, “moving from a lower to a higher (more abstract) level of understanding” (p. 35). The lower levels include raw text, relevant text,
and repeating ideas, with a gradual increase to more abstract levels through the
identification of themes, theoretical constructs, the theoretical narrative, and the research
concern. They suggest using relevant text, repeating ideas, themes, and theoretical
constructs not only as a way to organize and analyze the data but also as a way to develop
the theoretical narrative used in the final stages of analysis.

Starting with raw text at the lowest level of understanding, Auerbach and
Silverstein (2003) suggest that the researcher transform the raw text into relevant text by
reading the original transcripts with two questions in mind, (1) What do I want to learn,
and (2) Why do I want to learn it? Text was considered relevant if it answered either
question. I used the following set of questions listed in Table 4.1 to identify my relevant
text.

**Table 4.1: Relevant Text Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did I want to learn?</th>
<th>Why did I want to learn it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did Kirk, Dennis, and Phil describe their school experiences?</td>
<td>To identify potential risk and protective factors during school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What resilient traits were evident in their experiences?</td>
<td>To determine if specific experiences helped to develop resiliency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did Kirk, Dennis, and Phil describe their current career or post-secondary school experiences?</td>
<td>To determine if there is a link between past school experiences and their current career or post-secondary experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As per Auerbach and Silverstein’s suggestion, I used the cut and paste option in
Microsoft Word to move text from the original transcripts to a new document titled,
Relevant Text. As I read the original transcripts, I underlined the passages that addressed
what I wanted to learn and moved them into the relevant text document thus creating a
new document that contained only relevant text from the first and second set of
interviews as well as the focus group.
Next, using the relevant text documents, I grouped together repeating ideas. Repeating ideas occur when “research participants [express] the same idea, sometimes with the same or similar words” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 54). I used the same process, cutting and pasting the repeating ideas found in the relevant text into another document titled, Repeating Ideas. The cut and paste method was utilized throughout the analysis phase including the identification of emerging themes, which occurred when I grouped sets of repeating ideas together. At this stage of analysis, a total of three sets of documents were created, relevant text, repeating ideas, and emerging themes, which organized the raw data into three constructs that related to the theoretical framework.

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) recommended using an outline to graphically organize the repeating ideas, themes, and theoretical constructs that are used in the interpretation and development of the narrative. Additional codes were used to identify the participant and data source for each repeating idea. For example, (K1, FG), indicates that the repeating idea was Kirk’s idea and was mentioned in both the first interview as well as the focus group. An example from the outline that I developed is displayed below in Figure 4.1. The outline is identified in its entirety in Appendix D.
I. Risk Factors Associated with LD – (Theoretical Construct)
   A. Negative experiences – (Theme)
      1. “It was hard trying to explain why [I left the room]” (K, 1)
      2. “The biggest problem that I had was the negativity of some of the other students [with LD]” (K, 2); “All the students acted out, like, just because you’re in learning support doesn’t mean you can act out” (P, 2)
      3. “I’m having trouble now because the instructors are not necessarily teachers” (K, 2)
      4. “She [college professor] didn’t teach the information” (D, 1)
      5. “It [LD class] was too easy. It was all repetitive. I think it kept me from moving up in English” (D, 1)
      6. “I still have trouble with tests” (K, 2; D, 2)
      7. “We had to read out loud. I was always stuttering and not doing that great” (P, 1)
      8. “When a teacher would say something like, so you need to go to this room to take the test” (P, 2) (Repeating Ideas)

Once the data was coded, I prepared for the theoretical narrative. According to Auerbach and Silverstein (2003):

A theoretical narrative describes the process that the research participants reported in terms of your theoretical constructs. It uses your theoretical constructs to organize people’s subjective experience into a coherent story. It employs people’s own language to make their story real and valid. (p. 73)

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) recommended six steps that help to create the narrative from the text. The first step requires an explicit statement of the research concern and theoretical framework. This step helps to identify the beliefs that influence the information that is included and excluded during the analysis process. For this study, my research concern is to learn more about how students with LD develop resiliency through their school experiences and how those experiences influence post-secondary and career choices. The theoretical framework attempts to illustrate how the risk/resiliency model supports my claim that students with LD develop resiliency through their responses to the
risk and protective factors that they experience in life. The design of my research questions and theoretical framework led me to read the data looking for clues that pointed to the development of student resiliency through past experiences.

The theoretical narrative continues following the repeating ideas, themes, and theoretical constructs outline. The findings are presented in the form of a story written in a way that links the participants’ own words to the theoretical framework. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggested the following format for writing theoretical narratives:

- Begin the narrative by describing the research concerns;
- Describe the first theoretical construct as it pertains to the participants, breaking it down into the relevant themes and repeating ideas;
- Use the repeating ideas to tell the story in the participant’s own words;
- Put the theoretical constructs in parentheses;
- Put the repeating ideas in quotes;
- Talk about the participants in third person – “they” (p. 74-75)

In summary, the data was coded in such a way that repeating ideas, themes, and theoretical constructs were identified. The repeating ideas, themes, and constructs were organized into an outline that was used to interpret the findings and write the theoretical narrative.

Data Sources

The following section addresses the results from the different data sources that were used in this study. The interview locations as well as my first impressions of each participant are described. The section continues with a description of the focus group session and the results of the document review.
Interviews

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol that was designed to help Kirk, Dennis, and Phil recall their school experiences as students with LD, as well as reveal their feelings about those experiences (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted at one of two mutually agreed upon sites. The first site location was my classroom at school. This location was chosen because of its central location and availability. I thought the bright, open atmosphere of the classroom setting might aid in the recollection of past school experiences. The large worktable located in the front of the classroom provided a nice space where we could sit and talk. Despite the fact that I thought it was an ideal location; the classroom was only used twice. Kirk selected the classroom for his first interview and Phil selected it for his second interview.

The second location was a private home. Also centrally located, this site was utilized to accommodate for evening and weekend interviews. The large center island in the kitchen provided a comfortable place to sit and talk with each participant. I was able to offer Kirk, Dennis, and Phil refreshments as they arrived for their interviews and the kitchen surroundings added to the casual atmosphere for which I was looking. The finished game room and all season room were also available for interviews and provided seating arrangements that were conducive for conversation. All three participants selected the private residence most often. This site was used for all of Dennis’ interviews to accommodate for his weekend availability. Dennis chose to be interviewed in the kitchen on both occasions, and Kirk and Phil selected the game room for their respective interviews.
A more public venue such as a coffee shop like Panera or Starbucks was also considered when deciding on the interview locations, but was not selected due to the fact that the interviews were tape-recorded and I was concerned about background noise.

*First impressions of Kirk.* My first observation of Kirk noted that he was consistently early for his interviews. I perceived Kirk to be a very responsible, mature young man as evidenced by his punctuality and manners as he arrived for his interviews. Kirk illustrated a level of responsibility and maturity in the first interview when he described his plan for finishing college,

I got a lot of things I need to get done with the county first that pertains to my job. Not that I have to, but there are three pay scales and to move from one pay scale to another, you have to take job related classes. I want to get them done next semester and then start school again next year. (11/13/2006)

The fact that he has a plan to take job related courses to voluntarily increase his pay and improve his knowledge shows maturity. Kirk plans to finish college even though he is “pursuing his dream” (11/13/2006) as a full-time firefighter indicating that he is taking responsibility to finish something that he started.

His laid-back personality was obvious through his ability to chat and make small talk as we acquainted ourselves. In fact, he described himself as an easy-going guy who gets along well with others. I got the sense that Kirk was a highly motivated person and he alluded to that motivation when he expressed the fact that he has had to overcome a lot and push himself in life.

I mean I could have really easily packed it in early in my career and been in special ed. the whole way through and never did anything with my life, cause I
didn’t think I could do it, but I mean I don’t know if I pushed myself, or if other people pushed me, I’m not sure how it went, but I was able to overcome a lot of stuff and it helped me pursue a career. (11/13/2006)

First impressions of Dennis. My first observation of Dennis was that he was consistently late. I was frequently concerned that he might not follow through with the entire interview process. My initial reaction to some of Dennis’ interview responses was that he really did not seem to have the same drive and motivation that I recognized in Kirk. He talked about how he procrastinates. He said, “I just can’t motivate myself to get up and do stuff” (4/13/2007).

Dennis’ responses and actions revealed that he was a complex person with a lot of contrasting thoughts and emotions. Even my observations of him were in contrast. He was habitually late and verbalized his problem with motivation. However, I could not ignore the fact that he was a full-time college student and a reservist in the National Guard. Nor could I ignore the fact that he voluntarily agreed to participate in my research study and honored that commitment. He stated that he struggles to get motivated, and I sensed his lack of drive, yet his daily responsibilities and willingness to participate in the research study did not support that observation. In fact, the more I got to know Dennis, the more impressed I was with his independence. This was evident in his feelings on receiving learning support services. He said, “I like to do things on my own. I don’t like people helping me. I got too much help in high school and elementary school. I just don’t want help anymore, I’m sick of it” (4/20/2007).

First impressions of Phil. My first observation of Phil was that he was a friendly young man who enjoyed talking to others. During the first interview, Phil commented
that he had “the lowest number of customer complaints.” When asked what he attributed this to he said,

I can just go into a customer’s house and start talking to them. Find something to talk to them about and just talk about it. If you walk in and see that they’re an Eagle’s fan or a Browns’ fan you just start talking to them about football.

(6/15/2007)

Phil often elaborated on experiences that he had with customers and how he was able to handle not so typical situations. He seemed to enjoy telling stories of his work experiences and showed a great deal of pride for the work that he did. I was intrigued by his stories.

We have what’s called recall. And like if someone goes out and messes something up, then they leave, like they go out to fix something and three days later it’s leaking again, they call back in and we have a warranty, so we come back out for free. So I went out for free to a call, and the lady was all mad about it, fighting with dispatch, fighting with my managers, so they sent me out. I ended up selling her a $3,200 dig job inside, and then a $6,000 dig outside. She was really happy afterwards. She gave me a customer compliment. (6/15/2007)

Phil’s pleasant personality was observed and evidenced repeatedly throughout the interview process.

Analysis of First Impressions

As a whole, the individual interviews revealed that Kirk had a positive school experience despite his LD, Dennis seemed to have a negative experience because of his
LD and the support services that were offered, and Phil had a positive experience, but would change some things about how the support was offered.

Q: How did you feel about being part of the learning support program in high school?

Kirk: I liked it. I appreciated what was provided for me in the learning support program because I was able to take it out and use it in my career and post high school, in college and what I am doing now. I was able to take what was given to me and expand on it. The help was there if I needed it, but I didn’t want to rely on it (12/4/2006).

Q: Do you feel that being a learning support student had a positive or negative impact on your school experiences?

Dennis: Negative. Since I was in learning support and they took me out of it, it was harder for me to catch up. So it took me a lot longer to finish English things than it took most people (4/20/2007)

Q: How did you feel about being a part of the learning support program in high school?

Phil: I liked being in it, I just didn’t like people knowing that I was in it. It definitely made the day a little easier, but it was a little too easy on us. Like, I know I failed a lot of tests. A lot of incomplete homework assignments. I think I should have been reprimanded for it (6/21/2007).

The individual interviews provided rich data that not only supported several of my initial observations, but also shed some light on Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s feelings and attitudes about their school experiences. The data collected during the interview process will be discussed and analyzed in more detail later in this chapter, starting with the individual case studies.

Focus Group

The focus group session also took place at a private residence on September 22, 2007. Again, Kirk was early for the interview and both Dennis and Phil were late. Aside
from a possible censoring issue that was observed early on, Kirk, Dennis, and Phil interacted very well as shown in the following passage.

Q: Do you feel that your involvement in the learning support program helped to prepare you for your post-secondary goals?

Phil: Somewhat, it was kind of nice when you got a longer time to take a test, a little bit of help. I think it was just school in general, if you wanted to go forward.

Q: So just high school in general helped you out?

Phil: Yeah. I’d say that.

Dennis: I didn’t think it helped me that much. I was in there [support classes] for English, so it had nothing to do with my goals now, cause it’s all math, and there’s no real English in accounting. So I really don’t think it helped that much.

Q: The program didn’t help you?

Dennis: No.

Kirk: It probably helped you out, but it didn’t help you out specifically for any type of subject.

Dennis: No. I don’t think it helped me out.

Kirk: No?

Kirk: I would get help when I needed it, but it wasn’t like I was depending on support to get through whatever I was doing. I was using it more like as a resource than a tool. I think it helped me out, yeah (9/22/2007).

This passage illustrates several things. First, it shows a positive interaction among Kirk, Dennis, and Phil. Second, it validates the responses that were given by each participant during the individual interviews. During the focus group discussion, Kirk echoed his thoughts from the first and second interviews with explanations of his positive school experiences and his appreciation of the support services that were offered to him.
Dennis expressed on more than one occasion his dissatisfaction with the support services that he received and the negative feelings he had while he was in school. Phil repeatedly showcased his pleasant personality and storytelling ability throughout the interview and focus group process, indicating that he liked the support services that he received, but would change the way they were delivered.

Finally, the consistency between the interview responses and the focus group responses revealed that the information that was obtained in the interview process accurately portrayed each participant’s true feelings. As the selected focus group passage suggests, Dennis had a much different experience than Kirk and Phil, but was not afraid to share his opposing views. His negative feelings were expressed repeatedly during the individual interviews and did not change during the focus group discussion despite Kirk’s attempt to sway his thoughts. Dennis continued to stay true to his negative feelings firmly stating, “No, I don’t think it helped me out” (Focus Group).

*Document Review – Cumulative Files*

The document review served two purposes: (1) to triangulate the data that was obtained in the individual and focus group interviews, and (2) to serve as an aide to developing the individual case studies. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s cumulative files were obtained from the participating school district’s archived records. The cumulative files held official documents such as psychological reports, reevaluation reports (RR), individualized education plans (IEP), IQ scores (WAIS-111 and WISC-111), and standardized test scores, as well as teacher annotations of Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s academic progress, behaviors, and interventions. The problem with the cumulative files was that they were unexpectedly incomplete. Each file was missing at least one
Once the available documents were identified, they were reviewed for details such as the date of initial referral and grade, original diagnosis, IQ scores, academic achievement and difficulties, post-secondary plans, and teacher annotations of behavior and personality. The data gathered in the following chart was used in the development of each case study. (See Table 4.3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Date of Initial Referral, Reason, &amp; Grade</th>
<th>Original Diagnosis</th>
<th>IQ Score</th>
<th>Continued Academic Difficulties</th>
<th>Academic Achievement</th>
<th>Teacher annotations of behaviors</th>
<th>Description of personality</th>
<th>Post-Secondary plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kirk</td>
<td>10/8/91</td>
<td>Specific LD: Weak reading skills, word recognition, &amp; word attack (RR, 91)</td>
<td>V : 113 P : 102 FS: 108 (WAIS, RR, 00)</td>
<td>Given the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) Kirk continues to show weakness in spelling and written expression. (RR, 96).</td>
<td>“Kirk’s behavior is above average” (RR, 91).</td>
<td>Well-adjusted (RR, 91)</td>
<td>Kirk plans to attend a four-year college with academic support for either sports medicine or management (IEP, 98).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>GR: 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Kirk puts forth his best effort, participates and seeks help when needed. He also has good attendance” (RR, 98).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kirk will enlist in the National Guard with basic training beginning in June, 2001. He will enroll at the university in Jan of 2002 as a full time student. Kirk’s instruction is academic in nature focusing on career education (IEP, 00).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>4/23/93</td>
<td>Specific LD: Relative weakness in short term memory, reading, spelling, and number and letter reversals (RR, 93)</td>
<td>V : 107 P : 102 FS: 105 (WAIS-III, RR, 05)</td>
<td>On the Stanford Achievement Test administered in first grade, Dennis had average scores in all areas except contextual reading, and phonetic awareness (95).</td>
<td>“Dennis’ social adjustment appears to be adequate although he does have some regressive tendencies. He uses his time wisely and works well independently” (RR, 93).</td>
<td>Cooperative, works well with others, (RR, 93, RR, 02, 05)</td>
<td>Dennis’ planned course of study is academic in nature with a focus on advanced placement and college preparatory classes (IEP, 05).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>GR: K</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Dennis has made”</td>
<td>Eager to perform, likes to please, good attitude for learning (RR, 93, 95, 05)</td>
<td>Confident (RR &amp; IEP, 95)</td>
<td>Dennis plans to join the National Guard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
significant progress in reading and language arts since he was diagnosed with LD” (RR, 95).

At the high school level, Dennis’ mother reported that “his willingness to take AP calculus is an indication of strength and academic achievement” (RR, 05).

On the Stanford Achievement Test administered in first grade, Phil received below average scores, which demonstrated a two-year delay in visual perceptual organization, reading comprehension, language expression, and spelling (RR, 94).

On the Stanford Achievement Test administered in fifth grade, Phil earned the following grade equivalencies: Reading: 2.6 Math: 3.6 Language: 2.5 (RR, 98).

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Cases

The following case studies of Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were created from the extensive data that was collected from the document review, the individual interviews, and the focus group discussion. Each case paints a picture of each individual’s life through the recognition of proximal and distal developmental experiences. Each individual is introduced with an explanation of their proximal experiences; their current post-secondary education or career circumstances. Their proximal experiences included a description of their daily routines and their current definition of success. Flashbacks were used to describe Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s distal experiences, which included their thoughts and feelings about their diagnosis of LD, the coping strategies that they employed while in school and their salient memories of either positive or negative school experiences.

Distal experiences continue to be addressed in each case by describing how Kirk, Dennis, and Phil decided to pursue their post-secondary or career paths. The academic and social factors that influenced their post-secondary or career decisions are part of each individual life story. The case studies conclude with a return to present circumstances through the identification of their proximal experiences, their overall satisfaction with life, and the identification of future goals.
A multiple case study design was chosen to explore the development of resiliency in Kirk, Dennis, and Phil individually but also as part of a larger subculture of students with LD.

*Kirk*

Kirk, a 2001 graduate, is a recently married reservist in the National Guard, and is currently “living his dream” (11/13/2006) as a professional firefighter. Life at the firehouse consists of 24 hour shifts. A shift that begins at 6:00 a.m. one day is not completed until 6:00 a.m. the following day. The benefit of a 24 hour shift is the time off in between. When Kirk is finished with his shift he gets the rest of the day off plus the next day. On a typical day he gets up around 4:30 a.m. and is at the firehouse by 5:30 a.m. If he is not running a call, he spends the first few hours of the day studying manuals and doing homework or doing housework such as cleaning, mopping, or checking the equipment that will be used that day.

The firefighters are responsible for their own meals, so by 11:00 a.m. Kirk or one of the other guys prepare lunch. During the afternoon, the firefighters run drills. Like any other household, chores are a must. After dinner they pitch in to clean up and Kirk resumes his studying, finishes homework, or just relaxes before bed. The challenge is to follow through with all of those tasks in between running fire calls. Kirk reports that on average, he runs between twelve and fifteen calls a day.

One of the things Kirk loves about his job is the teamwork. Working together towards a common goal is something he really enjoys. He said,

I love the teamwork aspect of it. I mean, I grew up playing sports, I was always around people, and the military taught me to work together with others and how
to interact with others well. I couldn’t stand sitting in an office space, by myself, typing on the computer. I like being around other people. (11/13/2006)

Being around other people is also a downside of life in the firehouse. It is like having six roommates at one time. There is always the potential of one grumpy person putting the other the firefighters in a bad mood. With the drama of the fire calls, Kirk finds interpersonal drama to be unnecessary. He said,

One of the hardest parts of the job is dealing with different people. I work in a station with six other people, so you got six other attitudes. I mean somebody’s having a bad day, and somebody else is having a good day, and the person that’s having a bad day is going to be grumpy and makes everyone else grumpy. I mean it’s just drama. That’s the hardest part. I grew up doing the job that I do, volunteering, so the job aspect comes easy to me, it’s the other things, the interpersonal. (11/13/2006)

Life at the firehouse is not always glamorous, but Kirk loves it. It is his dream job and it plays a big role in his feeling of success. As a young adult, he is married, supports himself and his wife, and goes to a job that he loves every day, which is allowing Kirk and his new wife to purchase their own home. In Kirk’s own words, he said, “I think I am successful…I am successful” (9/22/2007).

Kirk has not always experienced the same level of success that he is currently experiencing today. Early in his academic career Kirk was identified with LD. As a third grade student, Kirk’s teacher noticed that he had weak reading skills, specifically poor word attack and word recognition skills. She contacted his parents and suggested an evaluation for a specific learning disability. The evaluation determined that Kirk did
have a specific learning disability in the areas of reading and written expression (RR, 1991). Although he was having difficulty in reading, his evaluation revealed his full-scale IQ score of 120 (RR, 1991), placing him in the superior category of intelligence and contradicting his academic achievement. Throughout elementary school, Kirk continued to struggle with reading, spelling, and written language skills, (IEP & RR, 1991 & 1996) and often left his general education class to attend smaller, more individualized support classes, which embarrassed him sometimes (12/4/2006). Kirk responded to his embarrassment by telling his peers that he just needed more help.

As Kirk got older and started to understand his LD, he accepted the fact that he needed extra help and used it to his advantage. He took his diagnosis as a challenge and by middle school started setting goals and challenging himself to achieve them. One of the goals he set was to “get into the routine of everyone else” (11/13/2006). Kirk enjoyed his academic support classes because he liked the one-on-one instruction. His teachers described Kirk as personable, friendly, and cooperative, very mature, organized, and motivated. They said he strives for success and uses his strengths to overcome his academic weaknesses (IEP & RR, 1991-2000). Kirk’s motivation and perseverance paid off. By the time he was in high school he was mainstreamed for all of his academic classes. He still reported to the support class for extra help, but used it as a resource only. At the high school level, Kirk continued his goal setting routine and began making plans for life as an adult.

As a senior in high school, Kirk decided to pursue a career as a professional firefighter (IEP Transition Plan, 2000). His transition to adulthood began prior to graduation when he enlisted in the National Guard. His decision to enlist was driven by
the need to gain military points for the civil service exam. Knowing that professional firefighting jobs were few and far between Kirk also applied to college, “in case the firefighting thing didn’t work out” (11/13/2006). Getting into college was more difficult than he thought. Originally the university replied stating that his grades were not good enough for acceptance. He was eventually accepted, but specifically recalled needing the help of his guidance counselor to get in. He said,

[My counselor] wrote me an excellent letter of recommendation and said give the kid a chance, he is a hard worker, basically put the blame on him [the counselor] if things didn’t work out. He really laid it on the line for me. (11/13/2006)

After high school, Kirk trained with the National Guard and began his college career after he completed his basic training. While in college Kirk continued to struggle with reading and written language until he met his wife. She became his support system and helped him though his English classes. They would read together and discuss passages in small chunks, which helped him to understand better. She also edited papers for him and challenged him to keep going when things got tough. In addition to focusing on his academic studies, Kirk actively pursued professional firefighting jobs. He applied for jobs in several states and struggled through several civil service exams before he landed his current position. When Kirk was hired, he was forced to make a decision, either to finish his final year of college or take the firefighting job and finish college at a later date. Since the firefighting job was out of state, Kirk chose to accept the fireman position and made plans to finish college later.

Today, Kirk is taking classes to move up on the county pay scale. He said he is still affected by his LD to the point where he has to read something several times before
he understands it. He also said he struggles with information that is put out to a mass audience stating, “there are going to be parts of it that I just don’t get” (11/13/2006). When he is in class at the fire academy he asks a lot of questions to make sure he understands everything, and he is proud of the fact that he has learned how to be a good student, to study and take tests on his own (9/22/2007). He has accepted the fact that he has LD and does not let it interfere with his everyday life because he can’t. He said,

I guarantee if I’m sitting in the back of the ambulance and this person is dying and I go, hold on, I got a learning disability, I need to slow down, the guy’s going to die on me. I mean I’m dealing with things that are split second decisions. I can’t really be like, hold on here, let’s slow down and talk your way through this. (9/22/2007).

Dennis

Dennis, a 2005 graduate, is a full-time college student majoring in accounting and considering a minor in education. He is also a reservist in the National Guard. A typical day in Dennis’ sixteen credit semester starts around 8:30 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and 8:00 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. His days are consumed with classes, lectures, and study sessions. His days typically end around 7:30 p.m. with a calculus class, and then more studying or writing papers. A study session for Dennis involves a review of his notes or rereading the chapter(s) in his textbooks. Dennis said this usually takes a while since he has trouble comprehending what he reads.

The freedom that college students enjoy is often a blessing and a curse, and Dennis’ circumstances are no different. At the university he can do what he wants when he wants without anyone telling him what to do (4/13/2007), but without anyone telling
him what to do he tends to procrastinate. One weekend per month, Dennis comes home from school to fulfill his obligations with the National Guard where he trains in different aspects of firefighting. Dennis is able to juggle the responsibilities of college life while honoring the commitments he made with the National Guard quite well. He accomplishes things everyday, which makes him feel successful. The scholarship that he received to go to school and the fact that he owns his own car also add to his current feelings of success. As a young adult, Dennis feels like he is successful for his age (8/16/2007).

However, as a youngster in kindergarten, Dennis was not experiencing much success when it came to reading. Despite the fact that he repeated kindergarten, he continued to have difficulties learning to read. Dennis was evaluated for LD and was officially diagnosed in 1993. His specific LD was manifested through a weak short-term auditory memory, reading, spelling, and number and letter reversals. His evaluation revealed a full-scale IQ score of 105, indicating average intelligence (RR, 1993). Dennis liked school and did not remember having many academic struggles. In fact, when his parents told him that he had LD, he did not understand. Throughout his elementary career, Dennis started to notice that he was finishing his work before everyone else, but continued in the support class year after year. He saw other students who were not doing as well return to the general education class before him. This added to Dennis’ confusion about why he was in the class and created an area of frustration for him. He said,

It was frustrating. Students that weren’t doing the work as fast as me, weren’t doing as well in learning support, were taken out [of the support class] before me and that made me feel like I was doing something wrong in class, but I knew I
wasn’t because I was getting 100% on all the papers, 100% on all of the tests.

(4/13/2007)

By the time Dennis reached fourth and fifth grade, his frustration was on the rise. He no longer enjoyed going to school and felt bad because he was in support classes.

By middle school, Dennis’ frustration turned into anger and he remembers being mad about his situation. He said he would go home and just yell at his parents because he did not want to be in the class (4/20/2007), but his parents, along with his teachers, felt that the support class was the best place for him to receive his English instruction. In response to his frustration, Dennis would shut down from time to time and refuse to do his work. He reported,

I didn’t see the point of doing the work. I was never going to get out of the class.

I didn’t see the point of trying as hard as I was if I was never going to go any further, so I just stopped every once in a while and relaxed. (4/20/2007)

Dennis would eventually begin to work again because he would get sick of being yelled at. This cycle repeated itself throughout his middle and high school careers.

By the time Dennis went to high school, he was mainstreamed for all of his academic classes, which included an honors calculus class.

I might have been a slow reader my whole life, you never know, but I never got the chance to read harder books and learn faster. I was just learning too slow at the time. They kept it at a lower level. They didn’t challenge us [in the support classes]. What I remember was being taught 6th grade English and then I was being taught 11th grade English. It didn’t help at all. (4/20/2007)
Although he had negative feelings towards his support classes and his school experiences in general, Dennis’ teachers described him as cooperative, eager to perform, and noted that he had a good attitude for learning (RR & IEP, 1993-2005). In addition his teachers described Dennis as confident, responsible, highly motivated, attentive, and a pleasure to work with (RR & IEP, 1995-2005).

While he was in high school, Dennis made plans for his post-secondary education. He considered careers in both accounting and firefighting. He thought about a career in accounting because his academic strength was mathematics and “there was no English in accounting” (4/13/2007). Dennis considered a career in firefighting because he was always interested in firefighting and already had some training as a volunteer fireman. Ultimately, Dennis decided to join the National Guard to continue his fire training, and used the ROTC program to pay for his college credits (IEP Transition Plan, 2005). He figured if the military was going to pay for another area of education while training him to be a fireman, he would take advantage of it. Dennis was accepted at his college of choice and began his classes after he completed basic training.

Today, as a college student, Dennis is still affected by his LD. He has to read things twice to understand them, so it takes him longer to read than most people. Furthermore, he commented on the difficulties he has writing papers. He attributed his writing problems to not learning how to write academic papers while in the support class. He strongly believes that if he would have participated in the general education curriculum for English, he would be a better reader and writer today. Despite seeking the help of an outside tutor, Dennis recently had to drop a history class because he just could
not get through the volume of work fast enough. He will need to take the course again, but plans to take another instructor that may suit his learning style better (11/13/2007).

Overall, Dennis feels he is successful and is satisfied with his current life circumstances. He chooses to leave the past in the past and does not think much about his high school career. “It’s high school. Once you get out of high school, it’s over. You just don’t think about it as much cause you’re not in it” (9/22/2007). He also doesn’t think his LD had a negative impact on his career decisions. He said, “I mean, I got into college, I did what I wanted to do. Nothing really came of me being in it [support classes]” (9/22/2007).

Phil

Phil, a 2005 graduate, is a professional plumber with a national company. Working for a national company, Phil is not only expected to be a plumber, but a salesman too. Along with fixing leaking pipes and maintaining the quality standards that define the company, Phil is expected to sell additional services, products, and extended warranties. His workday starts at 5:00 a.m. with the shop meeting, which is used to trouble shoot and discuss how to handle specific situations. It is also used to review sales rules. The shop meetings are both informative and motivational since the best and worst sales are identified during the meeting as well as which plumber had the most complaints or compliments.

Phil’s shift begins after the shop meeting. His days are never typical. The company services eight counties in the area, so he never knows where he is going to end up. Every day brings in new calls with different customers, which he enjoys. He has worked in the homes of some prominent sports figures, which has afforded him the
opportunity to meet athletes such as Mario Lemieux and Troy Polamalu. Phil does not always know when his shift will be over, which is a down side to the job. For example, Phil described a situation where he was headed home at 5:00 p.m., but decided to take one more call. It turned out to be a sewer call and he was on the job until 3:30 a.m. His day is over when the job is done. He said he was frustrated with himself for taking the call, but felt really good when it was completed. He was glad he was able to solve the problem and finish the job. In addition to his regular shifts, he is expected to be on call for one night every two months.

Phil is still learning the trade, but is proud of the fact that he is now trusted with a company van and can travel to calls on his own. His goal is to join the company’s excavating crew, so in addition to his daily calls, he attends nightly classes to train as a heavy machinery operator. Phil reports that he is the youngest plumber in the company and is ranked 64th in overall sales and 50th in customer compliments. He attributes his success to his ability to be a chameleon and blend in (6/15/2007). Phil is able to walk into a person’s home and talk about anything. He said he just looks around for things that might spark a conversation. Phil has been working for this company for one year and is very proud of his accomplishments.

When Phil was in first grade he was referred for psychological testing. His teacher noticed his poor academic achievement, specifically in the areas of spelling and reading and suspected that Phil had LD. His test results indicated that he had average intelligence, but showed a significant weakness in the areas of visual perceptual organization, reading, math, and spelling (RR, 1994). At the time, Phil did not realize he had LD. It wasn’t until third grade that he realized he was having problems, but he still
did not think he had LD. “Everyone else was reading and I was having problems. I never thought I had a disability, I just thought I was dumb” (6/21/2007). He specifically remembered going to the support classes and said,

I liked being in it, I just didn’t like people knowing that I was in it. It definitely made the day a little easier because you’re in class with people with the same problems. It’s not like they’re reading Shakespeare and you still can’t read The Cat in the Hat. (6/15/2007)

Phil was always described as having a great personality. His teachers described him as cooperative, helpful, courteous, polite, attentive, diligent, and honest (RR & IEP, 1994-2003). However, despite his great personality and positive attitude, the fact that he did not want people to know he had LD had consequences. At one time, Phil used to try to earn the perfect attendance award in school, but by the time he was in middle school and high school, he hated going to school. His absences continued to accumulate and when he did go to school he was a self-described escape artist (6/15/2007). He frequented trips to the rest room and nurse’s office to protect himself from the embarrassment of reading in front of his peers, particularly in high school.

“When you’re a sophomore in high school, everyone is supposed to know how to read, and when you’re not any good at reading and when you’re sitting there reading something and you’re having problems, you look stupid. I found a way to get out of it at all costs. I drank a lot of water” (6/15/2007).

Phil didn’t take his high school experience seriously. He attributed this attitude to the fact that he was permitted to retake exams again and again until he passed them. Furthermore, he said he didn’t turn in his homework assignments, didn’t study, and
skipped classes over and over and was never held accountable for his actions, stating, “I should have been reprimanded more” (6/21/2007). While most students spend their senior year of high school preparing for life after graduation, Phil was in denial that high school was coming to an end. He half-heartedly listed attending a trade school for auto mechanics as his post-secondary career choice, but never had any formal plans in place (IEP Transition Plan, 2005). In fact, his denial almost caused him to not graduate. He described the support he received from one of the instructional aides and said if it wasn’t for her he would have never graduated (6/15/2007).

After high school Phil spent a year bouncing from one job to another, partying, and traveling with his friends. Within the course of one year he was fired from his job as a personal care assistant at a nursing home, was laid off from his job as an over head crane operator, and took a road trip to Philadelphia with some friends that lasted more than two weeks. They left with nothing but the clothes on their backs. When asked why they went to Philadelphia he said, “We wanted a cheese steak” (6/15/2007). Phil went wherever the wind blew him, but deep down he was nervous about his future. Because of his LD, the thought of college never even crossed his mind. He found himself out of high school for one year with no definite plans, no direction. He remembered comparing himself to his brother and feeling like he had no skills, talent, or ability. He said, “I felt like I had nothing” (6/15/2007).

One night Phil was on his way to meet some friends and made a wrong turn. He happened to turn around in the parking lot of the plumbing company and noticed that they were hiring. Phil took down the number, filled out the application, and was hired several weeks later. Today, Phil feels like he has found his niche. He said, “This is the
first job that I have taken seriously. I guess it grew out of wanting to grow up” (6/15/2007).

Even though his job is primarily a hands-on job requiring physical activity, his LD is still an issue. He is required to fill out invoices and write reports daily. He is constantly looking up words to check the correct spelling and has learned to use the appropriate abbreviations when necessary. He didn’t want any of the guys on the job to say “Wow, this dude can’t spell” (6/15/2007). He also developed a sales report table to keep track of the money that he earns for the company. Because his pay is based on commission, he needed a way to account for his earnings to verify his pay check. The other guys that he works with liked his form so much that they made copies of it and use it themselves.

Phil’s life turned around when he was hired with the plumbing company. In addition to having a job that he loves, he now has a girlfriend, which is motivation for him to make something of himself. He described his girlfriend as a smart person who knows everything (6/15/2007). Phil made the decision to improve his reading skills so he could fit in with her. He said he started to read the newspaper and gradually moved up to read other things. He recently finished his first novel, IT, by Stephen King. Phil was really proud of this accomplishment because he “never read one book in high school” (6/15/2007).

Phil’s experiences at his new job have done a lot to improve his confidence. He likes being a plumber, likes talking to his customers, and likes problem solving. He said, “There’s always a way to fix something you just have to find it” (6/21/2007).
Findings

Throughout the analysis process, I found that the data supported the research on risk and protective factors (Henley, Ramsey & Algozzine, 2002; Hehir, 2007; Werner and Smith, 1992; Brooks and Goldstein, 2001; Cosden, 2001; and Morrison a& Allen, 2007) and resiliency (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001; Werner and Smith, 1992). Therefore, this section is designed to reveal the relevant findings from the data that align specifically with the subcategories of the theoretical framework. Individual quotes from Kirk, Dennis, and Phil are used to support each theoretical construct. Table 4.4 lists the subcategories that were identified in the literature that define the theoretical constructs used to interpret the data.
Table 4.4: Theoretical Constructs and Subcategories

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factors</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Lowered expectations for achievement (Henley et al., 2002)</td>
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<td>• Societal negativity regarding LD (Hehir, 2001)</td>
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<td>• A loss of enthusiasm Risk for school (Hehir, 2007)</td>
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<td>• Inappropriate instruction exacerbates disabilities (Hehir, 2007)</td>
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<td>• Unwelcoming or threatening school environments (Cosden, 2001)</td>
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<td>• Maladaptive behavior (Werner and Smith, 1992); Poor coping skills (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001)</td>
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<th>Protective Factors</th>
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<td>• Special education programs viewed as a support (Hehir, 2007); Welcoming school environment (Cosden, 2001)</td>
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<td>• Presence of a caring adult (Morrison and Allen, 2007)</td>
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<td>• Personality traits that illicit positive responses from others (Werner and Smith, 1992)</td>
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<td>• Possesses special skills and talents (Werner and Smith, 1992)</td>
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<td>• Experiences opportunities at major life transitions (Werner and Smith, 1992)</td>
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<th>Resiliency</th>
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<td>• Capability to solve problems (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001)</td>
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<td>• Feelings of ownership (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001)</td>
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<td>• Sense of satisfaction in the positive impact of one’s behavior (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• More confident outlook as islands of competence are displayed (Brooks and Goldstein, 2001); identifies and uses whatever abilities and talents they have (Werner and Smith, 1992)</td>
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<td>• Sets realistic educational and vocational plans (Werner and Smith, 1992)</td>
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Risk Factors

The data that was collected from Kirk, Dennis, and Phil revealed that they were affected by six different risk factors, which included lowered expectations for achievement, societal negativity, a loss of enthusiasm for school, inappropriate instruction, unwelcoming or threatening school environments, and maladaptive behavior or poor coping skills. The following narratives illustrates how Kirk, Dennis, and Phil identified with each risk factor.
Lowered expectations for achievement. Dennis and Phil both felt the effects of lowered expectations for achievement. Dennis identified lowered expectations immediately as he continually reported that he felt his support classes were too easy. Dennis didn’t feel challenged. He said,

It was too easy. I was always done with everything and I didn’t learn anything. It was all repetitive. It wasn’t challenging. I knew I could do the stuff in learning support, but I didn’t know I could do the stuff in other classes. The only time I ever learned anything in English was when they put me back in the regular class. (4/13/2007)

Phil’s identification of lowered expectations was not as obvious as Dennis’ and was not directly related to the curriculum, but the fact that he was not held accountable for his actions revealed a lowered set of expectations for his behavior as well as his academic achievement. Phil said,

It was like a little too easy on us. Like, I know I failed a lot of tests. A lot of incomplete homework assignments. I think I should have been reprimanded for it. Like, if you fail a test, they shouldn’t be like, oh I’m sorry. Try again, here’s another piece of paper with the answers. You’re like rewarded for your….like you messed up. They know you didn’t study, but that’s fine, you can take it again. (6/21/2007)

Phil also said, “You just get away with it. Probably everyone felt bad for you. Like wow, he really can’t learn, let’s give him another shot” (6/15/2007).
Whether it was lowered expectations for academic achievement or behavioral expectations, Dennis and Phil were both adversely affected by the lowered expectations of their teachers.

Societal negativity regarding LD. On some level, Kirk, Dennis, and Phil all responded to the recognition of society’s negativity towards LD. Whether it occurred in high school, at the work place, or in college, the simple fact that they did not want others to know that they had LD indicated their awareness of societal negativity.

In regards to his college and career experiences, Kirk responded, “I never filled anybody in that I was in learning support. I mean they might have known just because I was enrolled in the academic support program, but I never took advantage of it” (11/13/2006). Kirk continued, “Like when I was going through the fire academy, um, I don’t think that they knew that I had a learning disability. I mean I never told anybody (11/13/2006).

Dennis never made a point to tell people that he had LD because he said, “It wasn’t too popular being in learning support” (4/20/2007). Phil was happy to receive the academic support, but hid the fact that he needed it. He said, “I liked being in it, I just didn’t like people knowing that I was in it. I did a pretty good job hiding it” (6/21/2007). Kirk, Dennis, and Phil all agreed that there were times when they did not want people to know about their LD, indicating that at some level they were aware of society’s negativity regarding LD.

A loss of enthusiasm for school. While Kirk never indicated that he lost his enthusiasm for school, both Dennis and Phil reported that they were excited to go to school and liked being there when they were younger. However, as they got older they
didn’t want to go anymore. Dennis reported, “It was alright [school], I mean I liked it. We got to play and do all kinds of stuff. It was fun. It wasn’t as bad as high school” (4/20/2007). Dennis indicated that his feelings towards school changed, “Later on, like 4th grade, 5th grade, because of the other students” (4/20/2007).

Phil’s loss of enthusiasm was evident in his poor attendance as he got older. He said, “I liked it [school]. I talked to everyone. I never fought with anyone. I used to try to get perfect attendance. I think I had it in like first and second grade. Then it kind of slowed” (6/21/2007). Phil revealed that by the time he was in middle school, he was afraid to go to school because it got harder for him (6/21/2007), and his poor attendance was documented in his cumulative file (RR, 2000). When asked about high school he said, “I think in high school all I wanted to do was go home. Sleep all day, go out all night. School never did nothing for me, I never wanted to be there. I just didn’t want to go” (6/15/2007).

Both Dennis and Phil started out excited and enthused to go to school, but the negativity that they experienced as a result of their LD caused them to lose their enthusiasm.

Inappropriate instruction exacerbated disability. The risk factor of inappropriate instruction was primarily echoed in Dennis’ recollection of his school experiences. As a result of his LD label and his involvement in the support classes, he does not believe that he was properly prepared for college. The effects of Dennis’ inappropriate instruction were felt when he went to college. He felt unprepared for the reading and writing assignments. He said,
I might have been a slow reader my whole life, but I never got the chance to read harder books and learn faster. I was just learning too slow at the time. I mean it was easy. I was finishing tests that should have taken like half an hour in like 5 minutes. At the time it was fine with me, but now that I’m in college, I’m not doing as well as I could have been doing. I have a hard time right now with English in college classes, because we never wrote papers in learning support. We never really wrote anything, like we just wrote little things, but I never really had to write a paper. I don’t know how to start it and I don’t know how to finish it. (4/20/2007)

_Unwelcoming or threatening school environments._ Dennis and Phil’s identification of a threatening school environment were largely identified through the threat to their self-esteem. Dennis and Phil often felt bad, frustrated, angry, and embarrassed by their LD as illustrated in the following quotations.

When asked if he was teased, Dennis reported, “Yeah, sometimes. I just remember feeling bad (4/20/2007).” Dennis was also detailed in describing when his frustration was coming from and how it affected his home life. He said,

Students that weren’t doing the work as fast as me, weren’t doing as well in learning support were taken out before me and that made me feel like I was doing something wrong in class, but I knew I wasn’t because I was getting 100% on all the papers, 100% on all of the tests. But there were two or three students that were taken out of it and put in mainstream years before me. (4/13/2007)

Dennis continued,
I’d go home sometimes and just yell at my parents cause I wanted to get out of there [support classes], and seeing other students getting out of there, and I wasn’t and I was doing better than them. That’s the main reason I was getting angry.

(4/20/2007)

Phil described his embarrassment and frustration with his LD. He said,

I just thought that I was lower than everyone else. And we had classes to go to that no one else went to. I always felt like, not really an outcast, but like I didn’t belong with the rest of the group of kids, which probably made me a lot more agitated. But I always thought that I was different than everyone else. It was embarrassing when you’re in a mainstream class, and the teacher would say something like, do you need to go to this room to take the test. I really didn’t like that at all. I tried to avoid it at all costs. (4/15/2007)

Phil continued,

When you’re a sophomore in high school, everyone is supposed to know how to read, and when you’re not any good at reading and when you’re sitting there reading something and you’re having problems, you look stupid. (6/15/2007)

Dennis and Phil both felt that their school environment was threatening. Although both were well liked by their peers and teachers, their LD label was threatening to their self-esteem.

_Maladaptive behavior: Poor coping skills._ As a result of their negative experiences, Dennis and Phil exhibited signs of poor coping skills. Their coping skills were employed in an attempt to protect themselves from the negative, threatening school environment that they were experiencing as students with LD. Dennis said,
I just refused to do stuff sometimes cause it was just too easy for me. I was just mad cause every time they had me do something it was too easy and I just wanted to be in regular classes like everyone else, so I got angry and just wouldn’t do anything. Once I found out that I could be taken out at any minute, and I told my parents that I wanted out, and they wouldn’t take me out, so I didn’t see the point of doing the work, I was never going to get out of the class. I didn’t see the point in trying as hard as I was if I was never going to go any further. So I just stopped every once in a while and relaxed (4/20/2007).

Phil demonstrated poor coping skills when he said, “I couldn’t stand it, I hated going to the class. I tried to skip out of it as much as I could (6/15/200). He continued with his thoughts on reading out loud in class. He said, “I found a way to get out of it at all costs. I drank a lot of water. I became an escape artist. It’s amazing how many times you can go to the nurse’s office in one day” (6/15/2007). Phil also said,

I tried to hide it [LD]. I kind of knew that the teachers knew something was wrong, like in high school, but like with all the kids, I was hiding it. I wasn’t saying I gotta go to my special ed. class guys, catch you later. I was real secretive about it. (6/15/2007)

Dennis and Phil’s negative experiences caused them to develop some inappropriate coping skills as way to express and protect themselves from the anger and embarrassment that they felt regarding their LD label.

Protective Factors

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil identified with five protective factors that were identified as they told their personal stories. Those protective factors included that fact that they
viewed the special education program as a supportive and welcoming environment.

Their stories also provided evidence that close relationships with a caring adults, their personality traits, special skills, and opportunities at major life transitions all served as protective as well.

Special education program viewed as support: Welcoming school environment.

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil all addressed the extra time and one-on-one instruction, as protective factors of their special education program. However, Phil’s responses were the most compelling in terms of the sense of security he received from the program. He said,

It definitely made the day a little easier because you’re in class with people with the same problems. It’s not like they’re reading Shakespeare and you still can’t read The Cat in the Hat. (6/15/2007)

He discussed the involvement of the special education teachers. He said, “In here [support class] it’s a lot closer than out there. The teachers are more involved. If you do something wrong they know about it, they’re like, what were you thinking” (6/20/2007).

He continued…

I didn’t like coming to the classes, but once you’re in them it’s alright. It’s kind of a relief once you’re in it. It’s like, there’s a busy little world out there, everything’s going so fast, and you come in here and it’s like normal. You’re on the page with what’s going on. You’re able to calm down, to let your guard down. (6/21/2007)

Although the extra time and individualized instruction that is offered in the support classes is considered a protective factor, only Phil identified the support classes as a safe haven where he could relax and let his guard down.
Presence of a caring adult. Kirk and Phil specifically referenced several key relationships that they had that protected them from the risks associated with their LD. Through encouragement and a little bit of tough love, those relationships emphasized the importance of responsibility and accomplishment. Kirk identified his mother as his caring adult when he was in high school. He said,

The first time I wouldn’t have brought anything home, my mom would have been putting me back in the car and we would have been going back to school and getting what I needed to be getting, and then going back home and doing it for however long it took until it was done. If I wasn’t doing any homework she would have thought something was wrong, she would have been calling the school (9/22/2007).

He identified his wife as his caring adult in college. He said, “Like in college, I shuffled my feet until I met my wife and she kind of put the boot up my butt and said you need to get going. She was like, I’m going to be graduating in two years and you are too, so let’s get going” (9/22/2007).

Phil identified one of the school’s instructional aides as his caring adult. He said,

Like Mrs. R cracked the whip, she really helped me out a lot. Helped me to realize I could do something if I wanted it. Yeah, and Mrs. R really helped me out with the graduation thing. Helped me buckle down. I seen her a couple of weeks ago, and I always stop and talk to her every time I see her. I haven’t seen her in three years and I seen her twice in one week. (6/15/2007)

He continued talking about the support he received his senior year. He said, “Like my senior year, it wasn’t easy. I got pushed a lot. I had to go every morning. I wasn’t
allowed to sit in homeroom. I had to go do homework. Cause they knew I didn’t take
nothing home” (9/22/2007). Phil really appreciated the support he received from the
instructional aide.

Personality traits that illicit positive responses from others. Kirk, Dennis, and
Phil’s teachers all noted their positive personality traits. Similar characteristics were
included in the descriptions found in the cumulative file review and were reiterated in the
individual interview responses.

Kirk was described as personable, friendly, motivated, diligent, cooperative, and
got along well with others (RR, 1991; IEP & RR, 2000). Kirk agreed. He said, I’m an
easy-going guy. I work well with others (11/13/2006). Dennis was described as a
cooperative child who gets along well with others. His teachers identified the
following qualities; he is eager to perform, likes to please, is respectful, and is a
saying, “I like to do things on my own. I am relaxed and easy going. I like to do what
everyone else is doing” (8/16/2007). Phil’s teachers described him as cooperative.
They said he works well with others, and is willing to help. He is courteous, polite,
honest, and eager to please (RR, 1994, 2000, 2003; IEP, 1995). Phil said,

I go with the flow. I mean I never tried super hard, but I never caused any
problems. I didn’t fight with no one. If I got frustrated in class, I’d just up and
leave. I didn’t fight with the teacher. Like when you see it happen, you’re just
like, why, why would you do that? (6/21/2007)

Possess special skills and talents. From an engaging personality to years of
experience and knowledge about firefighting, Phil, Kirk, and Dennis all implied that they

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had special skills and talents that made a difference in their lives. In regards to his personality, Phil said, “I can just go into a customer’s house and start talking to them. Find something to talk to them about and just talk about it” (6/15/2007).

Kirk and Dennis talked about their knowledge of firefighting. Kirk said, “I had previous knowledge in everything that we did there [at the fire academy] from volunteering” (12/4/2006). Dennis said, “I was always around fire fighting growing up. My dad was a firefighter, so I got into it when I was younger” (4/13/2007).

Experienced opportunities at major life transitions. Kirk and Phil were both presented with specific opportunities at critical times in their lives. Kirk was afforded the opportunity to reapply to college with the written recommendation of his guidance counselor. He said, “[My counselor] wrote me an excellent letter of recommendation and said give the kid a chance, he is a hard worker, basically put the blame on him [the counselor] if things didn’t work out. He really laid it on the line for me” (11/13/2006).

Phil stumbled upon his opportunity accidentally, but had the foresight to take advantage of it. He said,

I actually had no experience going in. I went out to see a couple of friends and I got lost, I made a wrong turn, and I went to the company’s parking lot on accident. They were hiring, so I put an application in and they hired me.

(6/15/2007)

Resiliency

Throughout the interview and data collection process, Kirk, Dennis, and Phil all demonstrated resilient characteristics. Those characteristics included the capability to solve problems, feelings of ownership, a sense of satisfaction in the positive impact of
one’s behavior, more confident outlook as islands of competence are displayed, and the fact they set realistic educational and vocational goals.

Capability to solve problems. An important part of developing resiliency is having the ability to solve a problem. Both Kirk and Phil are skilled at solving problems. Kirk solves problems daily as a firefighter, but as a result of his school experiences, is able to identify academic problems that he might be having. He said, “The biggest thing that I take with me is the recognition of a problem. Like, whenever I am sitting in class, I can recognize what I need help with and go on my own to get that help” (12/4/2006).

Phil indicated his ability to solve problems through the perseverance that he demonstrated when he was repairing someone’s sewer line. He said,

I was at a job last night. I made the mistake of coming home, dropping a guy off at the shop, and taking another call. I got home last night about 5:00 or 5:30, and took another call. I was on the job until about 3:30 this morning. I was so frustrated, like nothing I was doing was working. Usually you don’t have the proper tools to do it, but I had all the proper tools to do it. I had the cable machine, the cable, the camera, the jet. I tried it all. It was frustrating. I ended up just digging it up. We have an excavation crew and a service crew and I can work both. I mean, like if it would have been anyone else in service that night that call would have been still going on today. Cause they would have had to call a camera guy out, call an excavation guy out (6/21/2007).

He continued, “There’s always a way to fix something you just have to find it” (6/21/2007).
Feelings of ownership and a sense of control. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil have all indicated that as adults they feel a sense of control over their lives. Kirk is no longer dependent on his parents. He said,

>I can honestly say I weaned myself off of my parents. Cause I mean to this day if I need something I know that my mom would be there to give it to me, but I know that at 25 years old, I can’t do that. I needed to learn to accept that if I mess something up, I need to fix it. I can’t rely on my parents anymore. That’s why I like living far away, cause I know if I lived around here, I’d be at my parents house all of the time. I would still be highly relying on my parents (9/22/2007).

Dennis enjoys his freedom. He responded, “I can do whatever I want whenever I want. I can choose classes whenever I want. I have my own place, so I can do whatever I want without anyone telling me what to do” (4/13/2007). Phil knows if he skips work or takes short cuts he is responsible for flooding someone’s house. He said,

>I don’t skip work. I have the least amount of call off days. I’ve learned never to take short cuts, which is like really big in my job. Cause like, if you’re taking short cuts, you’re flooding someone’s house out (6/21/2007).

Sense of satisfaction in positive impact of one’s behavior. The fact that Kirk, Dennis, and Phil are all content with their current circumstances shows a level of satisfaction with their behaviors. All three indicated specific situations where they either felt that they were successful or proud. Kirk said, “It was encouraging, the fact that I was able to get out of it [the support classes], and kind of lead a normal high school career, and see how it is just being a regular student, taking regular tests” (9/22/2007).
Kirk, Dennis, and Phil all specifically talked about feelings of success. Kirk said, “I mean, I think I am successful. I mean I have a good job. I’m married, going to get ready to buy a house in the next couple of months. I mean I am successful” (6/21/2007). Dennis said, “I’m successful for my age. I got a scholarship to school. I am getting my education, and I own my own car” (8/16/2007). Phil reported,

I kind of like what I do. Most people laugh when you tell them you’re a plumber but there’s a lot of good things that come from it. When you go to a customer’s house with a major problem, and you fix that problem and you clean it up and make it look real nice, and you leave, the customer is standing there with a big smile on their face and they’re satisfied. It’s the little things (6/21/2007).

Confidence is developed as islands of competence are displayed: Identify and use abilities and talents. Dennis and Phil both identified instances where their specific areas of strengths and confidence were displayed. Dennis specifically referenced his academic strengths. He said, “I think the reason I went through math so well is because I wasn’t taken out, I wasn’t learning that in learning support. I was excelling in that better because I was in regular classes” (4/13/2007). Phil talked about his career success. He said,

It’s all commission based, so the more you sell, the more you make. So I made a little time sheet, and now everyone copied it. Everyone got one. I went on the computer at the shop and made it. So if there is a discrepancy I have it on paper. My manager loves it. I can show him, I was here this day, this is the invoice number, this was the amount, and he can go straight to the computer and pull it up (6/21/2007).
Phil continued,

If someone calls back in for a recall, and they don’t want me back out there, they send another technician. [The company] doesn’t pay that technician, I pay that technician. It comes out of my pay check. But all my customers always want me back, so I don’t have to worry about that (6/21/2007).

_SET realistic education and vocations plans._ Although Phil did not have a detailed transition plan at the time of graduation, he talked to Mrs. R, the instructional aide, and her suggestions for a career resonated with him. He said, “I did do a lot of hands on stuff. Mrs. R actually said that I should go to school for heavy machinery, which is what I’m doing now” (6/15/2007). Once Dennis’ transition plan was designed, he decided to take advantage of additional opportunities that were offered through the military, and eventually made accounting his career pursuit.

He said, “I actually wanted to be a firefighter, but I thought, if the Air Force is paying for another piece of education that I can get, I might as well take advantage of it, so that’s why I went to college” (4/13/2007).

Summary of Findings

The following charts (Tables 4.5 - 4.7) are based on the subcategories of the theoretical constructs that were identified within the existing literature on resilience. The X’s indicate specific risk and protective factors that Kirk, Dennis, and Phil experienced as well as their resilient characteristics. The tables highlight the fact that each individual had a slightly different combination of risk and protective factors, which ultimately caused them to display their characteristics of resiliency in slightly different ways.
**Table 4.5**

Identifiable Risk Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factors</th>
<th>Kirk</th>
<th>Dennis</th>
<th>Phil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowered Expectations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Negativity</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Enthusiasm</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening Environment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Coping Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.6**

Identifiable Protective Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protective Factors</th>
<th>Kirk</th>
<th>Dennis</th>
<th>Phil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spec. Ed. Program</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring Adult</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Personality Traits</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Skills &amp; Talents</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities at Major Life Transitions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.7: Identifiable Characteristics of Resiliency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protective Factors</th>
<th>Kirk</th>
<th>Dennis</th>
<th>Phil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to Solve Problems</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Ownership</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Satisfaction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence/Islands of Competence</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic Ed. &amp; Vocational Plans</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theoretical Narrative

The theoretical narrative addresses the research questions using Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s own words to tell their individual stories while aligning their stories to the theoretical framework. Elements of the theoretical framework are embedded in the individual stories and are identified through repeating ideas, which are indicated with quotations marks, and the theoretical constructs, which are identified using parenthesis and bold type.

My research concern was to learn more about how students with LD develop resiliency through their school experiences and how those experiences influenced post-secondary and career choices. The theoretical framework was used to illustrate how the risk/resiliency model supported the assumption that students with LD develop resiliency through their responses to risk and protective factors that they experienced in life, and supports my belief that their responses to their experiences have a cumulative effect on their post-secondary and career choices. Although Kirk, Phil, and Dennis had similar
experiences in elementary school, their individual perspectives created different responses to their circumstances.

*How do students develop resiliency through their school experiences?*

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were all diagnosed with LD during the early years of elementary school. All three were referred for testing because their respective teachers noticed their academic struggles, specifically in the area of reading. They were tested and qualified for special education services based on the discrepancy between their ability and achievement. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were identified as having average or above average intelligence, but were performing below grade level. Although they were placed in special education support classes in elementary school with similar disabilities, they each had very different school experiences.

*Kirk.* At first, Kirk really didn’t understand what was going on when he was diagnosed with LD, but he started to understand it more as he grew older. Although he enjoyed his involvement in the support class (protective factor), he did remember feeling “a little embarrassed” when he was pulled out of his general education classroom (risk factor). He said, “It was hard trying to explain why I left the room.” He liked the “one-on-one instruction” (protective factor) that he received in the support class and appreciated “the extra time” (protective factor) that he was given to take tests and complete assignments, but felt that the behavior and “negativity of the other students” (risk factor) in the class was a big problem.

As Kirk got older, he used his LD as a motivator to “get into the same routine as everyone else” (set a realistic educational goal), and became less embarrassed by his LD. He said, “If I would have let it embarrass me, I probably would have packed it in”
(positive personality trait). He became less and less embarrassed by his LD and used it as a motivator to “be like everyone else” (positive coping skill). By the time he was in high school, Kirk was “encouraged that he was able to have a normal high school career” (protective factor).

Kirk was almost denied having a normal college experience, because originally he was not accepted. He received a letter from his college of choice stating that his grades were not good enough (risk factor). Knowing several people on campus, his guidance counselor talked to a few people and wrote Kirk an excellent letter of recommendation, indicating that he would take the blame if Kirk did not perform. Kirk was impressed by his counselor’s support stating, “He really laid it on the line for me” (opportunity at major life transition). His involvement in the support program in high school taught him how to identify specific areas where he needed help in college (ability to problem solve). He became comfortable with the fact that he needed extra help and was confident enough to ask questions when necessary (feeling of control and ownership).

Throughout his school career, Kirk’s mother emphasized responsibility and encouraged that all homework assignments were done. He said, “If I didn’t bring anything home, she would have thought something was wrong. She would have been calling the school” (presence of a caring adult).

Kirk’s resiliency was not developed because of his school experiences, but rather because of his reaction to them. He identified the one-on-one instruction in the support classroom as a protective factor. His ability to solve problems in academic situations was strengthened as he learned to understand his LD and gained confidence. His feelings of control and ownership were evident in the fact that he took responsibility for his learning
by asking questions and advocating for himself. It was also evident in the fact that he was given the opportunity to reapply to college and took it seriously. The combination of Kirk’s personality traits and his positive feelings about the support program, created an environment where Kirk could develop a “resilient mind set” (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001).

*Dennis.* Early on, Dennis remembered being teased about his LD (threatening school environment), and did not want to attend classes in the support room for two reasons. First, he did not feel that he needed the academic support (risk factor), and second, he said, “it wasn’t too popular being in learning support” (societal negativity). Dennis was actually mad (risk factor) that he was enrolled in the support program and felt that the instruction that he was receiving was just “way too easy” (lowered expectations and inappropriate instruction). Throughout late elementary and middle school, the risk factors that Dennis faced contributed to the fact that he lost some interest in school (loss of enthusiasm), especially in his English support classes. He responded to his feelings of anger by “refusing to do stuff” (poor coping skills), but eventually would start to work again because he was “sick of getting yelled at.”

By the time he was in high school, Dennis was convinced that his years of involvement in the support classes added to the difficulties he was having in his general education English classes (inappropriate instruction). Although he preferred to do things on his own, he said, “he wouldn’t fail a class because he wouldn’t get help” (sense of ownership and control). Dennis felt much better about himself when he was in his math classes (island of competence) and felt that he excelled in math because he was “in regular classes.” Growing up, Dennis was surrounded by firemen. Several members of
his family were volunteer firemen and Dennis continued the family tradition by becoming a volunteer fireman himself (special skills and talent; island of competence). In fact, Dennis entertained the idea of pursuing a career in firefighting.

Overall, Dennis described his experience in the support program as negative, and identified his involvement as a risk factor. Dennis was able to develop some qualities of a “resilient mind set” (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001) despite his noted risk factors. The fact that Dennis did not want any academic support, forced him to develop a sense of ownership and control over his actions, which was noted in the fact that he liked to do things on his own. In addition, Dennis was able to identify mathematics and firefighting as areas of strengths, his islands of competence and special skills and talents, which eventually became career possibilities. It was interesting to note that Dennis did not mention the presence of a caring adult that influenced his school experiences. Nor did he mention any opportunities at major life transitions.

Phil. Phil recalled that he liked going to school and liked talking to people early in his academic career (positive personality trait). He also recalled that he hated reading out loud because he was always “stuttering and not doing that great” (risk factor). Phil had mixed emotions about his LD and his involvement in the support program. On one hand, he was “embarrassed” by his LD (risk factor), he hated going to the classes (risk factor), and “felt like he didn’t fit in” (threatening environment). On the other hand, once he was in the support class, he found it to be a great retreat from the pressures of his academic day (protective factor).

Whenever it was time to read out loud, Phil became an escape artist (poor coping skills) in an effort to save face in front of his general education peers. He continued this
behavior throughout high school, and said that he was allowed to “get away” with this type of behavior because he felt that people felt sorry for him, like he really couldn’t learn anything (lowered expectations). At one point Phil was in danger of not graduating (risk factor). He noted the influence of one of the instructional aides, and said her assistance was the only reason he even earned his diploma (presence of a caring adult).

Prior to the last few months of school when Phil “buckled down” to graduate, he showed few signs of a “resilient mind set” (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). His positive personality was listed as his biggest strength at the time of graduation. He was a pleasant person and his teachers liked him, but when faced with a challenge, he would either back down or “skip out.” Phil did not develop a resilient mind set through his school experiences. It wasn’t until much later on when he started working for the plumbing company that Phil began to show qualities of resiliency.

*What Influence did those experiences have on post-secondary choices?*

*Kirk*. Kirk had several experiences that impacted his post-secondary choice to attend college. First, without the influence of his guidance counselor, Kirk would not have had the opportunity to go to college when he did. Second, Kirk’s positive experiences in the support program provided him with the necessary skills to be a good college student. Kirk’s involvement in the program helped him to recognize problems and taught him where to go when he needed help. Also, his positive experiences in high school helped to provide him with the confidence that he needed to attend college. Once he was in college, Kirk continued to ask questions and advocated for himself when needed, which illustrated his sense of ownership and control over his circumstances. His girlfriend, now wife, provided him with support similar to that which he received from
the special education program and his mother, indicating his ability to identify his support system.

Dennis. Dennis made little reference to his past experiences influencing his decision to go to college. In fact, when asked about his involvement in the support program he replied, “I did what I wanted to do. Nothing really came of it.” The only influence that he did mention was the fact that he went to college because the military was paying for it.

However, further interpretation of his responses revealed some minor influences of his past experiences, such as the fact that he chose accounting as his college major, “because there is no English in accounting.” Furthermore, his past experiences affected his feelings on seeking help as a college student. The simple fact that he chooses not to utilize the academic support offered at the college level because he “hates getting help” is reflective of the fact that he resented the help that he received as a child. Although Dennis hates to ask for help and prefers to do things on his own, he “will not fail a class” because of it. Ultimately he will do what is necessary to get through the class which shows his sense of ownership and control.

Phil. Phil’s feelings of being dumb and less than everyone else caused him not to consider going to college. Because he felt like he couldn’t do anything, he spent an entire year after high school bouncing from one job to another without any plans for his future. He took advantage of an opportunity that he had at the plumbing company and has since developed an area of expertise, an island of competence. Possessing a sense of ownership and control over his circumstances, Phil never skips work, and never takes short cuts. He regrets that he did not pay closer attention in high school, but is attending
classes so he can officially join the company’s excavating crew, which is evidence that he has set a realistic vocational goal. Phil eventually improved his reading skills because he wanted to fit in with his girlfriend. He just started reading the newspaper and worked his way up to a novel. Phil is very proud of this accomplishment (sense of satisfaction) and has continued to read because, “Once you don’t use it, you lose it.”

Summary

Using Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) method of analysis, the data revealed that Kirk, Dennis, and Phil each had different school experiences that led to various degrees of resiliency. Kirk noted positive school experiences and demonstrated resiliency throughout his school career primarily through his positive personality, his ability to solve problems, his sense of satisfaction with his behavior, and his confidence. His decision to go to college was influenced by the fact that he knew how to address his learning needs and knew how to advocate for himself. In addition, he was afforded an opportunity at a major life transition point when his guidance counselor recommended that the university reconsider his application.

Dennis primarily noted negative experiences and demonstrated resiliency in the fact that his independence and willingness to accomplish things on his own showed signs of his feelings of ownership and control. Although he claims that his school experiences did not influence his post-secondary decisions, he chose to major in accounting because he remained in the general education classroom for all of his math courses. Furthermore, he claims that his involvement in the support program is the primary reason why he still struggles with reading and writing papers in college.
Aside from his positive personality and a brief period when he buckled down in an attempt to graduate, Phil showed almost no signs of resiliency while in school. His distal experiences had little effect on the resilient characteristics that he possesses today as an adult.
Chapter 5
Discussion

Chapter Five begins by revisiting the central purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework that were used to shape this study on resiliency; specifically to gain a better understanding of how students with LD develop resiliency. The central purpose is addressed through the identification of the research questions and how the questions evolved from the existing literature. A summary of the findings from chapter Four and a discussion of how the data was interpreted, specifically in terms of the relationship between proximal and distal developmental influences, are included.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the implications for future research, the limitations of the study, and an overall summary of the research process and findings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to determine how students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences and how those experiences influenced their post-secondary and career choices. A review of the existing literature revealed two problems (1) LD has a lasting effect across a person’s life span reflecting disturbing outcomes such as high unemployment rates and a lack of integration into the community (Lipsky, 2005), and (2) the preponderance of literature focuses on student deficit rather than student resiliency. The following research questions were designed in an attempt to address the issues stemming from the existing literature.

I. How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences?
II. What influence do those experiences have on their post-secondary and career choices?

Using the risk / resiliency framework, which highlights the complex interactions between the contextual factors that are relevant to student outcomes, Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s school experiences were reported as either risk or protective factors and were chronicled through their proximal and distal experiences. Data was collected through a document review, two semi-structured interviews, one follow-up interview, and one focus group in an attempt to answer the research questions. The data was presented in the form of three separate case studies.

Summary of Results from Chapter 4

The results of the study revealed that Kirk, Dennis, and Phil struggled with reading and were diagnosed with LD early in their elementary school careers. However, despite the similarities in their diagnosis, they perceived their school experiences differently. Kirk identified his experience in the support program as a protective factor, specifically referencing how the help he received taught him how to solve problems and become a better student. Dennis identified his school experience in terms of both risk and protective factors, emphasizing the risk factors. He specifically referenced how the program’s inappropriate instruction and lowered academic expectations adversely affected his learning. Phil also identified his experiences in terms of risk and protective factors. In the support class, Phil did not feel the same type of pressure to perform as he did in his general education classes, especially in regards to his reading ability. He identified the lack of pressure as a protective factor. However, he reported not being held accountable for his actions in school as a risk factor.
All three individuals remembered feeling some level of embarrassment with their LD label, but Kirk was the only one that demonstrated a positive reaction to his feelings by pushing himself to “get into the routine of everyone else.” Both Dennis and Phil responded negatively to their feelings about their LD label. Dennis refused to complete his assignments as a way to express his frustration, and Phil became an “escape artist”, skipping classes and wandering the halls, as a way to protect himself from the embarrassment of reading in front of his peers.

As a young adult, Kirk continued to feel the effects of his LD in classroom situations in college and at the fire academy. Knowing how to identify his academic problems helped Kirk to ask appropriate questions when he needed clarification. Dennis also continued to feel the effects of his LD as an adult in college, especially when he had to read something or take a test. He said it usually took him longer than most people to complete tasks that required reading. As a plumber, Phil also continues to be affected by his LD, particularly when he is writing an invoice or is in a training class. Spelling and reading are two areas where he continues to struggle, but he did say that he is working on both skills and they are getting better.

*How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences?* Kirk’s positive school experiences helped him to develop resiliency by developing several protective factors. First of all, he did not let his LD embarrass him. Secondly, Kirk used his LD as a motivator and set goals throughout his educational career. Thirdly, he motivated himself until he was mainstreamed for all of his academic classes.
Dennis was able to develop resiliency despite his loss of enthusiasm and negative school experiences. He was so angry about his involvement in the support classes that at times he would refuse the help and support that was offered to him. His refusal to accept help forced him to take responsibility for his own learning.

Phil responded to his negative feelings and embarrassment in his general education classes by avoiding certain academic situations at all costs. His avoidance eventually led to chronic absenteeism and threatened his potential to graduate. Phil demonstrated some resiliency in the fact that he chose to take his education seriously for a few weeks in order to graduate, but overall his school experiences and behaviors were not conducive for developing resiliency.

*What influence did those experiences have on their post-secondary and career choices?* Kirk’s school experiences influenced his decision to go to college. Although he ultimately wanted to become a professional firefighter, his positive school experiences provided him with enough confidence in his academic abilities to attend college. He said his experiences in the support classes taught him how to be a better student. Even though he did not finish college, he said the skills and confidence he gained in school are still applicable when he is sitting in a training class, reading a policy manual, or practicing a drill.

Dennis’ school experiences influenced his decision to choose accounting as his major in college. He noted that his reading and writing skills did not progress because of his involvement in the support classes. When he eventually did take English in the general education class he said he was so far behind that he constantly felt the stress of trying to catch up. As a result he gravitated toward his math classes because he felt
successful and did not require academic support services. His success in his higher math classes is what drove him to pursue a career in accounting.

Phil identified his school experiences as a contributing factor in his decision not to go to college. His negative experiences, lack of success, and overall frustration with school was so strong that the thought of attending college never crossed his mind. In fact, one year after high school he still had no career plans. The lack of confidence and low self-esteem that he experienced in school caused him to spend his first year out of high school bouncing from job to job, partying, and traveling with his friends. It was not until he stumbled onto his job at the plumbing company that Phil had any direction in his life.

Discussion

When thinking of the theoretical framework in terms of the separate theoretical constructs, it is difficult to determine where one construct begins and another ends, as all three are interrelated. Protective factors exist only in the presence of perceived risks (Werner & Smith, 1992), and protective factors promote resiliency, which itself is a protective factor. Therefore, this section discusses my interpretation of the findings and the implications for further research and theory development.

Risk Factors

Both Dennis and Phil felt the effects of lowered expectations for their achievement (Henley et al., 2002). While Dennis specifically referenced lowered expectations for his academic achievement, Phil referenced lowered expectations for his behavior in the fact that he was not held accountable for his actions. Research shows that teachers tend to underestimate the abilities of students with LD and make assumptions
about their achievement and behaviors (Henley et al., 2002; Poplin & Rogers, 2005). These lowered expectations can have a lasting effect on students with LD (Bradley & Danielson, 2002; Gallego, Duran, & Reyes, 2006; Lipsky, 2005; Roffman, 2000; Williams, 2005).

On some level, Kirk, Dennis, and Phil all responded to the recognition of society’s negativity towards LD (Hehir, 2007). Phil specifically noted that while he was in school he was very secretive about his disability recognizing early on that there was a sense of negativity that surrounded LD. As young adults, all three indicated that they did not make it a point to tell people about their disability, nor did they make it a point to utilize the academic supports that were offered in their post-secondary or training programs. Their acknowledgement of cultural negativity towards their LD potentially undermined any opportunities that they may have had (Hehir, 2007).

As they got older, both Dennis and Phil reported that they lost their enthusiasm (Hehir, 2007) for school. Phil especially lost interest in attending school, which was documented in his cumulative file. Feelings of frustration, anger, and embarrassment were manifested in the lack of enthusiasm they showed for school and were an indication that they too had negative feelings about LD (Hehir, 2007). Their negative attitudes had the potential to promote negative outcomes and additional risk factors such as failure, dropping out, and unemployment (Lipsky, 2005; Miller & Fritz, 1998).

Dennis emphasized the fact that the inappropriate instruction (Hehir, 2007) that he received in the support classes exacerbated his LD, and had a lasting effect on his performance as a young adult in college. Current research claims that a challenging, rigorous curriculum needs to be delivered to students with LD through effective
instructional practices in the general education environment (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Hehir, 2007; Williams, 2005). Inclusion and collaborative consultation offer academic support within the general education curriculum, which was the type of support Dennis was looking for.

In regards to their self-esteem, the school environment proved to be a threatening environment (Cosden, 2001) to both Dennis and Phil. They both addressed the fact that they felt bad, frustrated, and embarrassed by their involvement in the support classes. Phil and Dennis attended the support classes to address their academic deficiencies, which proved to be a threat to their emotional well-being (Brooks, 2001; Cosden, 2001; De Civita, 2000; Margalit, 2003), and in response to their experiences, they both developed poor coping skills (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1992) as way to protect themselves from their perceived risks.

Protective Factors

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil all viewed the special education program as a protective factor (Hehir, 2007, Morrison & Allen, 2007), specifically addressing the extra time and one-on-one instruction that was provided for them. However, Phil’s responses were the most compelling in terms of the sense of security that he felt from the program, particularly his relationship with the instructional aide. Research shows that schools can be protective environments as they encourage caring relationships and hold high expectations for student achievement (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Morrison & Allen, 2007).

Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s teachers described all three of them in terms of their positive personality traits (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1992), and in
Phil’s case, his positive personality was identified as a special skill and talent (Werner & Smith, 1992) that served as a protective factor for him. Identifying unique skills and talents outside of academics helps students to identify with their strengths so they can increase their chances for success (Poplin & Rogers, 2005).

Kirk and Dennis both identified experiences that they had that provided them with opportunities at major life transitions (Werner & Smith, 1992). These opportunities were necessary for them to achieve their goals, yet neither opportunity was identified or facilitated through the transition process. More attention to the transition process would help to increase the opportunities that students have as they move into adulthood (Trainor, 2007).

Resiliency

Both Kirk and Phil indicated that they were confident in their problem solving abilities (Brooks & Goldstein, 2002). In fact, they both seemed to enjoy job related challenges and specifically addressed their ability to persevere when solving a problem. In alignment with Brooks and Goldstein’s research, both Kirk and Phil’s problem solving abilities helped them to develop a sense of ownership and control over their circumstances, a sense of satisfaction with their abilities, and it helped them to identify areas where they were confident and competent.

Kirk and Dennis set realistic vocational goals (Werner & Smith, 1992) while they were still in high school. Their interview responses indicated that they followed through with the plans that they had in place, however, it is not known how much of the goal setting process was implemented through a collaborative effort between the students,
their families, and their teachers, or how much was predetermined by Kirk and Dennis independently without any guidance.

Findings and Implications

Finding 1: Students’ develop resiliency through their responses to their perceived risk and protective factors, which have a cumulative effect on their school experiences and post-secondary outcomes.

When students with LD experience lowered expectations and inappropriate instruction their enthusiasm for school and level of academic engagement drops. When this happens, feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and defeat tend to develop, which threatens the student’s self-esteem and potential for success. In an attempt to protect themselves from their threatening environment, students tend to develop poor coping skills and maladaptive behaviors, which intensify the effects of their LD. A student’s response to those risk factors has a cumulative effect on their school experiences and post-secondary outcomes, as evidenced in Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s individual stories.

A combination of high expectations for student achievement and high quality instruction in the general education classroom tends to eliminate the negative effects of lowered expectations and inappropriate instruction. When teachers have high expectations for student achievement and demonstrate their expectations by taking the time to prepare high quality lessons, students tend to raise their own expectations achievement (Henley et al., 2002). The sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that comes from their achievement tends to reduce their negative feelings and perception that school is a threatening environment. When students are achieving, school does not seem as threatening, and they tend to remain enthused and engaged in the learning process.
When they are enthusiastic, students tend to develop positive coping strategies in response to problems, thus developing resiliency.

*Implications for program design.* This theory has implications for program design and supports the recent trend in special education to move away from segregated support classes towards inclusion based practices such as collaborative consultation (Kampwirth, 2006; Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000). Building level administrators, special education supervisors, and superintendents need to look at the special education programs that are offered in their schools to determine if they are offering low level, remedial programs that have traditionally been prescribed for students with LD; or are they offering intense, high quality instruction through inclusive practices and collaboration (Poplin & Rogers, 2005). Whether inclusion programs are in the beginning stages, or are well established, school administrators need to provide intense, high quality professional development opportunities for the teachers who are implementing the program.

*Finding 2: Resiliency can be promoted in schools by encouraging long-term mentoring relationships between teachers and students.*

Further interpretation of the findings suggests that teachers could encourage resiliency and increase students’ protective factors by developing long-term mentoring relationships with their students. Educators are an essential element of education, and have a lifelong impact on students and the development of resiliency (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). These findings coupled with the research on resiliency, suggest that teachers could develop long-term relationships with their students by encouraging the students to identify areas and situations where the student felt in control, developed
problem-solving skills, and identified special skills and talents. The more involved a teacher becomes in a child’s life, the more opportunities he/she may have to help the student to develop protective factors, especially at major life transitions.

Proximal and distal developmental influences become a necessary element in building this mentoring relationship. Given the opportunity to conference with their students on a regular basis, teachers could help students to navigate through their proximal and distal experiences in an attempt to identify individual and social resources such as personality traits, cognitive competencies, and social support systems. Through this process, students would also be able to identify coping skills and their individual levels of well being as they pertained to various developmental outcomes (Martin & Martin, 2002). Martin and Martin suggest that the exploration of the student’s distal experiences should begin by determining if the event actually occurred, followed by determining the intensity of the event, how it was perceived, and if cumulative effects of more than one event had an impact on the student’s individual resources and developmental outcomes. Martin and Martin also suggest that this process should be revisited regularly to highlight aspects of the student’s personal growth, their individual strengths, autonomy and levels of achievement, as well as their positive self-regard, and self-determination.
Implications for teacher education or professional development programs. The idea of mentoring students and addressing their proximal and distal developmental influences as a way to develop resiliency has implications for universities, and other agencies that offer professional development training for special education teachers. At times, the job of a special education teacher falls outside of the realm of planning and instruction and into the field of counseling. According to the Council for Exceptional Children’s Special education Standards (2005), the job of a special education teacher encompasses more than what is expected within the realm of planning and instruction. In addition to making accommodations and modification to the curriculum, special education teachers are expected to be skilled in the areas of development and characteristics of learners, learning environments and social interactions, communication, and collaboration (CEC, 2005). In accordance with special education standard number five, Learning Environments and Social Interactions (CEC, 2005), special education teachers are expected to have the knowledge and skill level to guide students through the decision-making and problem solving processes. In today’s world of information and sensory overload, teachers should be familiar with the concept of resiliency so they can help their students to manage their thoughts and emotions in response to their circumstances. They need to help students to identify their protective factors (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001).

In addition, this theory also has implications for special educators in the area of transition planning. The results of this research study and the current literature (Trainor, 2007) reveal that post-secondary transition and planning continue to be an area of deficit
in the field of special education. Poplin and Rogers (2005) find it alarming that there are so few adults with LD who are thriving, independent, contributing members of society. Recall Phil’s story when he talked about bouncing from job to job with no real direction in his life. His transition plan in his final IEP stated that he would explore training programs for auto mechanics. However, he never pursued a program and never seriously considered the career. He became a plumber because he made a wrong turn and stumbled into the company’s parking lot. Today, Phil is a contributing member of society. He is thriving. However, his career outcome was the result of happenstance and not the result of having a carefully designed and implemented transition plan.

In fact, Phil’s lack of direction after high school is an indication that the guidance he did receive was ineffective. A transition goal and plan were written (IEP, 2005), but was not implemented properly. The transition plan satisfied the state and federal guidelines, but had little practicality. Poplin and Rogers (2005) recommend that to improve outcomes for students with LD teachers should (1) help students to think and talk about the greater purpose on their lives, (2) assist them in defining their strengths (outside of academic ones) such as diligence, perseverance, commitment, self-awareness, and goal directedness, (3) address the possibilities for employment and meaningful work in the larger world, including non-college track professions (p. 161). Poplin and Roger’s suggestions echo Martin and Martin’s (2002) suggestions further emphasizing the need for teachers to help students to increase their protective factors by developing resiliency.

**Finding 3:** Teachers can encourage resiliency in their students by applying lessons learned from other resilient individuals.
In keeping with the suggestions for future research as stated by Margalit (2003), Miller and Fritz (1998), and Poplin and Rogers (2005) the use of individual stories and life histories would contribute to the field of special education by encouraging teachers and students to understand resiliency as a phenomenon that can be encouraged through teaching life lessons using student experiences. First, in alignment with Margalit’s suggestions, the individuals that participated in the study shared the same phenomenon. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil were three individuals with mild LD that demonstrated resilient characteristics. Their personal stories revealed how their individual experiences either encouraged the development of resiliency or showcased the resilient characteristics that they already possessed.

The results of the study also addressed Miller and Fritz’s claim that the existing literature is missing clear examples of resilient individuals with LD who tell their own stories. Kirk, Dennis, and Phil’s stories were used to demonstrate how they either developed resiliency or strengthened the resilient characteristics that they already had. Miller writes, “If educators can help today’s students with LD develop resiliency, it may be from applying lessons taught by other resilient individuals” (1998, p. 2). Poplin and Rogers agree with Miller, claiming that individuals who are diagnosed with LD early in their academic careers and continue to show resiliency become valuable resources as their stories may help to develop lessons that encourage resilience in other students with LD.

Implications for Future Research

The stories of Kirk, Dennis, and Phil could be used as a teaching tool to encourage other students with LD to be resilient. Personal Narratives could also be used
as a basis to design a professional development program to educate teachers on how to encourage resiliency in their students with LD, focusing on self-understanding, self-awareness, perseverance, pro-activity, coping strategies, and social networks (Poplin & Rogers, 2005).

Finally, these life stories have implications for further research as both Margalit (2003) and Poplin and Rogers (2005) recommended that research on resilient students with LD should be longitudinal in nature. Poplin and Rogers suggest that research studies follow the adult “thrivers” who have LD to determine how they continued to develop and sustain resiliency throughout adulthood.

Theoretical Framework Revisited

Table 5.1 illustrates the connection between the central purpose of the study and the implications the results have for the field of special education. The evolution of the central purpose to the implications for the field of special education demonstrates the thought process of how the research questions were ultimately answered and what those answers mean to the field of special education.
Table 5.1: Aligning the Central Purpose to the Implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Purpose</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Theoretical Framework</th>
<th>Implications for Spec. Ed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To gain a better understanding of how students with mild LD developed resiliency</td>
<td>I. How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through school experiences?</td>
<td>2.1 2.4 2.6</td>
<td>Risk Factors: * Lowered expectations * Societal negativity * Loss of enthusiasm * Inappropriate Instruction * Poor coping skills</td>
<td>Risk factors have a cumulative effect on student experiences</td>
<td>Special education programs should be designed for inclusion practices and collaborative consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. What influences did these experiences have on students’ career or post-secondary choices</td>
<td>1.5 1.6 FG 2 FG 3 FG 7</td>
<td>Protective Factors: * Program viewed as support * Caring adult * Positive personality * special skills &amp; talents * opportunities at major life transitions</td>
<td>Teachers should encourage by helping students to identify proximal and distal developmental influences to improve their protective factors</td>
<td>Universities and professional development agencies should offer courses or training sessions on how to develop resiliency in their students, teaching educators how to guide students through their proximal and distal experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resiliency</td>
<td>* Problem solving ability * Ownership &amp; control * Sense of satisfaction * Islands of competence * Set realistic Ed. and Voc. goals</td>
<td>Transition planning process should include an opportunity for teachers to conference with students about their strengths and the greater purpose in their lives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Limitations and Delimitations

There are a few notable limitations of this study. For instance, one limitation is the lack of gender diversity. A limited number of responses to the research invitation were received thus limiting the choices of participants to those who responded. Further limitations included incomplete cumulative files from the school district that agreed to participate. Since the participants were past graduates, their cumulative files were limited to what the school district chose to archive.
Delimitations include the severity and range of the students’ LD. Due to purposive sampling, only students with LD who participated in the general education curriculum with supplemental aides and services were considered. An additional delimitation includes the fact that a multiple perspective approach was not used. Risk and protective factors and their affect on post-secondary and career decisions are viewed only from the individual’s perspective. Future research could look at risk and protective factors for individuals with LD from the perspective of the parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators. In addition, since this study focused on the students’ school experiences, little attention was given to the effects of their home lives and family situation on their development of resiliency.

Summary

In summary, this research study attempted to gain a better understanding of how students with LD developed resiliency by answering two research questions, I. How do students with mild LD develop resiliency through their school experiences? II. What influence did those experiences have on their post-secondary and career choices? Three individuals were chosen for the study through a series of criterion, purposive, and snowball sampling and the data was collected using a document review, interviews, and a focus group.

The data collected revealed that students with LD developed resiliency through their responses to the risk and protective factors that they experienced in school. While lowered expectations and inappropriate instruction served as risk factors, their positive personality traits and problem solving abilities served as protective factors. Their school experiences influenced their post-secondary choices given the facts that a positive school
experience encouraged post-secondary education such as college or a technical school, and poor school experiences influenced decisions not to attend college or influenced the selection of a college major.

Furthermore, the findings support my claim that students’ responses to their perceived risk and protective factors have a cumulative effect on their post-secondary and career outcomes. All three individuals made a connection to specific school experiences and their post-secondary choices. Their stories revealed that they were able to “thrive” despite the negative effects of their LD. Werner and Smith wrote, “some students with LD become resilient to the negative effects and attributes that are often associated with having LD; and despite the odds, make it in life” (1992). Kirk, Dennis, and Phil are three examples of students who are making it in life through their demonstration of resiliency.
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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Participant Interview Guide, Fall 2006

“Understanding how students with mild LD develop resiliency through school experiences: Implications for post-secondary and career choices”

Part I

1.) What do you do for a living?
2.) What did you do after you graduated from high school? Did you attend college? A tech school or training? Did you join the work force?
3.) Did you run into any problems getting accepted or finishing college or tech school? Did you have any trouble finding a job? Explain.
4.) Do you know what your learning disability is? Did you know what it was in high school? When did you realize that you had a learning disability? How did you feel when you realized it?
5.) Did your learning disability have any effect on the career or education choices that you made after high school?
6.) Did your learning disability have any affect on the educational or job related opportunities that you have had?
7.) Do you feel that you have overcome your learning disability? Why or why not and how do you know?
8.) Are you still affected by your disability? In what way? Describe.

Part II

1.) Can you recall when you first experienced difficulty in school? Was it academic, social, or emotional? How did you feel about school? How did you feel about being diagnosed with a learning disability?
2.) How did you feel about being a part of the learning support program, especially in high school?
3.) Do you feel being a learning support student had a positive or negative impact on your high school and adult experiences and decisions?
4.) Can you identify or recall any specific challenges that you faced as a learning support student? Do you still face those same challenges? Why or why not?
5.) Can you identify any specific opportunities that you benefited from as a learning support student? Do you still benefit from those opportunities? Why or why not?
6.) Can you identify the positive and negative aspects of the program and the services that you received?
7.) Thinking back, would you change anything about the learning support program?
8.) Can you recall anything specific about the program that you have used since you graduated? Any services or skills that you obtained?
9.) Do you have any suggestions for what you would keep or change about the program?
10.) What challenges has your involvement in the learning support program helped you to overcome? What challenges do you face in the future?
Appendix B: Letter of request for research subjects

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY
600 FORBES AVENUE ♦ PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

July 26, 2006

Montour School Board
Clever Road
McKees Rocks, PA 15057

Dear Dr. Tomei and Members of The Montour School Board:

My name is Lori Hufnagel-Buglak. I have worked for the district for the last ten years and teach special education at the high school. In addition to my teaching duties, I have also been pursuing my doctoral degree from Duquesne University. My research focuses on the challenges and opportunities graduates may have faced as students in the itinerant learning support program, and the impact those challenges or opportunities had on their career decisions. I have recently had my study approved by the university’s IRB committee and would like to use Montour graduates as potential research subjects.

Therefore, I am writing this letter requesting the names and addresses of all 2001 Montour graduates. These names and addresses will be used for research purposes only, and I accept all professional responsibility for confidentiality.

Completion of this study will not only help me to finish my doctoral degree, but it will have a positive impact on the future development of the district’s special education program at the high school level. I have included copies of my IRB approved cover letter and consent form as well as the IRB’s formal approval letter. In addition, you will find a copy of my research abstract and instrument.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email or by phone. I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Lori Hufnagel-Buglak

105 Harbor Drive
McDonald, PA 15057
724-492-1402
Buglakl@mail.montourschools.com
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: “Recognizing the Opportunities and Challenges that Affect the Academic Performance and Career Choices of Students in the Itinerant Learning Support Program”

INVESTIGATOR: Lori M. Buglak
105 Harbor Drive
McDonald, PA 15057
724-492-1402

ADVISOR: Dr. Rodney K. Hopson
Department of Foundations and Leadership
School of Education
412-396-4034

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in The School of Education at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You have been asked to participate in a research study. I am interested in talking with 2001 graduates who were enrolled in the itinerant learning support program at Montour High School. I would like to identify any academic opportunities or challenges that you may have experienced as a student in the special education program. I would also like to identify if those opportunities or challenges had any affect on the career choices you have made as an adult. Therefore, I would like to conduct two 90 minute interviews to find out your thoughts regarding your academic progress in school and the career choices you have made as a young adult. You will also be asked to participate in
one small group meeting (focus group) with other students who may have had similar experiences. This group meeting will be used as a way to expand your ideas and share your experiences with other graduates. The interview and focus group sessions will be tape-recorded and transcribed.

The interviews and focus group will be conducted during the fall of 2006 at a time and place that is convenient for both parties. For example, interviews may be conducted at Montour High School or a local library. You will be asked to participate in at least two separate interviews, with each interview averaging 90 minutes. The focus group meeting will also be held at a time and place that is convenient for all parties involved and will also average 90 minutes.

You have the right to withdraw participation at any time.

These are the only requests that have will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you will face no consequences should you choose not to participate. Personal risks for participating in this study will be minimal. However, there will be the benefit of allowing educators the chance to gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities students in the itinerant learning support population experience. It will also help educators to identify how those experiences impact the decisions that learning support students make as young adults, and give teachers the opportunity to improve education for students with mild learning disabilities.

**COMPENSATION:** There will be no compensation for participating in this research study.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study, and no identity will be made in the data analysis. All written materials, audio tapes, and consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the researcher’s home. All transcripts will be kept for
at least five years after completion of the study. When I transcribe the audio tapes, all identifiers of you, your school, and anyone you talk about will be deleted or disguised.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** You are under no obligation to participate in this study, and you are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time. Again, you will face no consequences should you choose to withdraw from the study. Any data collected up to that point will not be used and will be destroyed.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT:** I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Lori Hufnagel-Buglak, research investigator (724-492-1402) or Dr. Paul Richer, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board (412-396-6326).

______________________________   __________________________   Date
Participant's Signature

______________________________   __________________________   Date
Researcher's Signature
Appendix D: Coding Outline

Coding Outline

I. Risk Factors Associated with LD – (Theoretical Construct)
   A. Negative experiences – (Theme)
      1. “It was hard trying to explain why [I left the room]” (K, 1)
      2. “The biggest problem that I had was the negativity of some of the other students [with LD]” (K, 2); “All the students acted out, like, just because you’re in learning support doesn’t mean you can act out” (P, 2)
      3. “I’m having trouble now because the instructors are not necessarily teachers” (K, 2)
      4. “She [college professor] didn’t teach the information” (D, 1)
      5. “It [LD class] was too easy. It was all repetitive. I think it kept me from moving up in English” (D, 1)
      6. “I still have trouble with tests” (K, 2; D, 2)
      7. “We had to read out loud. I was always stuttering and not doing that great” (P, 1)
      8. “When a teacher would say something like, so you need to go to this room to take the test” (P, 2) (Repeating Ideas)

   B. Negative Feelings – (Theme)
      1. “It wasn’t too popular being in learning support” (D, 2)
      2. “I was a little mad” (D, 2)
      3. “I wanted to be like everyone else” (D, 2)
      4. “I just got angry” (D, 2)
      5. “I don’t like people helping me” (D, 2)
      6. “It made you afraid to go to school because you would look stupid” (P, 1)
      7. “I felt dumb. I just thought that I was lower than everyone else” (P, 1 & 2)
      8. “I always felt like I didn’t belong with the rest of the group of kids, which made me more agitated” (P, 1)
      9. “I didn’t think I could do anything. Like I honestly thought that I was hopeless” (P, 1) (Repeating Ideas)

   C. Response to Negative Feelings or Experiences – (Theme)
      1. “I just refused to do stuff” (D, 2)
      2. “I didn’t see the point in trying” (D, 2)
      3. “I just stopped everything once in a while and relaxed” (D, 2)
      4. “I don’t accept help from a lot of people” (D, 2)
      5. “I always tried getting out of it [reading]” (P, 1)
      6. “I became an escape artist” (P, 1)
      7. “I tried to hide it [LD]. I was real secretive about it.” (P, 1)
      8. “I bounced around. I was partying all of the time, not caring about anything. I’d go away and not come home for weeks” (P, 1) (Repeating Ideas)

II. Protective Factors Associated with LD – (Theoretical Construct)
   A. Positive Experiences – (Themes)
      1. “It was encouraging that I was able to lead a normal high school career” (K, FG)
      2. “It was kinda nice when you got a longer time to take a test” (P, FG)
      3. “Teachers are more involved. It helps you to stay out of trouble” (P, 2)
      4. “I got pushed a lot because they knew I didn’t take nothing home” (P, FG)
      5. “There was help” (P, 2)
      6. “It’s kind of a relief once you’re in it [support classes]” (P, 2)
7. “She really helped me out a lot. Helped me realize I could do something if I wanted it” (P, 1)
8. “I was excelling at math because I was in regular classes” (D, 1)
9. “The one on one helped” (D, 1)
10. “I could ask more questions” (K, 2)
11. “He [guidance counselor] really laid it on the line for me” (K, 1) (Repeating Ideas)

B. Positive Feelings – (Themes)
1. “I liked being in there [support class]. I had a positive experience” (K, 2)
2. “I am confident” (K, 2)
3. “I was pretty proud of myself” (P, 1) (Repeating Ideas)

C. Response to Positive Feelings or Experiences
1. “I am not afraid to ask questions” (K, FG)
2. “It [support program] opened my eyes to see that you have to work a little harder to get things done” (K, FG)
3. “I was able to identify my own shortcomings” (K, 2)
4. “I met my girlfriend. She was so smart. She knew everything, so I started reading the newspaper to make myself better, to fit in with her” (P, 1)
5. “I try to excel at everything I do” (K, 1)
6. “It [LD] is still a motivator” (K, 1)
7. “The biggest thing I took with me was the recognition of a problem” (K, 2) (Repeating Ideas)

III. Development of Resiliency – (Theoretical Construct)
A. Feelings about LD – (Theme)
1. “It started to get uncomfortable when people would ask me why I would leave to go take tests. It was a little embarrassing for me” (K, 1)
2. “If I would have let it embarrass me, then I probably would have packed it in. I would have accepted it [LD], and still been going somewhere else for language arts. I never accepted it. I always wanted to get better at it [learning]” (K, 1)
3. “To pull me out of a first grade class, and to put me in there [support classes], when I didn’t even have English yet, that was frustrating” (D, 1)
4. “I didn’t like it [support classes], going in there like a full time class, I hated that” (D, 2)
5. “It [LD] kind of like drove me to want to get into the regular routine of everybody else” (K, 2).
6. “The help was there if I needed it. I didn’t want to rely on it” (K, 2)
7. “I hated going there [support classes], but I am not going to just fail my classes cause I don’t want to go there” (D, 2)
8. “My little brother’s smart. He can spell anything. He can read anything. And I just always felt like he’s got a bright future. I got nothing” (P, 2)
9. “And then how I thought about it, it just makes you mad to think about it, like you don’t want it [LD]” (P, 2)
10. “I couldn’t stand it, I hated going to the classes. I tried to skip out of it as much as I could. I didn’t want to be there at all” (P, 1) (Repeating Ideas)

B. Description of Personalities – (Theme)
1. “I love the teamwork” (K, 1 & FG)
2. “I try to excel at everything I do” (K, 1)
3. “I set goals for myself and challenge myself to achieve them” (K, 2)
4. “I am a real personable person. I like interacting” (K, 2)
5. “I don’t let anything get the best of me” (K, 2)
6. “Confident” (K, 1)
7. “I got lazy once in a while, but I always did my work, I always tried” (D, 1)
8. “I like to do things on my own” (D, 2)
9. “I like to work” (D, 2)
10. “I am outgoing” (D & P, FI)
11. “Nothing gets to me” (P, FI)
12. “I like to joke around” (P, FG)
13. “I try to do things the right way” (P, FI)
14. “I like to do what my friends are doing” (D, FI)
15. “I procrastinate. I just can’t motivate myself to get up and do stuff” (D, 1)

(Repeating Ideas)

C. Success – (Theme)
1. “Nice house, nice cars, easy living” (P, FG)
2. “I’m living my dream” (K, 1)
3. “I think I am successful. I have a good job. I’m married, going to get ready to buy a house in the next couple of months” (K, FG)
4. “I am not successful right now because I don’t have my own home and I have not earned enough time to take vacations, but I have the potential to be successful because I want it so bad” (P, FI)
5. “For my age, I am successful, I got a scholarship to school and I own my own car” (D, FI)
6. “I am getting better at it whenever I read, cause it takes me less time to read something. I read a lot more and I am able to comprehend a lot more” (D, 1)
7. “I got into college. I did what I wanted to do.” (D, FG)
8. “I made a little time sheet, now everyone copied it, everyone got one. My manager loves it.” (P, 2)
9. “I’m the youngest plumber they have. I am ranked 64th overall in sales. I have the least amount of customer complaints. My customers always want me back” (P, 1)
10. “Like now, you get more confidence, and your managers start backing you up and the boss, and you just go to a job and bang it all out” (P, 2)
11. “You have to keep moving and if you want to do anything with your life, you just have to keep moving” (D, FG)
12. “If you give up, what are you going to do, live at home for the rest of your life? No one wants to do that. It all depends on how bad you really want it.” (P, FG)

(Repeating Ideas)

IV. Influence of Past Experiences on Post-secondary and Career Choices – (Theoretical Construct)
A. Continued effects of LD as an adult – (Theme)
1. “I wasn’t going to originally get in [to college]. They had originally got back to me and said your grades aren’t where we want them to be” (K, 1)
2. “I wasn’t scoring high enough on the test [Civil Service Exam]. I wasn’t reading the questions as fast as everyone else” (K, 1)
3. “I’m always going to have a learning disability” (K, 1)
4. “My learning disability impacts me in the fact that I, still have to sit through a classroom to learn the things you need to know about firefighting” (K, 2)
5. “I have to be more attentive to what is going on because the instructors are not necessarily teachers per se. You could kind of see towards the end, that they’re getting frustrated because you’re always coming with a problem” (K, 2)
6. “[In college] I have a hard time starting the paper. I have always had trouble with that” (D, 1)
7. “I can’t read fast and I can’t understand things as well as most people. It’s so much harder for me to comprehend what I read” (D, 1)
8. “I still have trouble with tests” (K, 2; D, 2)
9. “So I’d look up lavatory sink and write it down…to spell it, to make sure I had it right. Cause it [invoice] was an official document and I didn’t want to be like, wow this dude can’t spell. Now, I just write L-A-V, abbreviate it” (P, 1)
10. “I still can’t spell. I can read a lot better though. I can definitely read, I can’t spell nothing” (P, 2)
11. “You gotta sit there and listen to the teacher, but it is not like normal school. You learn math and the plumbing code. I got a math tutor” (P, 1) (Repeating Ideas)

B. What Influenced Their Post-secondary and Career Decisions – (Theme)
1. “I always knew I wanted to be a fireman. I set my goal early, like when I was in high school” (K, FG)
2. “I’m an easy going guy. I work well with others and I couldn’t stand sitting in an office space, by myself typing on the computer. I like being around other people” (K, 1)
3. “I joined the National Guard to get the military points [on the civil service exam]” (K, 1)
4. “I knew that firefighting jobs were few and far between so I went to college to have something to fall back on” (K, 1)
5. “I originally wanted to be a teacher. I chose recreational administration because I saw the curriculum for education and said, huh-uh. I’m not going to” (K, 1)
6. “Growing up, my dad was a fire fighter, so I got into it when I was younger, then my brother and sister became volunteers” (D, 1)
7. “I actually wanted to be a fire fighter, but I though if the Air Force is paying for another piece of education, I might as well take advantage of it, so that’s why I went to college” (D, 1)
8. “The Air Force was a good opportunity. I get discounts on health insurance. It pays for school, my food, my room and board” (D, 1)
9. “I am majoring in accounting. I was told I had a learning disability in English, and I was so far behind those people in English, that I went with the total opposite subject, math” (D, 1)
10. “I went out to see a couple of friends, and I got lost, made a wrong turn, and went to Mr. R on accident. They were hiring so I put an application in and they hired me” (P, 1)
11. “I was nervous for my future. I didn’t think I could do anything. It grew out of wanting to grow up” (P, 1)
12. “I always thought about being a plumber, or an electrician or a contractor. School was never really a big fun part of my life, except like woodshop or something like that” (P, 2)
13. “I didn’t even try [to go to college]. I never filled out any applications or anything. Never crossed my mind. I’m definitely not mad about it, I made a decision” (P, 2).
14. “I mean you look around and see what everyone else got, and that’s what you want” (P, FG). (Repeating Ideas)

D. Continued Evidence of Resiliency – (Theme)
1. “I have learned to expect to ask questions about things that I don’t get. I can take tests by myself, and I can study on my own” (K, 2)
2. “I just wanted to do things on my own, to try to overcome it, but it’s [LD] always going to be over my head” (K, 1)
3. “I don’t let anything get the best of me” (K, 1)
4. “They’ll ask for volunteers to come to the front of the classroom, and I’ll be the first one to raise my hand. I’ll be the first one to laugh at something” (K, 2)
5. “I like to do things on my own” (D, 1)
6. “I just go into a customer’s house and start talking to them. Find something to talk to them about and just talk” (P, 1)
7. “I don’t skip work. I have the least amount of call off days” (P, 2)
8. “Definitely reading the newspaper really helped, and I keep using it. Once you don’t use it you lose it” (P, 2) (Repeating Ideas)