2001

The Learning Disabled College Student : Experiencing the Hundred-Acre Wood

Frances Lowry Schander

Andrews University

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Andrews University
School of Education

THE LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENT:
EXPERIENCING THE HUNDRED-ACRE WOOD

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Frances Lowry Schander

May 2001
ABSTRACT

THE LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENT:
EXPERIENCING THE HUNDRED-ACRE WOOD

by

Frances Lowry Schander

Chair: Shirley A. Freed
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title: THE LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENT: EXPERIENCING THE HUNDRED-ACRE WOOD

Name of researcher: Frances Lowry Schander

Name and degree of faculty chair: Shirley A. Freed, Ph.D.

Date completed: May 2001

Problem

Learning disabled (LD) college students are attempting college in unprecedented numbers. This study explores the experiences of four graduating college students to determine how they managed their disability in the educational environment that has provided them with much difficulty for many years.

Method

A qualitative case study design with purposive sampling was used for this study. Over 9 months, four female college students, identified as learning disabled, were interviewed. In addition, conversations were held with their parents and teachers whom the four students identified as being “helpful.” Each student’s experience in
college is described and analyzed. Important themes, along with similarities and differences in the students’ experiences, are examined.

Results

At least one benefactor or mentor seemed to be the key to each student’s college success. This benefactor is more likely to be a family member, but could also include a friend or counselor. Other results indicate that the better the student’s understanding regarding her learning disability, the more willing she was to aggressively and successfully problem solve. All four students found college stressful and depended on friends and friendships to provide relief. Teachers had enormous power to adapt requirements to fit the students’ abilities, thus relieving stress and making college doable. The teacher’s perceived attitude toward the student appeared to be significant in the student’s success. In addition, intentional university support early in the student’s college experience appears to be critical.

Conclusions

While graduating from college is important to all four students, it is the development of self-understanding and problem-solving skills, while learning to take control of their lives, that is critical for lifetime success. To encourage LD student success, universities must provide both support for the students they accept and education for the faculty who teach them.
THE LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENT:
EXPERIENCING THE HUNDRED-ACRE WOOD

A dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Frances Lowry Schander

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Data approved
April 25, 2001
To the Heffalump and friends,

with much love
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PROLOGUE

OFF TO THE HUNDRED-ACRE WOOD

Pooh began to feel a little more comfortable, because when you are a Bear of Very Little Brain, and you Think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it.

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

About three decades ago I decided to break out of the family mold of attending the closest university to home and travel to what was then far-away England. Although I was at first terrified by my own plans to see the world, some months later I landed on that distant island and began an adventure that has provided a backdrop to the rest of my life in ways I would never have anticipated.

For the first time, I could see and touch historical, centuries-old wonders like Runnymede and Stonehenge, creep about the spidery stone blocks of celebrated locations like Winchester Cathedral and the pools of Bath, and drink in the vibrant strains of symphonic music at world-famous concert halls like the Royal Festival or the Royal Albert. But equally enlightening was a college literary club to which I belonged that year which introduced me to something else: Winnie-the-Pooh, a guileless and hopelessly charming character I had somehow missed while growing up. That year our club presented a play with readings and drama from A. A. Milne's classic. Some of us enjoyed Winnie so much that we began referring to each other by
some of the characters’ names—Tigger, Eeyore, Piglet, and more. I loved everything about that year abroad—the friends, the experiences, living on the top floor of an old mansion, the proximity to Europe—and even the school work. And then I returned to the New World to become a teacher.

Years went by, I married, and Winnie became an important part of my own daughter’s growing up. There is little doubt that the “Pooh” volume, a gift from one of my “England” friends, has been much-used and much-loved. The book itself is ragged and torn from repeated readings. The cover is slightly askew. But the difference is that it has never actually been read by my daughter. Perhaps it never will. That’s because my daughter does not enjoy reading.

My daughter, now a university student, is dyslexic. And there is a growing number of others like her, students attempting college, though they read slowly, write laboriously, and struggle in ways that those of us who are readers and writers never imagined.

In an effort to understand what it is like for her and other dyslexic college students whom I have taught, I have examined areas of their experience that I wish to understand more, all under the watchful eye of Winnie-the-Pooh who remarked soulfully, “I am a Bear of Very Little Brain and long words Bother me” (Milne, 1957, p. 50).
CHAPTER 1

THE NEED TO SEARCH

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn’t.

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

Introduction

Educators have always had difficulty knowing what to do with students who learn differently. That certainly was the case for me and most of my classmates in teacher training over two decades ago. And, when I began a teaching career, like so many of my colleagues, I was primarily interested in teaching the “good” students, those whom I found personally rewarding because they “did” school well. They were destined to be successful, or so I thought, and enjoyed school just as I had. They were often readers and writers, students who excelled in the primary venues through which education is measured (e.g., essays, tests, copious amounts of reading, writing, and memorization). These students provided me— and my teaching counterparts—the sense that we had successfully taught the material.

Then there were other students, who, like Edward Bear (a.k.a. Winnie-the-Pooh), have bumped along because it is all they have ever known. School is not
rewarding. Occasionally, these students must fantasize about better learning environments where they can excel, but the hope that these fantasies provide is quickly extinguished. These are students like Jeremy.

*Discovering the Problem*

It was my first year of teaching in a private parochial school on the green rolling-hilled fringes of western Pennsylvania. The view from my classroom window was any teacher's dream—lush fields of tall grasses and wildflowers, a woods full of tall hardwood trees with leaves that turned golden brown and bright orange in the autumn. On cool winter mornings deer emerged from the shadows and relative safety of the woods to munch the tall grass that fringed the forest.

In this near idyllic setting, I taught English, religion, and social studies to Grades 7-10 students. Although most of the students at our school were of the same Christian faith, we also had some children whose parents wanted them in a private school.

Jeremy was one of these children. I knew from his records that this tall, 14-year-old seventh-grader found school a real challenge. He had already spent 2 years at our school and was barely passing, even though anecdotal records indicated that he worked hard. He was intelligent and, thanks to a certain disarming charm, he had a secure place as a friend to his classmates.

I was fresh out of graduate school and determined that my students would excel. I worked them hard and demanded excellence. I insisted that they write often, drilled them in grammar, shared my favorite literature with them, and introduced
French to the curriculum. We began working on plays—which had to be memorized—to perform for their parents. Many students thrived. But Jeremy was floundering academically.

One day, when I was particularly exasperated, I said sternly in my teacher voice, “Jeremy, if you’re not able to do the work, you shouldn’t be here.” He looked crestfallen. I walked away, quickly forgetting what I had just said. That evening I received a phone call from his mother. She was a kind woman. She reminded me—gently—of what I had said to her struggling son and how discouraged he was. She wanted to know if I really meant what I had said.

This was a new thought. The words that had passed so glibly from my lips had hurt and demoralized. I realized that if he followed through on what I had suggested, I and the rest of the school would miss this charming boy who added a spark to my classroom. He wasn’t a discipline problem. Besides, he probably worked harder than any other student. He was trying desperately to survive that dreadful thing called “school” because he couldn’t drop out yet. He had to be there—or somewhere. For the first time, I saw what school was from his perspective. For him, school was not much fun.

Finding the Question

While teaching at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, I quickly recognized that there were students who clearly did not thrive in school. Often their learning characteristics had certain threads of similarities: poor short-term memory,

* In keeping with the writing style of this dissertation, contractions will be used.
inadequate writing skills, slow reading ability, poor reading comprehension, and a
general dislike for school, at least in the way it was being traditionally offered. They
were the students who frequently had difficulty attending to the academic task at
hand. They were the learners for whom instruction often had to be made as simple as
possible, sequenced, and repeated more than once. They were the readers who were
still on page 14 when the rest of the class was finished page 25 and ready to move on.
They were, in short, something of a nuisance because they didn’t fit the educational
template.

Yet, in other ways, teaching these students was immensely rewarding. More
than a few of these same students were articulate, insightful, possessed exceptional
vocabularies, and were doggedly determined to complete their current grade. But they
were floundering amidst a sea of written language and mathematical formulae. How
could they be successful in college, when elementary and high school had already
been difficult experiences?

For many years these students who found school difficult—who somehow
didn’t fit into the academic mold—simply dropped out, often in late elementary or
early high school. But as a high-school education became a prerequisite for any kind
of useful job, “poor” students began to remain in school longer. The educational
system had already found what it thought was a suitable solution: Send these students
to trade or technical schools. And so, beginning in the early 1960s, learning disabled
(LD) students were often channeled into practical, hands-on classes until they could
leave school at age 16 and be employed. For the next several decades, this seemed a
satisfactory solution, at least to those in charge of education.
By the late 1980s, however, this once acceptable answer was no longer adequate. A new wind was blowing in educational circles. There were students who were not satisfied with being plumbers, electricians, or computer technicians, as fine as these professions might be. They wanted a liberal arts education. At about this same time the Jeremys of the world began to speak up, to dare to express their educational aspirations. College was becoming big business, more students were attending, and a college degree was rapidly becoming the prerequisite for obtaining many jobs, including the traditional entry-level positions that had previously been filled by high-school graduates. For LD students, just like other students, college was becoming an important rite of passage through which they must journey in order to obtain available jobs.

Why College?

The importance of education has never been more evident than it is right now, at the beginning of the 21st century. On average, a college graduate is more than twice as likely to be employed and will annually earn a salary that is 34% higher than someone with a high-school education (U. S. Government, 1999).

Few among us would question the inherent value of higher education. We generally agree that completing college enhances the quality of life for the student, the student's family, and the wider circle of community, employer, and friends. The right to an education is almost as American as apple pie and baseball. Education has always been "a key to unlocking the promise of American life, a way to move from the back of the line to the front" (Manno, 1995, p. 47).
As we begin a new millennium in which the career gatekeepers have raised the bar to require a university education, obtaining a university degree then is particularly valuable. Thirty years ago a Grade 12 education was often the only prerequisite for a satisfactory-paying job that would allow a worker to marry and support a family. Today, the story is much different. As part of a knowledge-based society, workers frequently require an undergraduate degree for entry-level employment. In many ways, a college education is now the launching point toward obtaining satisfying employment instead of the high-school education that was considered adequate several decades ago.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they are used in this study.

*College/university:* Four-year post-secondary programs. The terms are used interchangeably.

*Learning disability (LD):*

A disorder in one or more basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, in which the disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance or environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (United States Department of Education, 1992, 5B-4). *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142, 1975), updated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments (PL 102-119, 1991)*
**Dyslexia:** A “specific type of learning disability involving a severe impairment in reading ability which affects and disrupts a person’s language development and functioning” (Spafford & Grosser, 1996, p. 1).

**Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD):**

A neurological disorder, often thought to be hereditary in origin, which affects the central nervous system. The essential features of the disorder are inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity, more frequent and severe than is typical for individuals at comparable levels of development. Although ADD is no longer thought of as primarily a childhood disorder, the diagnosis is not given unless some of the symptoms have been present before age seven. Additionally, the features of the disorder must be present in at least two settings—home, school, work. There must also be interference with appropriate social, academic, or occupational functioning. (Bramer, 1996, p. 6)

ADD is always a clinical judgment, and there are no measures of attention (Wren & Einhorn, 2000).

**Learning Disabilities: A Brief History**

The term “learning disability” is relatively new, reportedly first used by educator Samuel Kirk in 1963, as an attempt to help people understand why some students with apparently normal intelligence experienced tremendous difficulty with school (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1993). The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (now the Learning Disabilities Association) was formed the following year, and during the next several decades at least 10 definitions for learning disabilities have been used and applied (Hammill, 1990). However, it was 1969 when the federal government recognized officially the category in the Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act (PL 91-230). In 1976, the federal government began keeping track of the number of students with handicaps being educated and a
year later issued regulations regarding the diagnosing of learning disabilities (Hallahan, 1992). Professionals were just beginning to understand and acknowledge learning disabilities in the late 1970s. From an educational standpoint, then, the field of learning disabilities is very recent.

But this apparently simple and relatively new term actually includes a complex history and a still-not-very-understood present. Without doubt, it is the breadth of the term in an emerging new field that has contributed to a certain haze because the term “learning disability” includes a wide range of disciplines from educational psychology, curriculum and instruction, psycholinguistics, neuropsychology, and, most recently, neurobiology (Gander, 1996; Shaywitz, 1998). Most professionals acknowledge that while the term “learning disability” does not provide sufficiently specific insight into the nature of the disability to be truly useful, they would agree that it is inappropriate to say there are no learning disabled students (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Levine et al., 1993; Lyon, 1995; Shaywitz, 1996).

Individuals are considered to be learning disabled when a significant difference exists between their expected abilities (estimated by intellectual performance) and their actual academic performance in specific areas of functioning. Although using IQ as the benchmark method of identification of learning disabilities continues to be debated (Siegel, 1999; Stanovich, 1999), it is still crucial to the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV; APA, 1994) criteria which require functioning below what is expected, considering the person’s chronological age, measured intelligence, and educational level, and special
education law definitions which usually require some standardized method of evaluation based on IQ (Gordon, Lewandowski, & Keiser, 1999).

Within this general learning disabilities category, which, after considerable refining over several decades, has become an umbrella term, there is dyslexia. This specific reading disability has as its core symptom, a “difficulty reading and spelling individual words accurately and automatically and that the underlying neuropsychological deficit is phonological processing” (Padget, 1998, p. 169). A diagnosis of dyslexia usually includes what has come to be understood as “secondary symptoms,” spawned because of the core symptom. Consequently, a student with a specific reading disability usually has one or more of the following consequences of the core problem: poor reading comprehension, poor written expression, including significant difficulties with spelling and sentence structure (Pennington, 1991).

Because other difficulties, including attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), considered a behavioral disorder, frequently appear in tandem with dyslexia, problems such as distractability and lack of organization and synthesizing skills are often present as well (Spafford & Grosser, 1996).

Statement of the Problem

Most would agree, I think, that it is important that everyone be given equal opportunity to achieve his or her potential. This is true for all students, including those who are learning disabled. Persons with learning disabilities who complete a college education are more likely to hold professional/managerial-type jobs than those
LD students who graduate from high school (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995). Gerber, Ginsberg, and Reiff (1992) in one of the first studies to track the LD success rates indicate that nearly all the LD persons in their study who were considered highly or moderately successful had completed at least some college education, with 89% finishing a minimum of a bachelor’s degree.

LD students have been attempting college in increasing numbers since the late 1980s, when a growing wave of high-school graduates who were classified and educated under PL 94-142 began to recognize that a college education might be attainable, particularly under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (updated to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, PL 101-336), which ensures all “otherwise qualified” individuals with handicaps the right to higher education—at both public universities and almost all private universities in the United States (Lewandowski & Arcangelo, 1994; Vogel et al., 1998). Over a 10-year period (1984-94), these numbers of students in colleges and universities who self-reported a learning disability increased three times (Henderson, 1995). In addition, the number of higher education institutions offering support services to LD college students increased to nearly 1,000 by 1992, as listed in the Peterson’s Colleges with Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities (Mangrum & Strichart, 1992).

This growth has hardly been gradual. In 1985, for example, 1.1% of all first-time full-time freshman in the United States indicated they had learning disabilities. By 1996, the American Council on Education reported 3.1% of all college freshmen self-reporting with learning disabilities, up from 2.2% in 1991 (Long, 1997). According to the American Council on Education (2000, January 17), 9% (154,520

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students) of all first-time, full-time freshmen enrolled in a post-secondary institution in 1998 reported a disability. Of these, 41% said they had a learning disability, up 15% from 10 years earlier.

This increase in LD students in higher education is just as true in Canada where as many as 10% of students may have some type of learning disability (Learning Disabilities Association, 1994, cited in Cox & Klas, 1996). This may be due to a variety of reasons: the Learning Disabilities Association has lobbied hard for college-bound students; the secondary school system, recognizing the need for continued education in order to secure a good job, is directing more LD students to college; and there are better diagnostic tools with which to identify the particular and specific needs of LD students (Wiener & Siegel, 1992). In both the United States and Canada, LD students are becoming more vocal and more visible on many campuses, with a number of universities, including Harvard, encouraging the development of student support groups for LD students (Cox & Klas, 1996).

Some educators claim that the current focus on LD students is not really a current phenomenon, but rather has been brought to the fore because of higher education’s ideals of “excellence” and “accessibility” which has made it “safer” for students to be more up-front about requiring help with their special needs (Cox & Klas, 1996). In previous times, students who found college too challenging just faded away.

The increasing number of LD college students results from other reasons as well. Most noteworthy is the apparent increased success in actually educating LD students (Vogel, 1990). Because more high schools are offering assistance in a
number of ways to its LD population, the expectation among LD students of continued services at a post-secondary level continues. Also, though some would advocate for remediation at a college level, accommodation seems to work well.

In addition, we have come to recognize that learning disabilities are life-long, continuing into adulthood (Patton & Polloway, 1992), and it follows that students who needed remediation and/or accommodation in high school would continue to need similar assistance in college. Society has also developed an increased awareness of adult illiteracy issues and the resultant long-term social and economic ramifications for society that are involved. To a certain extent, then, there is some motivation of self-protection on the part of those who do not wish to support illiterate and unemployed persons for the rest of their lives (Cox & Klas, 1996).

Given the nature of college, its demands of significant amounts of reading, writing, memory, and processing, it is predictable that learning disabled students will experience more challenges than their non-LD counterparts. But, unlike the blind student or the quadriplegic, LD students look just like everybody else. According to Longo (1988), “Marked by no outwardly visible sign of their handicap, these students [LD] may pose the greatest challenge to higher education’s ability to accept and adapt to the diversity than any population accommodated thus far” (p. 10).

The Reality of the Problem

At first glance these students appear able to cope. Often exceptionally articulate, many LD students appear self-sufficient . . . for about 2 weeks. Then the combined reality of their learning disability and the nature of “every man/woman for
him/herself” at college collide, totally upsetting the equilibrium. “Using long established avoidance patterns, these students enter the hide out phase of their college education, generally a short-lived period during which they attend classes, carry books, and exhibit behavior suggesting ‘no problem’” (Allard, Dodd, & Peralez, 1987, p. 360).

Second, finding the correct balance between remediation and accommodation is an ongoing challenge, even for the best special education and general education professionals. Figuring out the degree of accommodation necessary—remediating students’ deficits, working their strengths, complementing their weaknesses—is an art in itself, requiring ongoing monitoring with each new class that the LD student takes.

Within institutions, communicating clearly regarding the extent to which they are committed to maximizing students’ abilities to achieve both academic and personal success can be excruciatingly difficult (Cox & Klas, 1996). Many professors see themselves as protectors of academic standards, while administrators and support personnel are attempting to meet the needs of the LD student who is seeking a college education and whose tuition dollars are needed.

Affective issues, often difficult to measure, are more than likely influencing academic performance. Evidence indicates that LD college students demonstrate a variety of problems that adversely affect their academic performance (Hughes & Smith, 1990). Given the importance of educational attainment and scholastic ability in our world, it is not surprising that students, who find themselves at the bottom of the heap even though they are working very hard, will have secondary issues that seriously affect their lives, sometimes more adversely than the LD factor.
A Closer Look at the Problem

What are the challenges that LD college students face? Because of the variable nature of learning disabilities, pinpointing the exact nature of LD and receiving a useful psycho-educational assessment is not always easy. By the time LD students arrive at college, many are accompanied by files heavy with a succession of assessments, occasionally contradicting each other. While assessments may be becoming more uniform, many institutions recognize that on-site, anecdotal “evaluations” of the students’ deficit areas often give truer pictures of the students’ struggles.

We do know that many LD college students have difficulties in the following areas: reading (Runyan & Smith, 1991; Vogel & Adelman, 1992), written expression (Vogel, 1985; Vogel & Adelman, 1992), and math (Cordoni & Snyder, 1981), with language-based disabilities accounting for more than 80% of all disabilities (Blalock, 1981). Other areas of difficulty include test taking, note taking, organizing and time management, identifying task requirements, synthesizing information, memorizing, and establishing both long- and short-term goals (Mangrum & Strichart, 1988). For others, social and interpersonal skills present problems (Heyman, 1990; Jarvis & Justice, 1992), though not always (Cosden & McNamara, 1997; Lewandowski & Arcangelo, 1994). Some evidence of immaturity is evident in dealing with emotions and feelings (Mangrum & Strichart, 1988). In addition, low self-esteem and other emotional problems continue into adulthood (Saracoglu, Minden, & Wilchesky, 1989). Finally, learning disabilities are lifelong (Gajar, 1992; Spekman, Goldberg, &
Herman, 1992) and many of the associated problems tend to intensify with time (Gerber et al., 1992).

Failure rate of LD students is high (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). Sitlington and Frank (1990) reported that only 6.5% of 911 LD high school students entering college were still enrolled 1 year later. Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, and Yahaya (1989) indicated that the graduation rate was only 30% for LD students at 2- and 4-year colleges, compared to a national graduation rate of 50%. This figure, however, is based on just 6% of the colleges/universities which were members of the Learning Disabilities Special Interest Group of the Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Postsecondary Education (Greenbaum et al., 1995) and so should be regarded cautiously. Vogel and Adelman (1990) reported a 37% graduation rate for 110 LD students attending Barat College, a small midwestern college which gave intensive attention to special students. Course grades of the students there were significantly lower than their non-LD counterparts, but the two groups graduated at about the same rate.

Purpose of the Study

Being an LD student appears to be rife with challenges. In general, we know that students with learning disabilities drop out of school more frequently than students with other handicaps (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992). For example, Lichtenstein (1993) reports an alarming 40% high-school dropout rate among LD students compared to 25% of their non-disabled peers. For the hardy 60% who complete high school, Miller (1997) points out that the transition from high
school to college can be traumatic for even the most competent learning disabled student.

Research has already indicated that LD college students are more vulnerable to academic stress and failure than their non-LD counterparts (Cosden & McNamara, 1997). In addition, studies also indicate that LD college students report lower self-esteem, higher rates of failure, and lower college graduation rates than their non-LD peers (Vogel & Adelman, 1992). Despite seemingly overwhelming odds, however, learning disabled students do successfully complete college.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of these LD students who are succeeding at the tertiary level, to find out how they manage their disability. In other words, what happens to the Jeremys who complete high school and attempt college?

The broad research question is: From the student’s perspective, how do LD students survive higher education, the very setting that has given them considerable challenge throughout their academic lives?

In asking this, I wanted to explore the role that others have played in their education:

1. What personal qualities are evident in teachers who take an interest in the college experience of LD students?

2. What part do families play in LD students successfully completing college?

3. In what ways do students identify that they have been able to manage their disability?
Because it is important that these students perceive their college education as the beginning of their lifetime adventure, I was interested in their perceptions of the future. I wanted to understand how empowered they feel for lifetime success.

And because so many LD students have significant difficulties with language processing—whether written or oral, or both—I wanted to know how they have dealt with the preponderance of reading and writing that is inherent in a traditional college curriculum.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 explains the background and the progressive interest I have in working with learning disabled students. It provides the context for the study and the questions which have motivated it.

Chapter 2 explains the methodology that I used in the study. In addition to including particular sources relating to qualitative case studies, I have also indicated the process that I have followed toward my summary.

Chapters 3 through 6 are the personal accounts of the four college students who inform my study. Each of these chapters reflects the themes about which I was particularly interested, which I wished to explore more closely as I examined how these students manage college.

Chapter 7 is the cross-case analysis. In this segment I look at the collective lives of these students in the context of the literature, looking for threads of similarities and differences.
Chapter 8 is a summary of the study, referring again to the original questions which motivated the study. Recommendations to colleges and LD college students are included, along with further questions which might be studied.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

One fine winter's day when Piglet was brushing away the snow in front of his house, he happened to look up, and there was Winnie-the-Pooh. Pooh was walking around the circle, thinking of something else, and when Piglet called to him, he just went on walking.

"Hallo!" said Piglet, "what are you doing?"
"Hunting," said Pooh.
"Hunting what?"
"Tracking something," said Winnie-the-Pooh very mysteriously.
"Tracking what?" said Piglet, coming closer.
"That's just what I ask myself. I ask myself, What?"

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

Introduction

Because I was looking for insight into the lives of LD college students, I chose a descriptive qualitative design. This would allow me to draw from what Merriam (1988) describes as a "rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study" (p. 11). Merriam points out that this design is able to "illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study. [It] can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience or confirm what is known" (p. 13). By its nature, "qualitative inquiry is inductive—focussing on process, understanding, and interpretation—rather than deductive and experimental" (Merriam, 1988, p. 21). This approach, occasionally called "opportunistic" or "naturalistic" research, requires that the researcher choose a case rather than a variable in an attempt to gain an
understanding of a broader phenomenon. Case studies focus on specific situations or phenomenon that help the researcher to understand the phenomenon being studied.

Case study is valuable because it “incorporates the views of the ‘actors’ in the case under study” (Tellis, 1997, p. 3). In addition to the voice and perspective of the actors, case study also includes related actors and the interaction between them. Because of this, the voices of multiple informants mingling with each other are heard instead of only the researcher’s, adding a valued dimension to the investigation.

The Design

For this study, I used purposeful sampling, with subject selection based on predetermined criteria to the extent that the subjects could contribute to the research study (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). According to MacMillan and Schumacher (1997), purposeful sampling is useful “when one wants to understand something about those cases without needing or desiring to generalize to all such cases. . . . [These] samples are chosen because they are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena the researcher is investigating” (p. 397). The researcher searches for information-rich key informants (Patton, 1990).

Also, I used reputational selection, in which subjects are “chosen on the recommendation of an ‘expert’ or ‘key informant’” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). Because there were persons who had special knowledge in this area of selection, I relied on their expertise in helping with the selection of participants.
Participant Selection

I was interested in examining the experiences of LD students at both a public and private educational institution. In order to accomplish this, I interviewed four LD students, two from York University (or one of its affiliated colleges), a public university in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and two from Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, a 2,700-student institution of higher education operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

I was interested in students with language processing disorders which would be indicated in one or more of the following: difficulty in learning to read, erratic spelling, and/or lack of ease in manipulating written as opposed to spoken language.

An additional criteria was that I was interested in LD college students who were nearing the end of their college/university experience. Because they were almost finished, or at least in the latter one-fourth of their program, they were deemed “successful.” Since gender was not the focus of this study, I was not concerned about whether they were male or female.

Participants needed to have documentation of a learning disability from a school file. This could include a psychological report, an Independent Education Plan (IEP), or a report from a private educational psychologist. In addition, there needed to be absence of compounding physical or sensory disabilities, indication of a minimum full scale IQ within the average range (i.e., FSIQ 85-110), and the absence of significant barriers in spoken or written English because of a foreign language background. All participants were able to present documentation indicating
difficulties in language processing, and all provided written documentation showing IQ's within the average range. English was the first language of each participant.

Data Collection

Sources of Evidence

The study was conducted during a 6-month period at York University, Andrews University, and at off-site locations, as required for mutual convenience. Data for this study were collected using a multi-method approach consisting of the following: (1) multiple subject interviews, (2) parent interviews, either in person or using recorded telephone interviews, (3) selected teacher interviews, (4) document examination, and (5) field notes.

During an initial meeting with each of the four participants to determine eligibility and mutual interest, I recorded field notes of our session together but did not tape our meeting. At subsequent meetings, both tape recordings and field notes were used to track our sessions together. After I had begun to write up the case studies, clarification and subsequent questions were followed up with each of the informants.

Interviews

According to Merriam (1988), interviewing is a major source of the qualitative data necessary in order to understand the phenomenon being studied. For this study, I used semi-structured interviews. Initially, I asked participants to tell me about themselves. Then I asked about how they felt their learning disability had affected their lives. In subsequent interviewing, I asked more specific questions which
I felt were pertinent to my study. Occasionally, when I felt the questions were becoming too narrow, I asked fewer questions and listened more. Many of my questions were spawned by previous answers to questions which piqued my interest. I viewed our sessions together as a conversation, in which one listens and joins in another person’s thinking, while avoiding premature judgments. The experience became one through which we learned together (Yonemura, 1982). Several times the interview sessions became very intense and, fearing that I was creating undue unpleasantness by my questions, I gave opportunity for closure. But in each case, the interviewees were determined to carry on because they felt that their contribution was significant. Being asked to participate seemed to validate who they were. Invariably, at the end of our sessions, they thanked me for listening. And so we continued our journey together.

Initial interviews were held with each of the four candidates to determine eligibility, interest, and availability. During an initial untaped meeting of about 1 hour to 1½ hours, potential interviewees briefly told me their stories and why they were interested in participating in the study. I explained the purpose of my research and how they could help; I also explained what I needed from them in terms of time and documentation.

Following their agreement to participate in the study, at least 2 taped, in-depth interviews, each approximately 2 hours in length, were held at a mutually convenient location. After the interviews, the tapes were transcribed and then I spoke with each informant for additional information or clarification as needed. Follow-up telephone calls were made to seek clarification, elaboration, and further contact.
Interviews were also held with at least one parent of each informant and selected teachers who were identified by key informants as being particularly helpful to their college success. One informant mentioned several helpful teachers whom I interviewed. Another informant could think of no helpful teachers. Where possible, I looked over written work, both in-progress and completed.

Data from interviews, observations, documents, and field notes were housed in four volumes (cited by volume and page number), one for each of the interviewees. Also included were e-mail (cited as a Document File), field notes, and other artifacts, as available.

Documentation

Each student was required to provide documentation regarding her learning disability. All documents provided indicated a language-based disability, which met the major criteria established for inclusion in the study.

Other documents included test results from classes and/or written material in various stages of production. Some essays were also submitted. E-mail correspondence relative to this study is also included.

Field Notes

From the time I first began negotiating with possible subjects, I kept field notes relating to each interviewee. Occasionally we talked informally on the phone or met to discuss further points. For each of these informal sessions, I maintained field notes regarding where we met and what we talked about, along with general observations regarding the setting and my impressions.
Data Analysis

As soon as I had finished the first round of interviews, I began having material transcribed so that I could tweak the questions, if necessary, sort them into primarily descriptive categories, and begin looking at patterns, themes, and new insights. Because I had completed a significant literature review, I was already aware of significant themes, and questions were roughly categorized according to those themes in which I was particularly interested.

Almost immediately I began to pick up significant connecting threads between these themes and the experiences of the interviewees. These were important guiding lights as the themes began to grow or diminish in significance during successive conversations. As I explored these themes throughout the interviews, I began to make connections between the experiences of those whom I was interviewing and the literature which I had studied.

As might be expected in interviewing members of the LD population with language-based difficulties, several had expressive language problems, indicated by fragmented speech, malapropisms, and straying from the topic. Generally, the quoted speech has been smoothed for the sake of coherence within the text.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are most interested in consistency, trustworthiness, and dependability, which are validated through triangulation of method/data, an audit trail, and stating researcher biases (Merriam, 1988). According to Tellis (1997), triangulation “arises from the ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes”
Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I asked participants for feedback to validate my interpretations (member checks). Students had the opportunity to read and respond to the material I used from the interviews.

As the primary instrument of both data collection and analysis, I have attempted to both clarify and summarize as I progressed through data collection. Data analysis was concurrent with collection.

Transferability

The purpose of my study was to understand how the four students whom I interviewed were able to achieve success in college. I do not expect all LD college students to reflect these successes and challenges in the same way. Indeed, each story will be different. However, by telling the stories I hope that other educators or LD students may be able to find threads of information that may be useful to their own experience.

I chose to probe the lives of four LD college students to try to understand their life stories, particularly as they pertain to higher education, and to share those experiences with others. According to Merriam (1988), “One selects a case study approach because one wishes to understand the particular in depth” (p. 173). And while each case is different, according to Eisner (1991), “every particular is also a sample of a larger class [so that] what has been learned about a particular can have relevance for the class to which it belongs. The theme, embedded in a particular situation, extends beyond the situation itself” (p. 103).
Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of this study include informed consent, the anonymity of the participants, and confidentiality of all written and recorded data. All four students participating in the interviews were informed of the purpose of the intended research study. Each was given and signed a consent form which explained the parameters of the research protocol.

In each case I assured the participants that our journey together was not unlike a trip to an unknown destination. I was grateful that they were willing to travel with me, but I assured each one that our journey together would probably take a few unforeseen twists. As Eisner (1991) explains, "Researchers usually do not know what will emerge . . . and therefore are not in a good position to inform those to be observed about what to expect" (p. 215).

Role of the Researcher

As researcher, I have been the primary instrument of data collection throughout this study and would like to make my biases explicit. I have taught learning disabled students for many years. As I stated earlier, for the first decade of my teaching career, I was relatively unaware of learning disabilities and their implications. It was not until I became the parent of a learning disabled child that I began to search for understanding. As our journey--hers and mine--has progressed through elementary school and high school, I have frequently found that I had more questions than answers.
Because of my own experience, I have become much more aware of learning disabilities in my classroom. In teaching adults who have returned to college—tentatively—after years of being out of school, I have on more than one occasion suggested that testing might be useful to determine if there was a learning disability. When a student is a skilled oral communicator and clearly has cognitive ability, but has great difficulty reading and writing, that person may be dyslexic. What I am not so sure about is how that person is going to be successful in college. But I do think that such students should be given every opportunity for success, particularly considering the educational requirements demanded by the current labor market.

Yin (1994) mentions a variety of skills that the researcher should have including the ability to ask good questions, to be flexible, to have a firm grasp of the issues that are studied, to be free of preconceived notions, and the ability to be a good listener. I knew the general categories that I wished to explore. Although I asked some detailed questions early in my interviewing, I found that I needed to set them aside so that I could really hear what was being said. Occasionally I deliberately refrained from picking up the question list because I wanted the subject to follow up on potential questions or forks in the road that seemed equally pertinent to the task at hand.

Being an empathetic listener is important. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), one of the “hallmarks of outstanding anthropological and sociological studies to date has been the empathy with which they have presented . . . informants” (p. 140). I felt affirmed as an interviewer by several of the informants who commented that they felt I had been a good listener. Three of the four students
indicated that being able to tell their story had been therapeutic because it validated who they were, that their life experience was important, and that they hoped that others, particularly educators and other struggling LD college students, could learn from them or, at the very least, take comfort in the journey that others have made before them.

Summary

Purposeful sampling was used for this qualitative case study design. Four students, each with a documented learning disability and an IQ within the average range, participated in the study. In addition, parents were interviewed, as well as teachers who were identified by the LD students as being particularly helpful. The results of the data analysis constitute the remainder of this study.
CHAPTER 3

WENDY: “REMEMBER THE DIVING BOARD”

Pooh had found Piglet, and they were walking back to the Hundred Acre Wood together... Pooh sighed with happiness, and began to think about himself. He was BRAVE.

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

Introduction

Wendy and I had spoken a number of times on the phone before I arranged a meeting with her in southwestern Michigan. As we chatted by phone, I detected enthusiasm, eagerness, and a joie de vivre that was contagious. When I arranged to meet her in the university bookstore, I asked how I could identify her. I was surprised at the matter-of-fact way that she described herself: dark hair, average height, and plumpish. Not many 23-year-old young women describe themselves as “plumpish.” I enjoyed her candor.

When we did connect a few days later, I was charmed. Wendy had dark, expressive eyes and dark hair, thanks to her Native American heritage, she later told me. “Plumpish,” I thought, was a bit of an overstatement. Wendy definitely had energy and a buoyancy that was infectious. She spoke eagerly and earnestly, at times even passionately, about her life experience and her determination to be an educated woman.
When I first met Wendy, she was living in an off-campus apartment. Although spartanly furnished, her living quarters were neat and attractive. When I arrived one blustery spring evening, soft mood music was playing, candles were burning, and the distinctive fragrance of incense hung in the air. Her playful white kitten provided background entertainment while we chatted. The peaceful atmosphere of her living quarters provided a restful ambience to the darkness and driving rain outside. She offered me hot tea. All of this peacefulness, I was to learn later, was a deliberate and studied effort on Wendy's part to create calm in the midst of an often chaotic educational world.

An Understanding

Wendy described herself as dyslexic. When asked to elaborate on what that meant in her specific case, she said she has language processing difficulty. Specifically, she describes herself as an "extremely slow reader" with poor comprehension, a student who processes verbal information slowly, and has difficulty with writing and spelling. In addition, she has an auditory discrimination deficit which she described as an inability to accurately interpret what she hears (I, 2-3). In other words, she says, the words that she hears are "scrambled" before they get to her brain.

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) indicates that Wendy has strong verbal expression, vocabulary, auditory and visual memory, and written expression. Weaknesses appear to be mathematical reasoning, reading, and spelling. Assignments and testing called for assistance from the special education teacher, along with
allowing Wendy to have the test read to her, acceptance of reasonable approximations of spelling for grading purposes, plus short-answer essays instead of specific recall and verbal explanations allowed to supplement written responses.

The Early Years

Wendy’s “differentness” was apparent from early childhood. Because Wendy’s mother is a teacher, and since dyslexia seemed to run in the family into which she married (Wendy’s father and two older siblings are dyslexic), her mother was already alert to a possible learning difference.

Between Wendy’s second and third birthdays, Wendy’s mother remembers her sentence structure as being scrambled. She says, “No matter how many times you said to [Wendy]: ‘Do you want to go out and play?’ she would say: ‘Play I want’” (I, 67). Because Wendy’s two older brothers were already diagnosed as dyslexic, one profoundly so, Wendy’s mom decided to include her in their trips to the Child Studies Center in Fort Worth, Texas, where her brothers were already receiving remediation.

Although she began kindergarten at age 5½, Wendy’s early learning experience was largely unprofitable. Wendy seemed incapable of grasping the concept of written language as a code. Hearing sounds, particularly initial ones, was difficult. Her mother describes her kindergarten experience in this way:

She was clueless, totally clueless. Written language and trying to get her to form language . . . wasn’t even possible. She would start drawing a straight line to make the letter A and in just a few moments she would be in a completely different world drawing complex pictures. . . . [W]e really tried to help her to see that there was a written language. She didn’t perceive that idea. Hearing for her was the biggest thing. Instead of hearing apple she heard the “p” and not the “a.” In boy she heard “oy.” She didn’t hear the first part and definitely not any beginning vowel sounds. (I, 67)
Wendy describes the same experience. Paying attention was very difficult, she looked out the window a lot, and felt removed from what was going on in the classroom. She recalls sitting in class, thinking it was almost like those around her were speaking a foreign language. She could not understand what her classmates were talking about. Wendy adds: “She [the teacher] would ask a question, the students would respond and it sounded like they were speaking another language . . . like it just was mumbled” (I, 5).

During the toughest elementary school years, her mother pulled her out and home schooled her for a total of about 3½ years. She liked those years when she had individual help and a tailor-made education (I, 7). But most of the rest of her elementary school meant tutoring at learning centers and teachers who didn’t understand her “learning ability” and accompanying frustration. One room in particular, which Wendy describes as a “cookie cutter” classroom, was second grade. The teacher seemed unaware that some children learned differently. Wendy did not do well in that room.

High school was a better experience. She describes a high-school English teacher who was particularly effective and willing to work with her. A counselor also took the initiative to speak with her teachers about the way she learned. Wendy describes this woman as “awesome”: “If ever I had a problem with a teacher, she would go and work it out” (I, 8).

The down side of high school was the resource room, a place where she was required to go for 1 hour each day and which Wendy describes as another way of
separating students and emphasizing differences. She remembers how humiliating it was to have to go to the special room. She says:

Other students are asking you, “Where are you going?” And, of course, you know, you feel . . . this embarrassment in high school. Now I’m like, “I really don’t care.” But, at that time you know, when you are 16, you are like . . . “Oh, I’m going to City Hall.” . . . I would tell them where I went. But I was always kind of like—like this little niche in my stomach, right before I’d say the word. And then it was out, and I’m like, okay, “Well, that’s over with.” (I, 9)

Within the resource room were both learning disabled and mentally handicapped students, two very different groups. She says, “I would get very distracted because they would be very loud with the teacher and . . . demanded all of her time. So she had no time to spend with me. She had me do a lot of dumb exercises” (I, 10). Wendy felt that her time in the room was largely unprofitable because her capabilities were far beyond those of the students in the room.

College

Wendy describes herself as someone who loves to learn and who enjoys her classes, particularly ones with lots of discussion because orally she performs well. She usually has a good time in classes that value her input, she tries very hard, and pushes herself to be successful. She laughs when she explains that, if she had the money, she wouldn’t mind being a professional student.

While in Grade 10, Wendy began taking creative writing and yoga classes at a nearby college. Her mother recognized that she was bright, not being challenged in the right ways, and needed some mental stimulation to keep her from becoming depressed. This introduced her to a world of people who were not necessarily the
football players and spiked-hair crowd of her high school. Wendy’s mom explains her proactive approach:

I think that to help your child you must be aggressive with their education. It is a one-shot opportunity in their life to give them what they will need that will enable them to accomplish what they want to in life. If Wendy wanted to be a hairdresser or a ditch digger—I’m not maligning any one of these—but I want her to be whatever she wants to be. That’s what I want for her. (I, 71)

For her first year of college, Wendy attended a school near her home. But Wendy and her parents really wanted her to experience a Seventh-day Adventist school. Since her mom had attended Andrews University some years before, Wendy decided to go to Andrews to study speech pathology. To her mother’s consternation, however, when Wendy went to Andrews “it was just like we were back in the 1970s. They argued with me about what dyslexia was—that it was just a theory, not a proven fact.” She laughs: “I told them, then I want a dose of reality if this is a figment of my imagination!” (I, 70).

Wendy began college as a speech pathology major, but has subsequently changed to elementary education when it became obvious to her that she preferred a more dynamic setting. Some of her college classes have been easy. Because she loves to write creatively and discuss ideas, she found poetry class both rewarding and non-stressful. A children’s literature class was easy. She says that most religion classes are also simple for her because they are interesting and she can discuss “globally” (I, 23).

At first, when she arrived at Andrews, Wendy tried taking an overload of classes (in excess of 16 credits). With little guidance from an advisor, she found herself in desperate straits. Since then, she has usually taken 14-16 credits, depending on what the classes are.
Unlike many dyslexics, Wendy has found foreign languages to be fairly easy, particularly the vocabulary. She studied French in high school for 2 years, and has taken an additional year in college. She has learned to speak a little Mandarin.

Support

Because Wendy has attended primarily public schools, she was used to academic support through most of her pre-college days. When she began college at a 4-year state institution near her home in Kentucky, she appreciated the ongoing help she received from counselors specifically trained to help LD students. Most of all she liked the convenience of being able to work through one center specifically designed for learning disabled students. It’s not that she’s embarrassed about going to various centers for help; it’s just that for her it’s a waste of time. As she says,

For me, my time is so precious because . . . it takes me so long to finish assignments. And if I’m taking 16-17 credits, I don’t have time to spare to go to one center and spend two hours there. And then run over and try to catch this center before it closes, to spend time there. . . . It’s not practical. (I, 29)

Both the support and trained personnel were lacking when she arrived at Andrews. Although she has found several teachers who were willing to advocate for her, generally she has missed the feeling that there was a “center” to support her, where one person who knew her academic history and how she learned could help her to devise a plan so that she could be successful. Instead, she found herself having to explain to and/or educate every teacher.

One of Wendy’s biggest nightmares at her current university has been lack of input from an advisor. Her first advisor was moved to another department, the second was not very helpful, and it was only when her mother called the university to
complain about lack of advisement that a third advisor was assigned to Wendy. This advisor is much more involved in helping Wendy plan her schedule. During one crisis when mis-advisement was given and Wendy was taking classes she didn't need, her mother called the university to complain and says:

I told them that if they didn’t rectify the situation I would definitely call an attorney and I would not hesitate doing that. Because they laughed at her [when she said she needed better help in planning her classes] and then . . . when I told them that she didn’t get advisement and it costs 22 grand a year and we’re not pastors and we pay cash for what our kids can’t get on scholarships and Hey, I can’t do this. When I told them that, they told [Wendy], “We can’t believe that for as old as you are you have your mom treating you like a little baby.” So I called them back and I threatened them with a lawsuit and said, “If you ever talk to her or I hear about that again, be advised.” (I, 71)

Wendy has worked hard to increase her academic skills so that she can use as little support as necessary. Although she describes herself as a slow reader with poor comprehension, Wendy says she has helped herself to improve by forcing herself to read a new book every week. This is a “pleasure” book, not a textbook.

Also, Wendy rarely skips class because then she feels totally lost. She takes careful notes and has learned to draw pictures in her notes to correlate information. One symbol will represent a whole paragraph of notes. After reading a book on this method, she has refined this way of note taking and remembering even more. An auditory learner, she finds that study groups work best for her. If she just reads material herself, she doesn’t remember much; however, if she talks it through with a classmate or two, she retains and is able to organize the information in her head much better. Selecting the right people is the key here, Wendy says, since some students are not good discussers and the whole point in getting together becomes a time waster.
If she is really floundering in a class, she usually tries to go to the professor to
tell him she's lost and needs help. If the professor does not offer concrete suggestions,
she usually asks where else she can go for assistance. She's learned not to be bashful
about using centers and asking for help. Occasionally, her mother will intervene,
though that sometimes brings negative repercussions for Wendy to the extent that she
wonders if the intervention is counterproductive. She relates one recent incident:

My mom . . . had called the professor and the head of that department. And, once
my mother got involved and let them be aware of my legal rights, they were very
helpful with her. But as soon as they got off the phone, it was like I got the blunt
end of the deal. The professor called me in her office and pretty much just
really—did not have a very good conversation with me. She was very angry that my
mom had called. And she was angry that anything legal would be brought up. And
I told her, "I don't really want to get involved with that; I just want to make a fair
grade in the class." So, sometimes [intervention] is good. Sometimes it's bad. (II,
18)

What impressed me the most about Wendy was her seeming resilience. School
has been challenging. In fact, as I was interviewing her, she told me of a succession of
poor grades she had just received, in spite of diligent effort and study. But she was
still smiling.

I was curious to know what kept her going in the midst of discouraging times.
Wendy was quick to mention her family—her father, who is also dyslexic, and her
siblings. When Wendy feels she just can't handle all the frustrations any longer, her
father especially will pray with her, remind her of Bible promises to calm her down,
and keep her focused. Wendy's greatest support comes from home.

It is probably her mother who is her most ardent champion, however. Wendy
says her mother, who has worked at the university level, can be depended upon to
give her good feedback. Her mother knows about available programs, students'
rights, and courses of action that Wendy can take when she feels like she can’t work with a professor. During Wendy’s first year at Andrews, one teacher in particular wasn’t going to work with her and was being very negative toward her. Her mother suggested that she talk to the Dean. Although the teacher was not happy that Wendy went over her head, the end result was favorable for Wendy, and the teacher has been unfailingly cordial ever since (I, 17).

Early on, Wendy’s mother made it a point to positively reinforce as many good things as she could in her children because she knew life was not going to be easy for them. As she says,

I learned that the single most important ingredient in my children’s education was my input—not because I was a teacher, but because I believed in them... From the moment I saw that she might be following especially in her older [profoundly dyslexic] brother’s footsteps, I began a really big campaign of telling her how bright she was. (I, 68)

Regardless of how Wendy’s day is going, her mom tries to bolster her courage and affirm her as a worthwhile person. She says,

I try to have a real positive attitude no matter what Wendy calls me and tells me. I say, “You are going to do this. You can do this. You are so awesome,” and even at times I just want to—when I get off the phone... just sit in a corner and... bawl. I cry my eyes out. I try not to let her hear that. (I, 71)

Her mother also gives her advice on how to approach her teachers when she needs help. She says, “I tell her, ‘You’re going to march in there, you’re going to hold your head up, and you’re going to look them squarely in the eye and say, ‘I’m paying for this... Work with me and... help me go get through this’” (I, 71).

Wendy readily acknowledges how valuable her mother has been in providing her with support. Occasionally, Wendy tells her mom: “You’re my only
cheerleader," and her mother says,

If I have to cheer when I’m 80 years old and you’re 57, I’ll be standing on a box screaming, “Good job,” because that is what she needs and that is what they [other LD students] need to hear. . . . Students need to hear wonder, wonder, wonder stories of how well they’re doing. They need [to be] propped up because it’s a tough, tough world and when they have that kind of encouragement they will be that encouraging to [other] students [whom they teach]. (I, 73)

Knowing just what to do to be helpful is often uppermost in the minds of dyslexic students’ parents. When to intervene or when to stand back is always a delicate balance, and Wendy’s mother expresses this dichotomy poignantly:

Wendy and I have hung up—we have gotten off the phone with her so frustrated at me. She will say, “You don’t understand. I can’t stay here. I can’t be here one more hour . . . one more day . . . one more moment.” And I have said, “You can. You are. You will.” And then I’ve sat down in a corner and said, “Lord, you know my soul of souls. You understand the deepest . . . part of my soul. Help me to know what to do. Should I push, should I pull, should I wait, should I encourage, what thing can I do? Do I sit still and let her pull away from school? Because I tell you, when the dyslexic loses momentum, the dyslexic loses the battle. . . . All the dyslexic students that I’ve ever taught . . . if the momentum goes down they can’t seem to get a corner or a foothold again. . . . It’s like the window of opportunity is much more fragile. . . . Much care should be given to not missing a window of opportunity—especially during these college years. Because they drop out and do whatever they can do to make a living . . . and they don’t finish. So there again that reinforces that sense of failure that many dyslexics experience all through their lives. That’s why I can’t let that happen. (I, 82)

Wendy’s mother is not only a mother, but also a teacher who wants to provide the emotional security and empowerment that students—particularly those with learning challenges—need. She says:

[I want] to give power to the people around me that I work with, to empower them to believe they can do it, and to give them skills. . . . Skills you can teach to a monkey, but monkeys don’t believe they can accomplish anything. They don’t have that concept. So I have set two goals [for myself as a teacher]: to give skills, but the most important skill is to give power. Anyone can learn how to do anything. If you take statistics enough times, you will understand it. It’s believing that you can do it that makes you do it. (I, 74)
Life has never been easy for Wendy. She has learned that she must frequently work extra hard for often limited rewards. She has also learned that occasionally the barrier is in her own mind. Years of failure and minimal rewards for increased effort sometimes work against her. Her mother illustrates this point with a story.

When Wendy was about 5 years of age, her mother took her and two older brothers to a community swimming pool for lessons. Every day for several weeks the children, including Wendy, learned new maneuvers. On the last day they were given a test. As part of the beginner’s swimming test, Wendy was required to jump off a diving board—either the high board or the shorter one. But the swimming instructor made one stipulation: Once the children were in line, they couldn’t change their minds. Wendy, following her big brothers’ lead, got in line to jump off the high board. They jumped into the pool with no problem. Wendy, suddenly realizing she was next and the enormity of the situation, stood frozen with fear. She yelled to her mom, “I can’t do this. Mommy, please. I’m scared. I can’t go off.”

About 100 people were standing inside the pool area watching, mesmerized by the unfolding drama before them. All eyes were riveted on this sobbing little girl stranded on the diving board. Eventually she lay down, as if frozen to the high board. The entire testing had come to a halt. Her mother even tried bribery by promising her that if she would just back down the ladder, the family would do whatever she wanted that afternoon.

Finally one of the instructors climbed up, walked out to the end of the board, and said, “Wendy, give me your hand.” When she refused, he picked her up and
jumped off the board with her. Seconds later, she emerged from the water with a magnificent smile and exclaimed: “That was so much fun!”

Today, when life gets really tough, her mother reminds her: “Remember the diving board!” Her mother says that’s the story of Wendy’s life because “when it feels crazy, she either gets the courage to do it, or someone helps her, or I push or pull or whatever we have to do, and once she’s there, it’s like, ‘I can’t believe it. Ah!’” (I, 90)

Stress

“Stressful . . . very stressful . . . extremely stressful,” is how Wendy describes her college experience. The previous week she had “studied, studied, studied” for several tests. For a geology class she made a 68% which, she pointed out, was “passing.” But for statistics, history, and an English test she had earned about 33% on each. As she says, resignedly, “I don’t know what I was doing, but the information just did not stick with me this time. So . . . it gets frustrating because sometimes it seems to flow very well. Other times, it doesn’t” (I, 42).

From the beginning, school has always been very stressful for Wendy. Even in elementary school, Wendy remembers many times when she did not want to attend school because she felt her learning differences isolated her. She says,

There were a lot of times I did not want to get up and go to class. I did not want to go to school. I’d tell my Mom, “My stomach hurts.” Or I’d tell my Dad, “But I feel sick.” But, it was very stressful . . . because I knew that I was different because I did not learn the same as the other students . . . I felt a lot of alienation because I felt like I was different. (I, 7)
Remarkably, in high school, Wendy learned how to turn this ongoing negative stress into a positive. During this time, she was pulled from a regular classroom every day for an hour and placed in a remedial classroom which had profoundly retarded high-school students who received candy if they didn’t wet their pants. Instead of being discouraged and freaked out, she decided that God had put her there to work with those kids. Soon she became an advocate for the students to the “outside world,” asking for help that she knew should be available to them. This advocacy so alarmed the school district that they pretty much gave her the leeway to get whatever she needed. According to her mother, she became a sort of town hero to the kids who had struggled and had no one on their side when people wrote letters to the school about how helpful she had been. Articles even appeared in the local newspaper about Wendy’s tremendous helpfulness in that classroom.

Besides looking beyond herself to others’ needs, Wendy has learned alternate ways to relieve stress. Several years ago she decided to pursue a hands-on interest in Chinese medicine. After 2 years of intensive classes from the International School of Shiatsu, she received a diploma so that she could work as a practitioner. She has studied under Chinese doctors to learn everything from eyedorology to reflexology and acupressure. Wendy describes this knowledge as giving her “a lot of confidence” because it is something that she understands and can apply. It has also given her a skill which she uses to support herself in college (I, 12).

Wendy admits that regular 8 or 9 hours of sleep are very important in managing the stresses of her learning disability. She feels that sufficient sleep is necessary so that her brain can just relax and have a kind of down time. If she is sleep
deprived or outside stress is bothering her, she has a much more difficult time
concentrating on her school work, and what she is trying to learn just will not stick.
For her, then, the characteristics of dyslexia are more pronounced when she has
insufficient sleep.

According to Wendy, her main source of relaxation comes from her own
private worship. She says she prays a lot and has her own daily worship, even though
at times she doesn't feel that she can spare the time. Particularly before going to sleep
at night, she likes to turn all of her troubles and worries over to God, ask Him to help
her relax and sleep well so that she can deal with a new day (I, 44).

Other stress-relieving activities include North American Indian-related
activities like hiking, canoeing, the outdoors, and making her own clay beads for
jewelry.

Written Expression

In some ways Wendy appears to be a fairly confident writer. She particularly
enjoys creative writing and says she has joined the hundreds of other Americans who
are currently writing a novel.

But expository writing, which requires synthesis, is more difficult, she
confesses:

[My] writing is poor. Because I think a lot faster than I can actually write . . . I can
write—sit down and write a paper in a very short amount of time. But then I'll go
back and read it and I'll leave out paragraphs or sentences and words. And It
won't make any sense. So I have to go back through and edit it. And I'll edit a
paper maybe five times before I print it out and give it to a teacher. It I don't . . .
they can't even understand it . . . because . . . every time I read it, I put the words
in that I missed the first time. (I, 2)
Like many dyslexic persons, she tends to be a concrete learner and has difficulty sometimes with abstract thought. But she has devised a system for tackling big writing projects. If she has to write an argument/persuasion essay, for example, she follows a plan that she has perfected over the years. At first, she gets library books on the topic that she just looks through, skimming for highlights of areas on which she wants to concentrate. Then, instead of reading the books, she puts them away and takes out flash cards upon which she writes down topics she wants to concentrate on in her paper. Then she looks through the contents of the books, and underlines a few sentences that will support the topics. She writes those on the flash cards and color codes them. Pink, for example, could be a supporting argument and green could be an argument against.

Wendy doesn’t read the books because it’s too much information which she finds distracting and has difficulty synthesizing anyway. In fact, she says that at that point she usually takes the books back to the library. Then she throws all the cards on the floor and visually begins to imagine how the paper is going to go together. So, first she has a topic and then sub-topics. She tries to think: “How would I write that paragraph to support that [topic] sentence?” (I, 31-32). She begins to organize the flash cards in subdivisions and the paper takes shape.

She says that understanding that she didn’t have to read the whole of anything in order to find material was a freeing experience. In reading entire books for information, she found that she became distracted, forgot what she wanted to find, and it was too time consuming. Now she single-mindedly looks for material that will suit the purpose of her paper. If a book isn’t helpful, she discards it immediately.
But, like others with language processing and organizational challenges in writing, she admits the entire process is time consuming and slow.

**Teachers**

Wendy feels that for an LD student to be successful in college, there has to be at least one teacher you really like and who really, really wants to help you. As she says, “If you’ve had at least one [great teacher], I think you can be successful in college. If your whole academic life has been discouragement and frustration, the chances of your wanting to pursue higher education are probably very slim” (I, 54).

She knew early on that she wanted to be involved in education. Two elementary teachers in particular had been an inspiration to her. Her first-grade teacher, she says, was particularly helpful because she gave Wendy a feeling that she could be successful. It is that feeling that Wendy wants to share with other students. She admits that without those several instances of believing and supportive teachers, she probably would have gotten a trade and then “just worked.”

Wendy has had some college teachers who have helped her to feel confident and successful. One American Government teacher seemed to go out of his way to make all the students feel appreciated and valued. Wendy liked the class’s organization and the fact that she was able to make connections between what she already knew and what she was studying. She felt the teacher was interested in all her students, was approachable, and willing to be flexible. This warmth lessened her anxiety level considerably, removing what frequently is an emotional barrier to learning. Another teacher who taught a science class used a lot of hands-on materials,
was very structured and sequential. Expectations were clearly defined to the point, Wendy says, that some students thought the teacher was "talking down" to them and dropped the class. But Wendy thrived in this setting.

Wendy identified two other teachers, both in the math/science department, as being particularly helpful. Both apply a commonsense approach to helping students. A math teacher, whom Wendy found to be very approachable, readily admits that math was not his easiest subject in college. After many decades of teaching, however, he not only knows his subject well and feels confident about it, but also works hard to speak at the students’ level. He tries to determine the point where learning is breaking down and takes it from there. He claims he is not a "fancy" teacher, doesn’t use much multi-media, but has found that chalk is pretty effective. He offers step-by-step suggestions for students who are having difficulty with concepts. He suggests that if they’re having problems they should first read and try to understand the book. They should take the concept step by step, recognizing that reading a math book is not like reading a regular book. If they are still lost, they should visit him. And if that doesn’t work, then they should try the math center. The combination of inviting students to come for help, plus breaking concepts down to manageable chunks, no doubt has made him a favorite teacher not only for math “haters” but also for LD students.

Another teacher, Dr. S., chair of her department for over three decades, wishes she knew much more about learning disabilities. Despite her limited information, she feels that LD students should not be given any more or less consideration than any other student in her class. She recalled something a speech teacher who influenced
her quite a bit used to say: “What’s good for the handicapped is good for the normal, too” (I, 62). She clarifies this statement by saying,

Any teacher who is interested in a student being successful would try to attend to those needs as they become apparent and take whatever steps. . . . To decide what’s appropriate is part of the creative process. . . . There needs to be a creative effort on the part of the teacher to try to understand what that student’s problems are and try to structure an educational environment in which that student can be successful. (I, 62)

Wendy describes this department chair as being exceptionally helpful, giving her one-on-one tutoring on a number of occasions, breaking down the barriers that kept her from understanding a concept. She is very grateful for this help and says,

I think [teachers like this] are worth their weight in gold because . . . you come to school and it’s very hard and frustrating . . . especially when you are having a hard time in the class, and you really don’t see how it can be improved. You don’t know what to do. And when you go to the professor and [he gives] you wonderful advice, and helps you with labs or with setting up equipment, [a task] that . . . might take hours to do by yourself, he helps you, and he shows you step by step why this process works. . . . I think, “Wow. Now that’s where my money’s going.” You know, I don’t mind paying extra money, even if I only have . . . maybe two professors my whole college career that are like that. (I, 37)

Dr. S. says that she often loses students who are at the bottom end of her discipline, but says that if they will come to talk to her she will always do her best to help them to be successful. She says she always makes it clear to her students in class that although there may be times when she appears to be busy—and they will think they shouldn’t disturb her—they are always her first priority.

Although admitting to not having a well-focused teaching strategy with LD students in mind, Dr. S. says she does understand clearly if a student isn’t being successful. She loves teaching in her discipline, works hard to make ideas clear, and thrives on seeing the lights come on in her students’ eyes when concepts are
understood. Her teaching style is very non-hierarchical and informal, with lots of examples, discussion, questions, and response watching. Watching students' faces seems to be the gauge by which Dr. S. measures how successful her teaching is. For Wendy, at least, that gauge seems to work and motivates Dr. S. to teach as creatively as possible.

Dr. S. wishes she knew more about learning disabilities. She would like to receive short and informative communication on a regular basis from an appropriate teaching source at the university. She would also like LD students to be identified in her classes so that she could monitor them more appropriately. She suggests that she is never sure whether a student is just not understanding because of lack of attention or basic skills, or whether the process of learning is impaired by a learning disability.

Some teachers just aren't helpful at all, according to Wendy. For example, Wendy was enrolled in a history class last fall. The teacher would grant her no accommodations whatsoever, even though there were only seven students in the class. He would not give her any extra time on tests, even though her documentation clearly said she should be granted this accommodation. He told her that the whole class had been able to finish the test, and she should be able to also. "And that's frustrating because I get very nervous when I know that there's a timed test," Wendy adds (I, 40).

Another teacher gave Wendy a hard time about spelling. It wasn't until the teacher was challenged that she ended up allowing Wendy credit for misspelled words.
Looking Ahead

Wendy, who is one-fourth Native American, hopes to teach on an Indian Reservation. With less than 1 year of classes left in her college program, primarily in education, she hopes to be teaching children soon. She sees herself as a loving, compassionate, and especially patient teacher who has already had some experience teaching creative dance to inner-city children. She has a head start already in understanding that every child learns differently thanks to her own first-hand experience being the “different” learner.

Summary

Wendy is a well-informed LD student whose drive to succeed was evident from our first conversation. Although many classes have been difficult and some teachers not very helpful to Wendy during her program, she is remarkably resilient. She refuses to be overwhelmed by the rigors of academic life, even when she seems to be floundering.

Her parents—especially her mother—have provided Wendy with important survival skills for her college experience. More than anyone else, Wendy depends on her for the “cheerleading” she needs to make it to the end of the day. Her mother is willing to do this, but also aggressively seeks to expand the understanding of teachers and administrators within higher education. As she says succinctly, “The failure to educate the dyslexic child belongs to the educator and the educational system” (I, 92).
CHAPTER 4

ANNA: "THE MONKEY ON MY BACK"

_The sun was so delightfully warm, and the stone, which had been sitting in it for a long time, was so warm, too, that Pooh had almost decided to go on being Pooh in the middle of the stream for the rest of the morning, when he remembered Rabbit._

"Rabbit," said Pooh to himself. "I like talking to Rabbit. He talks about sensible things. He doesn't use long, difficult words, like Owl. He uses short, easy words, like 'What about lunch?' and 'Help yourself, Pooh.'"

A. A. Milne, _The World of Pooh_

_Introduction_

"As much as I try to work with my learning disability, it's a constant battle not to sort of get overwhelmed by it," sighs Anna, a quietly determined 29-year-old student at Atkinson College, the division of York University for part-time adult undergraduate students (II, 55). A York University professor suggested Anna's name as someone in his class who had self-identified as learning disabled. I was eager to meet Anna, and since she lived not far from the center where I worked with learning disabled high-school students, we agreed to meet at my workplace one wintry evening after my last student left.

Anna was moderately tall, blonde, slim, and dressed in a camel coat that had a bit of a "retro" look. Immediately, I was attracted by her pleasant, congenial manner. She was open, laughed easily, but what impressed me the most was that she looked
tired. True, it was already dark outside my office window, but I couldn’t help noticing the dark shades under her gray-green eyes. As we talked about the university classes she took, her own work schedule, and how little time she had to enjoy life, I was concerned that by involving her in my study I would be adding to her already packed-full life.

But she assured me otherwise, insisting she wanted to participate in this study, and was even looking forward to it. She was eager to share her life story, one that was largely defined by the way she learned. As we had agreed earlier, she had brought along a psycho-educational report—one of many, I would learn later—which indicated an average range of intelligence with significant discrepancy between Verbal and Performance scores, with Verbal scores being significantly higher. Reading comprehension, word attack skills, spelling abilities, and short-term auditory memory all showed significant deficiencies. Attentional issues, which indicated ADD, and language processing, a fundamental issue of “dyslexia,” appeared to be Anna’s primary learning challenges. She had been in and out of special education most of her academic life. At the time of our first meeting, she was hoping to be accepted into the Bachelor of Education program at York University, which involves an additional year of study beyond completion of a bachelor’s degree in a subject area.

Our initial session together, which I did not tape, was emotionally draining. Her story was one of day-to-day survival in educational settings that were (and still are) hostile. Listening to an hour and a half of her educational experiences as an LD student was already exhausting. But Anna wanted to share her story, and I was eager to hear more. According to Robert Coles (1989), it is only through stories that we can
enter completely into the life of another person. Stories, in a sense, are the window that provides a deeper meaning and a broader perspective on life. It was both depth and breadth of understanding of Anna’s current university experience that I hoped to achieve. In order to do that, I needed to hear about her early life.

*Early School Memories*

Elementary school, according to Anna, was a nightmare. In fact, she could recall no pleasant memories from Grade 1 through Grade 6 at all. She does remember a really fantastic teacher she had in senior kindergarten who knew that “something wasn’t clicking” for her educationally, but then suggested to Anna’s mother, “Well, maybe she’ll grow out of it; it’s just a phase” (II, 4). Anna remembers a kindergarten friend, a very active boy who was her only friend in kindergarten. None of the other children wanted to play with her. Perhaps the “birds of a feather” routine begins early.

As a preschooler, early indications of problems were already evident. For example, her mother remembers Anna’s desperate attempts to talk as a young child—long after other children of a comparable age were already communicating intelligently. Few people, with the exception of her mother, could understand her. In addition, her mother also remembers her as being extremely hyper as a little girl, always on the tear, never wanting to sit still for very long. Aside from not being able to speak intelligibly and being perpetually active, her parents noticed nothing unusual. She was their only child, and they had no other children of their own to compare her with. According to her mother, Anna enjoyed kindergarten, but the real problems began in first grade. She was easily distracted; she did not fit in.
Anna has similar memories. Almost immediately, in Grade 1 Anna noticed that she learned differently from the other students. Her differentness, already apparent to her, was upsetting. She recalls:

I was . . . crying all the time. I couldn’t keep up with the work. My teacher was reprimanding me all the time; my parents were stressed out because they couldn’t figure out what was going on with me. And I can remember always having to sit beside the teacher’s desk because I couldn’t cooperate with her and the other students, because I always wanted to copy the other students’ work. . . . I think I was a little bit hyperactive. So I knew there was something wrong. And then when I had to repeat Grade 1, I knew there was something definitely wrong. (II, 4)

Her mother remembers her being bussed to different schools for help. She points out how aware children are of being different from their peers. Almost daily her daughter asked her, “Mommy, why am I so stupid?” (II, 98)

Special Education

Anna repeated Grade 1 once and when the school suggested that she repeat it a second time, her parents refused. Special education was suggested. From her mother’s perspective, it seemed to be a good thing because at least Anna was getting extra attention that she seemed to need. It was not an easy time for special education students in Ontario because the Ministry of Education didn’t seem to know what to do with them or for them. After being tested by a psycho-educational consultant, she was moved to another school, which in turn became a sort of “holding tank” until she could be moved to John Fisher, a public school which could offer Anna full-time special education.

But Anna didn’t appreciate being singled out for special education. Instead of sharing her parents’ view that special education would give her the extra boost she
needed to be successful in school, she saw it as emphasizing her differentness. In short, she felt “stupid.”

Unfortunately, about this same time, another crisis in Anna’s life that year left her devastated. Her parents split up, and her father moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, 2,500 miles west. Because she was very fond of him, she felt the separation keenly. The unstable condition at home brought about by her father’s departure plus the fact that the school she attended was “conservative” and located in a neighborhood with “established” families just added to her already difficult school program. If she had felt ostracized as a special education student, she felt even more shunned because she no longer had a socially acceptable “family” unit.

Education at John Fisher lasted only about a year, and then the LD program was closed down, so Anna had to be moved to yet another school. She waited for placement again at her original school before being sent to a new school, Ward Street School, which had a learning disabilities classroom. She remembers her time there as being particularly unpleasant. Her teacher not only didn’t have the patience to work with LD students but was physically abusive.

I can remember challenging her and just being taken into a secret [place]—taken into a corridor off the main hallway and put up against the wall. And she’s holding my neck saying, “If you don’t listen to me,” you know, “I’m going to call your mother.” . . . Another incident involved a girl who had temper tantrums–behavioral problems—and she was in the LD class. One day she had a full-blown temper tantrum and instead of restraining her, which you are supposed to do with children, she [the teacher] basically hit her back and kicked her. And I watched it. (II, 8)

Anna returned to her original school for Grades 4, 5, and 6, where she received about 40 minutes of daily remedial help, mostly in reading and math.
Otherwise, she was mainstreamed. Only once during elementary school does she remember being encouraged to leave the relative safety of special education. This happened when a school psychologist gave her the option of dropping the remedial help and even encouraged it, but her LD teacher convinced her that it wouldn’t be in the best interest of her academic skills. For Grades 7 and 8, she was back in full-time special education.

She attended a high school that had an LD program where she received extra help every day. She wasn’t keen on having to go to a special room for this help because it separated her from the rest of her friends, and she was embarrassed about needing special help. Having to report to this special education room was humiliating. Other students referred to it as the “crayon room,” “the arts and crafts room,” and by numerous other derogatory terms.

She describes the LD classroom as having a sub-culture all of its own, and the students assigned there for remedial help used to sneak in there so that their friends would not know where they were. Anna says, “Like they’d be walking down the hall with someone and they’d say, ‘Well, where did you go?’ And I’d say, ‘Oh, I have to go to the bathroom,’ and they wouldn’t even figure out that you were going in to get remedial help” (II, 11).

Now, over a decade later, she figures that at least some of her friends knew where she was going, but it didn’t really matter to them. Teenagers, she has decided, are so self-absorbed with being teenagers that it doesn’t really matter if anybody has a learning disability. So it wasn’t really an issue.
She does recall being really indignant about several students from the enriched program being in her remedial room for awhile though. Recognizing who they were and the fact that they were “aliens,” she demanded an explanation and protested indignantly to the special education teacher: “Not only do they get some of the best teachers in some of the best subject areas, [but] they’re using my time in here.” The teacher explained that they were dyslexic and needed some extra help too, but she was adamant, “Well, it still doesn’t matter. I don’t want them in here” (II, 11).

Her high-school teachers largely came across as condescending and even disapproving of learning disabilities and the fact that there were resources available for LD students in their school. It was up to Anna’s LD teacher to connect with the teachers who would decide whether or not they would make accommodations. She felt a number of her teachers either thought she was dumb or pretending, and recalls teachers who would say in front of the class, “There are certain people in this class who . . . are not understanding, or are just not going to grasp it” (II, 13). These same teachers made pointed hints that the learning disabled students in the class were just going to have to deal with the material in the best way that they could.

In retrospect, according to Anna, it seems the high-school administration was simply not supportive of learning disabilities. It was one more base to cover in an already taxing environment where teachers felt LD students were a bit of a nuisance because they didn’t fit the mold. She was asked not to take the OACs (classes in the Ontario education system for university-bound students), but simply to accept the watered-down, less strenuous Grade 12 diploma. In the end, she recalls teacher
comments toward her through most of high school as being either really negative or very condescending, like “Anna made such good effort” (II, 13).

After high-school graduation, she was encouraged to take Recreation Leadership, a 2-year college program designed to train a person to plan community activities, run a community center with activities for the elderly and children, or plan activities on a cruise line. Although the program was pleasant, and her learning disabilities counselor was extraordinarily helpful, Anna says she knows of no one who has actually gotten employment because of the training. She soon realized that employability wasn’t going to happen just because she’d spent 2 years taking courses. If she was going to be able to support herself, she needed additional education which included a university degree. She applied to Atkinson and was accepted. For her 2 years of college, she was given 1 year of university credit.

*College*

Early on, Anna yearned to be successful, to be able to make her own way in the world. According to her mother, since the beginning of high school Anna has always hung around with high achievers—those with very specific goals for their lives and their careers. She just naturally went to college because her friends did. According to her mother, “All her friends are high achievers. They have college degrees and have gone on to careers. And that’s how she sees herself. She didn’t see herself as someone who was going to get a job at MacDonald’s. That would never be enough” (II, 104).
Peer pressure—in this case, positive—and, also possibly because she wanted to keep up with her friends’ lifestyle, were the motivators. Her mother adds: “She always wanted to have what they [her friends] have. She was always a little more mercenary than I was. She would like to have nice things, a good life. That means having a career” (II, 104).

But university has been tough. Working independently and “not really having anybody there for guidance” has been worrisome (II, 2). This has been particularly true in selecting courses, where she has particularly felt adrift without sufficient advisement. The first university course she took, she received a D. Her self-confidence was shaken, and she put off resuming a university education for another half year to think about what she was doing.

She admits that none of her university classes have been easy. She started out majoring in psychology, but found multiple choice and the specialized vocabulary of the discipline too difficult, so she switched to “just sociology,” clearly a disappointment to her (II, 30). And getting into the classes she thinks she needs is challenging because it’s a large university and class size is often limited, better teachers’ classes fill early, and key classes for certain popular majors are required.

And that’s because university, you know, runs out of spaces in their courses. That’s a whole other scenario, but I am really ticked off with that. Because you know, there’s no more space left and it’s such a disaster. And then people have to end up taking these courses that they don’t want to be in . . . and they do really terrible. And then meanwhile you are shelling out a thousand bucks per course for something that you don’t want to be in. But you have to take [them] because there [are] no . . . other courses. (II, 28)
Understanding a Learning Disability

In a sense Anna has ongoing frustration with her lack of understanding of her learning disability. She frankly admits that, in spite of repeated testing, she still doesn't really understand her learning disability. She wishes that someone could do a brain dissection and point out the "little red block right there" so that the whole idea of learning disabilities would be much easier to understand (II, 4).

Much of the testing was done when she was young. More recent testing indicated average intelligence, with Verbal scores much higher than Performance scores. She does know that she seems to process information more slowly than her counterparts (II, 2), that she has short-term memory problems (II,1), and that her organization, spelling, and written skills are deficient. She also indicated that although the educational psychologist's evaluation she was handing me was the most recent she had, it was just one of a very fat file accumulated over the years.

Because she doesn't really understand her learning disability, she is not always convinced she really has one. What she does understand is that her written skills—including both organization and syntax—are poor, that writing anything longer than several pages is excruciatingly difficult, and that she retains little of what she studies, unless she is able to connect it to her life experience. Yet, orally, she has excellent ideas and is incredibly articulate. Because she is so good at expressing her ideas in class, her teachers are both surprised and baffled when she ends up turning in below-average papers and completing tests with surprisingly low scores. Reading takes her much longer than other students in her classes.
Anna also knows she does not work well independently, but needs very direct instruction to be successful in academic tasks. The tasks must be broken down, and she is aware that she functions best where there is "teamwork" (II, 85).

Her work experience has been closely connected with what she does or doesn’t do well. She does not enjoy secretarial or administrative work, areas in which she feels particularly weak. Anna has worked successfully at a variety of jobs like camp counseling, day care, and feels she’s a “pretty good” teacher’s assistant. She figures she was also good in sales, even though she hated it, mostly because she didn’t like people bothering her all the time. I was puzzled when Anna said this because I knew she’s currently working enthusiastically as a teacher’s aide and loves it, plus she is planning to be an elementary teacher. She laughs and clarifies her position about people bothering her: “It’s okay when they are little children” (II, 86).

Anna has had a succession of counselors through the years, dropping out frequently because she felt they weren’t helpful. Beginning as a child in elementary school, she soon found the experience of visiting a counselor to be “boring.” She soon devised fairly clever ways of taking them for a “ride.” Over time she developed skillful ways of getting them to talk about themselves for extended periods of time. “I’d catch them off guard all the time,” she says (II, 93). She describes one counselor in particular whom she had fun with. She says:

I wasn’t saying anything and I could tell he was getting really upset with me, so I pretended that I had an invisible friend in the room and he totally took it. It was hilarious. . . . I just couldn’t believe it. . . . Twelve years old and I could fool this therapist, thinking that I had an invisible friend. (II, 92)

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Perhaps this is when Anna discovered her acting ability. Anna describes herself as “definitely an arts person” (II, 42), who is “particularly good at improvising, one of the frameworks of drama” (II, 32). She says she has “the ability to blend into almost any group of people so that people don’t know where [her ideology] is coming from, from A-Z.” One minute she can be a “raving socialist” and the next minute she can appear to be at the opposite end of the spectrum, all of it a spontaneous act (II, 16).

Teachers

Like most LD college students, Anna admits that, even at 29, she finds it difficult to approach a teacher for help the first time. In a somewhat embarrassed manner, she reluctantly relates how just a few weeks before our conversation she was taking a really challenging class. Feeling that she was drowning in material she didn’t understand, she asked the teacher if she could come to talk to him about her learning disability and how he could help her. Although he said, “Okay, no problem,” she didn’t go. As she related this incident, she was slightly incredulous that even though he had indicated a willingness to talk to her, she blanked the appointment out of her mind and never went. Looking back at that experience, she says she found him very intimidating in class. He lectured very quickly, had an advanced law degree, and because of those factors she just lacked the assertiveness to bring herself to tell him that she had a learning disability. Anna says:

I . . . think that part of me is resistant because I don’t know if I want to go to these profs. I have to say, . . . “I have this wrong with me.” . . . You have to explain it all over to them again. . . . And it’s just like—you are afraid to say—you are afraid to admit it; because it’s like . . . you got all the way up to university and you’ve
[still] got to ask for help. . . . And you don’t know how you are going to be looked upon . . . And [you say], “Oh, great; here it comes.” . . . I’ve had professors who looked at me like I was a wacko. (II, 61-62)

Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that she identified Dr. R. as being the best college professor she has had. Dr. R’s warmth and enthusiasm were evident the first time I talked with her. She gave the task at hand her wholehearted attention, and I had the feeling that she did this with everyone. Although she says she knows very little about learning disabilities, she takes each of the students and their needs very seriously. She clearly wants to be as helpful as possible.

In one class of 200 students last year, she had 4 students self-identified as LD. According to Dr. R., the most common LD was dyslexia, but occasionally there are students who have functional brain damage or an accident-induced learning impairment. Letters identifying the students and their learning needs arrive from one of the university’s three special populations centers saying that a student has a learning disability and may need extra time on a test, or may need to do their tests or papers in an alternate manner. The letters do not specifically identify the student’s learning disability.

Although Dr. R. automatically honors these requests for accommodation, she understands that there are profs who don’t and has been told by her department that it is up to her discretion whether to allow students these “special privileges.” She says:

I’ve spoken to students who have told me they’ve had problems with other profs in the past who have been sort of reluctant, quite flip, about the problem. They put it in the category of the student who “claims” there’s a death in the family and needs special consideration . . . They’re very sceptical of any claims that students have; they want death certificates; they doubt what the student is saying. (II, 107)
To ensure that all students are being well served in her class, Dr. R. also lets her teaching assistants (TA’s) know that accommodations should be made for LD students:

I communicate with my TAs because if I have a large class I’m not going to be dealing with these students. In fact, I’m probably not going to be dealing with them at all. So they might approach their TA first. Often I don’t get these letters. Or they sign—sometimes it’s very late and a student doesn’t approach me until the end of November for a December exam. Other students will come in early at the beginning of the year and make sure they have the documentation for me to sign throughout the year. But some of them are last minute kinds of requests. (II, p. 109)

She knows that “being merciful” in a university setting is not particularly popular, but feels it is important to do “good things” by giving students a break when possible. Other students who seem to exhibit learning difficulties are encouraged by her or her teaching assistants to go to the special populations centers on campus. Sometimes they will go, but others are too proud or would rather “tough it out.”

In addition to her sensitivity to students’ special needs, Dr. R. creates a classroom climate where all students are valued. For example, Dr. R’s teaching style is “friendly” to LD students, although she doesn’t feel that she is intentionally trying to meet their special needs. Her lectures are very organized, include discussion, and integrate the reading for the day. Dr. R. says:

I think I have like an overview of what students need, whether they have LD or not. I’m very, very clear in my lectures, I give a lot of handouts, I’m very organized so I always have a rough . . . agenda of what I’m going to do that day clearly written on the board and go through in an organized fashion what exactly I will cover that day. . . . I think that helps. Especially for an LD student who goes to a lecture that’s a talk. I know that professors often lecture as though they’re giving a talk and they feel that, well, this is university and they [the students] should be able to follow . . . like, you should be able to do this on your own and I’ll see you next week. (II, 110)
But she has never lectured in that way. She always has a plan that she shares with her students at the beginning of class, provides handouts, and even gives detailed review sheets that cover the main points that students must know. Prior to examinations, she gives students sample test questions.

Her teaching style is non-hierarchical. She feels no need to constantly be emphasizing to them that she is the authority figure at the front of the classroom because, as Dr. R. says,

They know that, and I don’t have to constantly remind them. It’s a given. . . . So, I don’t have any airs about me, and I deal with them as human beings. . . . I maintain eye contact with people in the classroom. . . . It’s a “non-distance” learning. To me, teaching is about relationships with students, so I don’t want to be distant. The more distant one is from students, the less they will learn. So I think the closeness actually facilitates learning. They feel more comfortable; I feel more comfortable. (II, 111)

Because her sociology classes cover critical pedagogy regarding teaching for equality, she uses every opportunity to discuss teaching practices in her classes. She told me about the time when some students came to her after class and asked why she was letting other students talk so much during class. They said: “You know, we’re paying for this course. We don’t want to hear from them” (II, 111). And she thought to herself that this was the perfect opportunity to begin talking about critical pedagogy. The next week they did just that. Dr. R. says she learned from that experience that she really needed to talk about educational teaching styles early in class so that students understand that they can learn from each other. She adds:

I try to convey the fact that students are also saying important things and we’re building on what’s happening in the course and what they’re getting from other students is experiential learning. And particularly when we’re dealing with issues of inequality—be it racism, sexism, ablism, or whatever it is, we need to hear from these students in the classroom who have actually experienced this. . . . I had one
student in a wheelchair in one class and it was important that we hear from her. It is important that we hear from students who’ve identified themselves as LD because then the other students say, “Oh, this is real” and then they can understand not just what I’m saying or what the book says but what these students also experience. The students learn more from that than what they read in a book. It just validates. (II, 111-112)

It is in classes like Dr. R’s, where students are affirmed, where the teacher is approachable, organized, and goes the extra distance to make sure that students understand what is important that LD students like Anna thrive.

Writing: The Biggest Challenge

Like many LD students with language processing disorders, Anna finds writing papers a tortured experience. When I asked her about her process for paper writing, Anna threw her hands up in despair and exclaimed in horror, “Oh, God. That’s got anxiety written all over it! . . . That is like my personal enemy” (II, 34).

She admits writing papers causes her great amounts of anxiety, and she is almost always disappointed by the outcome because the ideas in her head are poorly represented by what appears on paper. She says: “If I could sit down in front of my prof, if he had 2 hours, I could tell him my whole essay. You know. And that would be significant” (II, 87).

She has usually coped with written work by having a few trusted friends help her. For example, a teacher friend has consistently helped her by doing most of the preliminary research. For Anna, a slow reader and even slower writer and synthesizer, the thought of having to rifle through resources that may be only marginally related to her topic is too daunting. Her friend, Eleni, has helped her throughout her university experience by narrowing the sources and directing Anna to those that are most
helpful. In other words, Eleni speeds up the process by cutting away the chaff before Anna takes over.

I asked Anna if she had ever tried using the university’s writing center. According to Anna, there is a place at Atkinson where she can take her written work to be looked at and checked over. The paper has to be faxed there first, not always easy to do. But the most intimidating part of the problem is that she ends up meeting with a different person each time, which only fuels her feelings of anxiety because she has to start at the beginning again, exposing her lack of writing ability once more to a peer who will think she is “stupid.” As she says:

It’s almost like [it’s] more anxious for me to go in. Because I feel that if I go in with my paper, [in to see] this person who says, “Sit with me for an hour,” and they’re going to tell me what’s wrong with it. And then I’m going to have to leave and redo it again; I’m going to have to come back and make an appointment for the next week, for an hour. It’s—the anxiety is too much for me because I know that there could be stuff wrong with it. And I just don’t want to have to keep [going back]. That’s why I’ll hand in sloppy work sometimes. It’s because I’m like, well, it seems like I check it over like 16 times, and it’s still missing stuff. Or it’s still not complete. (II, 63)

Anna doesn’t feel the tutors understand how much energy is consumed with each revision. When, after several revisions, she balks at further refining, the tutor will say,

“Well, you know, you keep on doing it; you’ve got the strength to do it, so keep on doing it.” And you just sort of feel like saying, “No, I don’t, I don’t have the strength to do this anymore.” You know what I mean? Like, I am trying to make my point as clear as possible. And I just don’t have any more energy; and I don’t like this. And you know, even if I did start to like it, by the third or fourth time around, do you think I’m still going to like it? (II, 64)

So the energy, the negativity, and the anxiety of having to face yet another face who may reinforce Anna’s feelings of “Here’s another person who thinks I’m
stupid because I spell every other word wrong” is overwhelming to Anna. She avoids the experience, opting instead to use the assistance of her trusted friends, who already know her writing foibles.

Looking through her papers, the most apparent difficulties are organization, managing sentences, and surface errors like spelling and punctuation. The many proofreading errors clearly get in the way of content. Cryptic teacher remarks cover the margins, messages like “unclear” and “awkward” or “makes no sense.” Clearly there are ideas, but conveying them in a clear and organized fashion is problematic.

Other school challenges include tests that require much memorization, almost impossible for Anna. Tests in which she can bring her own experience or elaborate upon statements with supporting information from her reading appeared to be easier. Multiple choice tests, particularly when a specialized vocabulary is involved, were difficult. Oral tests seem to work much better, when minimal cueing/prompts trigger her memory and help her to give a better indication of what she really knows.

Foreign languages are usually challenging to dyslexic students, whose phonemic awareness is already deficient in English. Anna studied French in elementary school and admits she failed miserably. In high school, LD students were exempt from taking both French and typing. In college, she has avoided all foreign languages.

Support

One of the greatest challenges to LD students is the need for support, both emotional and academic. That support needs balance so that the student does not fall
prey to "learned helplessness," the tendency of some students to lean too heavily on help from others for what they could do themselves (Spafford & Grosser, 1996). Although this may afflict some LD students, for many, more support is necessary or the student will simply give up and disappear from the educational scene because of inability to cope with the academic demands.

Through elementary and high school, Anna’s mother was her chief advocate, defending her frequently, even though her mom admits she didn’t always understand what was going on inside Anna’s head. A single mother from the time Anna was 7, her mother had to work full-time just to keep them financially afloat. Living in a neighborhood where divorce was still relatively unknown, Anna’s mother didn’t get much outside support because being a single parent was not a good thing back in those days, and many educators felt that a learning disability was an outgrowth of home problems. Consequently, even Anna herself felt “stigmatized by people . . . in a sort of sad, silent way” (II, 21). Her home situation plus the intense pressure of rarely being able to measure up to educational expectations caused her intense psychological anguish which still carries an emotional response as she related her story to me. Anna remembers:

She [my mother] used to comfort me a lot. . . . It was a big deal in elementary school because I was treated like crap. I mean it was to the point where . . . I used to break down. . . . I used to cry all the time when I came home from school. Just saying, “I’m not normal. I’m not normal.” [or] “Other children are better than I am” and “Why am I so stupid?” That was the phrase of those years, “Why am I so stupid? . . . and “Why can’t I do anything that these other kids can?” (II, 21)

One elementary school incident when her mother really took action on Anna’s behalf is notable. Because Anna was in an LD classroom, she was not allowed to ride
on the bus for “normal” kids. Instead, she had to ride on the bus specifically for

disabled and mentally handicapped children. Anna remembers the story this way:

Riding on that bus was really terrible. We had a very abusive bus driver who used
to beat up all these kids on the bus. He was awful... he would make racial slurs. All of us were grouped together; all of us were miserably unhappy because we all knew why we were on the bus. Because we were all different. So that sort of made it even worse, you know, hitting kids. He would tell them that they were retarded, that they were going to go nowhere in life. . . . He would swear at us and call us a bunch of f-ing idiots. It was really awful. And so one day I couldn’t take it. He had threatened us too that if we said anything . . . he would come to our house and kill us. . . . So, I couldn’t take it anymore and one day I told my mother, and she just lost it and phoned up the bus company and said . . . “This man is totally insane.” (II, 21-22)

The next day the busload of unhappy, terrorized special education students
had a new bus driver, thanks to Anna’s mother.

Anna recalls her mother having to intervene when she wasn’t allowed to
check out books from the school’s library because the librarian said she couldn’t read
them. She wasn’t allowed to join the elementary school recorder band because she
was an LD student, even though she enjoyed playing the recorder at home. Her
mother had to write “nasty” letters telling the educators they should know better, that
just because her daughter was learning disabled didn’t mean that she lacked the
capacity to appreciate and participate in making music.

Although her mother provided support in a variety of ways during elementary
and high school, when Anna arrived at college she was on her own. According to
Anna, her mother was very patient with her, but weary of the uphill battle to educate
Anna, she didn’t push any further. Anna feels her mother was emotionally exhausted
from having to advocate so often on her daughter’s behalf. In college, Anna has done
her own advocating. But she is deeply grateful to a number of people who have gone out of their way to help her.

For example, for 7 years she has lived with a friend’s parents who have charged her no room or board. This has made it possible for her to continue in university, working only to pay for books and tuition. She quickly acknowledges that she could never have accomplished what she has without their tangible and unpressured encouragement. She has relied on friends to help her with papers. While Anna’s learning challenges don’t seem to make any difference to her friends, Anna’s mother says she’s sure they know about Anna’s LD and “they’ve always been very supportive . . . almost protective” (II, 101).

Another incredible source of support is a friend, a special education teacher, who has helped Anna as a sort of personal tutor (II, 38). She helps her research papers, organize materials, proofread, and generally sees that Anna is moving according to schedule. Anna agrees that she is worth a million dollars, maybe more, to her.

In college, the real lack of support has been academic. Anna had spent most of her life in special education, with teachers to bolster her confidence and provide tutors. In high school her education was more “hands on” with guidance whenever she needed it. There were many psycho-educational assessments. So many, in fact, that when she left high school they had files on her that were so full she could hardly lift them off the floor. “Tons of stuff,” she says (II, 101), probably at least 15 [files] (II, 37). In high school she had teachers who had become her cheer leaders and her encouragers, but in college she was assigned to a counselor whom she really didn’t
get to know because there are so many LD students that counselors don’t have much
time to help and, as Anna says, “You tend to get a little bit freaked out because you
don’t have these supports” (II, 3). Suddenly, you are on your own.

During her initial 2-year college stint, however, Anna did have significant
help from her counselor. Whatever Anna suggested that would make her college stay
more profitable academically, her counselor went to work to see that, if possible, her
request would be fulfilled. She even got financial assistance from the Learning
Disabilities Association (Ontario) to help her purchase a computer. When she moved
to Atkinson, however, she was assigned to a counselor who seemed to feel, according
to Anna, that any requests were an intrusion. Because of this, Anna has avoided
asking for help. When she asked to change counselors, she was told that couldn’t
happen.

I wanted to know if Anna had taken any “strategy” courses to help her manage
college. She has taken a few, but says she does not have the patience for them. For
example, she mentions a course on “how to write a paper” that she could have
attended. To her, it seems impossible that the Herculean task of essay writing could
be condensed—and still be worthwhile—into a 2-day class. She is skeptical about even
trying it, wondering if it would really work for her. And that would be 2 days when
she could be working on other school work.

But she knows her time management skills are poor. Somewhat
unrealistically, she muses that a strategy course in this area might give her “a 90%
success rate in accomplishing . . . reading and . . . note taking” (II, 37).
Anna is just beginning the B.Ed. program, in the final year of studies that will give her elementary teaching certification in Ontario. At the beginning of the program, to her surprise, she received a letter asking her what kind of assistance she will need to be successful. Tutors? Extra time on tests? Note takers? Access to special adaptive technology? After several years at Atkinson, where she felt pretty much ignored, she was delighted to be consulted. Being asked what she needs also makes her feel that she is being treated as a responsible adult who has some say—and therefore some control—in her life.

Stress

Stress and fatigue are familiar to Anna, who says she’s spent most of her life dealing with them. The stress of keeping up academically has made school, the environment where she has spent four-fifths of her life, unenjoyable. For Anna, the rewards for studying are minimal considering the time spent, especially when she sees what other students are doing. She says that the most school-related stress is caused by comparing herself to others. As she says,

[It’s] not being able to get your stuff together on time. . . . It’s seeing that people spend the same amount of time on it you do, and they get higher marks. And I couldn’t believe it. I helped my girlfriend through this paper and she got an A, and I did the exact same thing and I got a C. I couldn’t believe it. I go, “This is typical for me. The one time I get an A at university, it’s not mine.” (II, 72)

Trying to keep up is what Anna calls “mental exhaustion” (II, 73). In her opinion, LD students should not work while attending school because it’s too fatiguing. When she’s totally overwhelmed trying to balance school and work, she describes herself in these words: “Just sitting there and it [my anxiety] will just brew
and brew and brew. And I just . . . like have anxiety attacks or panic. And freak out.
And then [my mentor] gets freaked out, and then we’re both stressed out” (II, 73).

Maintaining Sanity

During and since high school, Anna has been surrounded by friends. She works hard to maintain these friendships; they are important to her because they validate her in a way that schoolwork never has. Having fun and socializing on weekends is particularly important because it allows her breaks from the dreaded monotony of the college program. Friends provide another means of support by validating that she is a worthwhile human being who, although daunted in an academic setting, can hold her own socially.

Another way that Anna keeps sane is through acting. Definitely an “arts person” is how Anna sees herself. She enjoys acting and has participated in many plays and admits to being “good” at acting. This both did and didn’t surprise me. I know that many dyslexics are excellent actors, thanks to their unusual intuition into “real” human nature. But I’ve always wondered how they remembered their lines. “Sure I have problems . . . [with] dialogue work,” says Anna, who thinks it’s mostly due to nervousness. “But improvising—doing ‘off-the-cuff stuff’—is almost second nature” (II, 32). While acting works well at times, it can also get her into trouble:

Like I said . . . I could be a raving socialist. I could walk into a Republican party and come off as one. I have a knack for doing that. . . . And you know . . . I can go [into any situation and play a role]. . . . That’s why this is the funniest thing. I actually do quite well at job interviews, but it’s just that when I get into the job, I don’t like it. So I sort of lead a fake facade of interviewing around the city. . . . I’m very superficial. . . . What people want to hear I can tell them. Except for my friends. . . . I’ve never had any problems at interviews or with acting. (II, 33)
Though she appeared so animated when she told me about her various acting stints, Anna assured me she could never see this as a marketable profession. She wants a more stable life, one where her “bread and butter” is sure. She said she would be very fearful about going into something that is not going to guarantee a job. As she says: “You know, it’s tough enough that I already have something that’s sort of—a monkey on my back” (II, 29).

The Future

Anna’s mother recalls the day when her daughter graduated from high school. At a high-school graduation speech for special education students and their parents, Anna’s mother heard something that really startled her. It reminded her of how patronizing people, even educators, can be when they don’t view LD students as “real” people with hopes and career aspirations of their own. Anna’s mother remembers the incident in these words:

The graduation speaker said, “We want these people to get jobs” and that was the whole gist of his talk. He said, “We want them to integrate into society and get jobs and so on…” And I said to Anna, “You know, I don’t want you to just have a job. I want you to do something you really love and that you really believe in. I don’t want you to have just a job.” . . . They [LD students] should be able to become something that they believe passionately in and do things that really turn them on. Not like . . . get a job . . . That was . . . one of those moments when I thought, “Uh, Anna deserves to have a heck of a lot more in life than just a job.” (II, 103)

Anna’s mother wanted her daughter to have much more than “just a job.” Anna does, too. Although she “hates” school, she continues taking classes toward a teaching degree because she wants to prove to a lot of people, particularly LD
students, that they can be successful. She feels that one of her best assets is her ability to resist negative forces around her that threaten to come between her and her goals:

I basically fight in my own way to keep going, even though I keep getting barricades thrown at me and obstacles that I have to climb over. In a way, having a learning disability is kind of like always having to prove yourself. Not necessarily for the worst, but for the best. (II, 15)

But Anna has goals she wants to achieve, even if life continues to challenge her. She says:

I don’t think anything is going to change in my life. I think I’m still going to have to keep pushing harder and harder. There are certain things that I want to accomplish. But it’s difficult. . . . It’s really hard to say what my future is going to hold. . . . Things change every day. (II, 91)

Some days she is optimistic about the future and says, “You know what? . . . I think I can do it” (II, 91). But other days she’s not so sure and feels depressed and tired of the struggles her LD has given her. Sometimes she feels like saying, “You know, you have been in my brain for a while now; can you go to someone else? Can you go bother somebody else . . . for a change?” (II, 91)

While she tries to complete university, it’s still difficult to watch her friends who have gotten good jobs and are making good salaries. Anna says,

It’s . . . really hard for me to stand up beside someone who says, “Well, I’ve gotten my law degree and I’ve defended this person and that person. I’ve been in the paper.” And you say, “Well, I have a learning disability and I went to university.” You know what I mean? It sort of seems so like–so little compared to [them]–you know, such a little accomplishment because not many people are really aware of it. . . . We are only aware of who succeeds and has a college degree. (II, 83)

Besides her ability to keep going amidst great odds, she is optimistic about the future. Anna was ecstatic to be accepted into York University’s bachelor of education program, under the learning disability quota. For several years Anna has worked as a
teacher assistant in an elementary classroom. She enjoys the practical experience enormously, and says she can spot the LD students almost immediately. She wants to make a difference, one that will help them to enjoy an academic experience very different from the one she has mostly endured. Making that difference will bring her much joy and enormous satisfaction.

**Summary**

Anna’s life reflects the conundrum that learning disabilities present in an academic environment. She is alternately fatigued by the tremendous effort to successfully complete college and energized by the need to prove to herself and others that she can accomplish this.

Much of the “baggage” of negative elementary school experiences appears to haunt Anna. She was able to recount numerous unpleasant experiences, explaining how she felt at the time and who were involved. In addition, her unraveling family split still affects how Anna viewed that time in her life. In spite of this, her good humor and resiliency were evident throughout our conversations.

Attending school is still difficult. Although the college she attends offers some support, Anna has many reasons for not using it. She continues to “hide out” from most teachers because they intimidate her and she has difficulty explaining her own learning disability. Seeking help from anyone other than her mentor creates more pain than it’s worth. Sheer determination on her part, the kindness of family friends, and the helpfulness of one benefactor have helped Anna to achieve success.
CHAPTER 5

AMY: "LIKE A TURTLE IN A SHELL"

Piglet came a little closer to see. . . . Eeyore had three sticks on the ground, and was looking at them. Two of the sticks were touching at one end, but not at the other, and the third stick was laid across them. Piglet thought that perhaps it was a Trap of some kind. . . .

"Do you know what this is?"
"No," said Piglet.
"It's an A."
"Oh," said Piglet.
"Not O, A." said Eeyore severely. "Can't you hear?" . . .
"Do you know what A means, little Piglet?" . . . "It means Learning. It means Education."

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

Introduction

Amy was to meet me in the lobby of the York University (Toronto) library. Although I had been to the university's main library before, I wasn't exactly sure where our rendezvous site, the Periodicals Room, was. Glancing around a bit apprehensively, I searched the faces of the students--mostly bustling about to get to class. I was uncertain how I would find Amy, and wondered why I hadn't asked for clearer identifying details. There was no need to worry, however, because I was still a few minutes early. Next thing I knew, a round-faced, Asian girl with smiling eyes stepped up and asked if I was looking for Amy. We had connected.

I noticed--uneasily--that it took me awhile to put the face and the person together. In my narrow world, I had never before met an Asian person with a learning
disability. In an odd sort of way during our initial get-acquainted conversation, I kept mentally asking myself if I was actually talking with the right person. Soft-spoken, Amy talked quickly in what amounted to sentence fragments that were short gushes, answering my questions eagerly and with forthrightness. She was not one to paint pictures with her words, but she had definite thoughts about her experience as a learning disabled student that she wanted to share.

To become better acquainted, we retreated to one corner of the six-storey library that serves 43,000 students in North Toronto. For the three sessions that followed, I listened to, tape recorded, and took notes for about 6 hours while Amy talked about her experience as a learning disabled student amidst an oriental culture where a good education, a well-paying job, and success are paramount.

I learned that 22-year-old Amy has one sister, 5 years younger, a straight-A student in local high school. Her father, a realtor, and mother, an office worker, emigrated from the British colony of Hong Kong before Amy was born. Although the family also speaks Cantonese, English has always been Amy’s primary language.

Amy’s entire educational experience has taken place in public schools in the Toronto area. A student at York for the past 3 years, Amy has just switched to an honors psychology program which will add an additional year to her program. Still unsure of a life career choice, she feels that the honors program will give her wider options when she does decide.
Understanding a Learning Disability

For Amy, learning to understand her disability has been life-changing and has happened only within the last year and a half. Spurred during her second year in university by the fear that she would be asked to leave York due to poor grades, with the encouragement of a friend she decided to seek help instead of trying to “go it alone.” For nearly 6 years Amy had ignored—either consciously or otherwise—the fact that she had been in special education during nearly all of elementary school. Remembering that made her decide to seek help, and she began the process of trying to deal with her learning disability by visiting a developmental pediatrician. This visit, along with previous psycho-educational assessments, indicated attention deficit disorder along with language processing difficulties. Full-scale IQ was within the average range.

Despite a relatively early fourth-grade diagnosis in elementary school, Amy herself was never involved in any of the discussion. No one—either parent or educator—took the time to try to help her understand how she learned or why learning was so challenging. She recognized that she was overly “bored” by school, but as she says, “I truly had no clue what was going on. I just knew that something was kind of weird” (Ill, 3). Her parents, particularly her mother, were aware of some of the early assessments, but by high school, when Amy no longer was in special education, her mother simply hoped she had outgrown the problem. Although Amy recognizes some of her learning characteristics in her father—and now a cousin (her father’s brother’s child)—the family did not talk about Amy’s challenges. Amy now thinks of it as an issue of Chinese culture where “defective” people or “people with disabilities . . .

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shouldn’t have been here in the first place. . . . It’s like I’m not all here” (III, 7). Thus
the silence, as though failing to acknowledge a learning difficulty would make it
disappear.

Amy understands that she has difficulties in the following areas:
organizational skills (both in time and writing), concentration, reading
comprehension, spelling, and vocabulary. Amy describes herself as a slow reader who
needs prodigious amounts of time to interact with and interpret what she reads in
order to understand (III, 1).

The Early Years

Although Amy began elementary school at the usual age of her peers, she
always felt that she was different from the other students in her class. She says: “I
would never relate to others. I don’t think that the other [students] could relate to me”
(III, 7). This sense of lagging, of not being like the other children, seems to have been
verified in Grade 2 when spelling workbooks were distributed to all the students.
Although the other children were working through the book, filling in the blanks and
enjoying the words, Amy was stuck. She knew something wasn’t right because she
couldn’t seem to even get started filling in the blanks. Amy recalls being scared and
saying to no one in particular but to her world in general: “What is going on?
Someone please tell me” (III, 8).

Occasionally, not-so-subtle comments along the way from teachers verified
her feelings of differentness, like the time her Grade 4 teacher asked her what she
wanted to be when she grew up. Adult professions weren’t foremost in her pre-
adolescent mind, so Amy replied, “You know, I really haven’t thought about it.” And
the teacher responded: “I’m glad [you haven’t] because I don’t think you will go on too far” (III, 8). Although Amy was only 9 years old at the time, she remembers feeling both hurt and mystified. She was hurt because she understood the negative message behind the teacher’s comment, which only supported her own negative feelings growing inside her mind about herself. She was mystified because she understood she was different but couldn’t understand how or why.

According to her mother, Amy was always very “different” in both behavior and performance from the other kids in her class. Because Amy was born about the same time as children of a number of their friends and relatives, the families kept close tabs on the progress of each other’s offspring, comparing accomplishments and pursuits, as parents tend to do. Amy was so unlike the other children, her mother says. She seemed content in her own world. In her gentle Cantonese/English accent, her mother describes her differentness this way: “I had a lot of friends around my age, and we all started our families at the same time. She was quite different to the others. To me she didn’t have the paying attention kind of timing. She could be looking at you, but her mind was somewhere else” (III, 68).

After psycho-educational testing in Grade 4, Amy was moved to special education where the teacher/student ratio was closer to 1:5 so that Amy could be taught individually, as needed. Despite this extra attention at school, Amy, according to her mother, “kind of dragged on, but I don’t think that really helped her that much.” Before anybody knew what was happening, Amy entered a difficult phase from ages 10-13, when she cried very easily over simple things, and her mother says, “We kind of dragged along. But it was very hard” (III, 68).
In high school Amy got lost among a multitude of students. Despite intensive special education during 5 years of elementary school, no one suggested it in high school. This was during the early 1990s, an era of severe government cutbacks, particularly in special education. She got along as best she could, mostly by trying not to talk about school difficulties with anybody, including her parents. A lot of teachers complained about her apparent inability to do well. One puzzled teacher even asked if she was an ESL student, but Amy assured her she was born in Canada. Her parents, in the meantime, hoped she could squeak through with enough credits to graduate, and didn’t dare to think beyond high school. Just getting Amy through high school was difficult enough for the whole family.

Because Amy no longer was using the additional support of a special education team, her mother admits she fantasized that “the problem” had gone away, thinking and hoping that Amy was older, more mature, and that she had outgrown her learning difficulties. She says, “I kind of denied that there was a problem. . . . I said, ‘Oh, yeah. Maybe this is over now and she will be okay.’ And because she was in high school she didn’t really come by and show me homework like when she was little” (III, 77).

In the meantime, amidst a culture noted for striving for success, Amy felt out of place. Her parents, hoping to provide some incentive for achievement and lacking understanding about Amy’s learning disability, reminded her of the many achievements of their friends’ children, suggesting that if she was having academic problems that maybe her peers could help her. Her mother says, “But she didn’t want to talk about it. I guess it was kind of painful to admit, ‘Oh, I have problems. You
guys are all so good” (III, 69). Amy remembers knowing that she worked much
harder at school work than any of her friends, who didn’t even have to study to get
A’s. But Amy thought her low grades were the result of her not working hard enough.
And so she studied harder, usually without noticeable improvement in performance.

University

Peer pressure and the desire to “get a good job” inspired Amy to attempt
university. A close Asian culture in which her friends and the children of her parents
naturally went on to college or university provided the impetus for Amy to want to
try. Her mother says,

My sister and I both had our children the same day, just two hours apart. The
other girl is so smart. And they grew up together. And Amy saw that the other girl
is so good, and she wasn’t good in anything. I guess for her it was very hard to
take. And even though she knew she couldn’t handle university, she wanted to try.
I was glad. (III, 77)

In retrospect, Amy admits that logically she really should not have attempted
university, given her poor high-school scores and her weak study habits; instead she
feels she should have gone to a community college because “it’s more hands on, . . .
instead of reading textbooks, because I can’t absorb [the concepts] that well” (III, 18).

Because Amy didn’t have grades high enough to get into university (she had a
68% average in a Canadian system where 80% is an A), her parents decided to “beg”
the university to admit her, to give her a chance. Interestingly enough, they did not
appeal on the grounds that she had a learning disability, even though a diagnosis
would have been readily available and accepted. She had, after all, made it through
high school on her own, with help coming primarily from tutoring at learning centers.
In her parents’ minds, Amy had some flaw that was shameful. Admitting this to a
university would not be appropriate. It simply did not occur to them that a university would be willing to level the playing field for someone with Amy’s challenges or that they should even ask for consideration.

Stress

The pressure is always on. Amy describes herself as a nervous, up-tight-about-everything sort of person who has learned to work very hard to avoid failure. In elementary school she repeated Grade 4. During her first 2 years at York, she failed one course each year and was terrified she would be asked to leave. She confessed she has never felt comfortable in any class she has ever taken in university, that every class is hard (III, 25), and she has learned that she can never “cut loose” and enjoy a class because she will quickly find herself behind. “Stress is something that I just feel I should have,” Amy says. She always feels stressed when she is awake, and confessed that she was stressed when she slept as well. For example she says, “When I’m dreaming, I can actually picture myself studying. I can even see my notes like when there’s an exam coming up” (III, 58).

Amy has learned to work hard 5 days a week; however, she avoids school work on weekends in order to relax; spending time with her friends is absolutely essential for survival. By the end of the school week, she admits she is “just a wreck” (III, 21).

Support

Aside from her parents going to the university admissions office to plead entry on their daughter’s behalf, Amy feels that her parents have offered little support. In
fact, considerable alienation has existed between her and her parents for some time, largely due to a lack of understanding about Amy’s learning disability. Because Amy had a difficult time remembering to do tasks in sequence at home, friction frequently erupted between Amy and her parents. Amy says, “If I forgot to do things, they would just yell at me” (III, 16). Amy feels her parents chose to ignore her learning difficulties because that was the easiest thing to do.

Recently, with newly acquired assertiveness skills encouraged through her counselor at York’s Learning Disabilities Programme (LDP), Amy has learned to respond to her parents by reminding them that she didn’t deliberately forget to do a task. Instead, she now asks them to write down what they want her to do. For example, now her mother is learning to write down the task, never reminding Amy more than once to do it. And her mother no longer becomes angry with her for forgetting. After years of tension over Amy’s apparent forgetfulness, Amy sees this as support, with one parent deliberately trying to change decades-long practices in order to be helpful. For Amy, this is a significant breakthrough.

Although nobody had been holding Amy’s hand very much in high school, helping her with her work, for Amy, university was a “big shock.” She discovered she had to do everything for herself, that no one planned her day for her to the same extent that the high-school environment had. Although she tried to organize her time and her life, she knew she wasn’t being very effective. She had difficulty making herself sit down and do homework. She says:

Everything was left ‘til the last minute. It’s just [that] I couldn’t be bothered. . . . It’s like I tried so hard and I . . . accomplished nothing and might as well not be bothered. I did a lot of TV watching. . . . And my parents would always ask me if I had any work do to, and I’d say, “Oh, later, later, later.” . . . And I never ended up
doing it until like, maybe for essay I would do them [in] the last day or . . . two.”

(III, 4)

She left studying and papers to the last minute. Her grades were borderline. It wasn’t until a teaching assistant helping her with a writing assignment suggested that she might have a learning disability that Amy remembered that during elementary school she had indeed been in special education.

Getting retested and operating under the LDP at York has been one of the best things that has happened to Amy. She was frightened by the real possibility of being asked to leave when her best friend was kicked out by the university. Her friend, though capable of academic excellence, stopped doing her work and attending classes because she was preoccupied with a boyfriend. Amy, fearful that she would have to withdraw because of her own low and failing grades, decided to aggressively seek help before she, too, was asked to leave.

One of the by-products of Amy’s visit to the developmental pediatrician is that she is taking Drexalin®, a stimulant to help her to focus and organize. Although this drug suppresses her appetite and makes her tired, she feels it is helping her to stay more productively focussed as she learns. Because she doesn’t want to take it too much, she tries to be off it during the weekends.

Her tutor at York has been tremendously helpful. She describes years of tutoring at learning centers during high school which were subject-specific and where tutors tended to do the work for the student. At York, where tutors are trained specifically to help LD students, Amy found that she was being taught how to learn. Using examples, reinforcement, and direct instruction, Amy is slowly being empowered to do her own work by herself with coaching from a tutor. She feels

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particularly good about this: "Learning how to do my work myself is an advantage because in the future I have to do all of these things anyway. So I am taught to do it, and no one else is doing it for me" (III, 35).

Feeling the support of the York University LDP has been important to Amy’s success and the fact that she plans to graduate soon. In addition to a helpful tutor, Amy also has taken advantage of other services offered, including adaptive technology. More than any of the other LD students I interviewed, Amy has learned how to make technology work for her. In addition to tape recording lectures (though she does not tape record all lectures, just the ones that have particularly difficult content), Amy also uses computers well. She transcribes all her notes from tape to computer. She does all of her writing on computer, from brainstorming to finished project because she knows she can type faster and more neatly than she can handwrite. She has also developed a writing system using a word processor that makes writing more expeditious. She uses her computer to write most of her examinations.

At York, she receives her textbooks on tape. The textbooks, ordered by LDP, are useful since she can both see and hear the information, aiding retention. The books-on-tape service, similar to the Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (USA), is free through the Trent Library. The difficult part in making all this work is accessing a tape recorder, available through the library, since the tapes are four-track and do not play on regular tape recorders. Although the tape recorders can be checked out by LD students, they are cumbersome, not easily portable, and, in house, can only be used during regular library hours.
Amy relies heavily on the university's Kurzweil 1000, a computer program which converts printed word to speech. She understands this program well and frequently scans articles since they are not available on tape. The "voice" can be adjusted so it sounds fairly natural. JAWS, another program originally designed for the blind and visually impaired, reads whatever is on the screen in a robot-like voice. Amy, therefore, can scan material into the computer which then reads it to her. Unlike some students, including Wendy, the other case study subject at York's Atkinson College, Amy has learned to overlook the somewhat obnoxious reading voice and uses JAWS often.

Another university accommodation is that she gets 60% more time on tests, something which Amy describes as "very helpful." Also reassuring is that if Amy doesn't like her university-offered accommodations, she can talk to her counselor and together they will determine if she needs more time or a different accommodation. As Amy says, "Basically, if whatever concerns I have I want to fix, I go talk to her" (III, 37). Amy uses word processing for tests, where possible. If she needs extended time on papers, her tutor talks to the professor for her to arrange an extension.

Workshops are offered at the college. One course is offered specifically for LD students. Amy plans to take that six-credit course before she graduates, mostly because she wants to meet other students like herself. But she has taken advantage of non-credit workshops that have been offered in reading, time management, anger management, and assertiveness training, all of them useful in helping her perform more independently as a university student.
The biggest help to Amy has been the psychologist to whom she was assigned following her disclosure of learning disabilities at York. Following diagnostic evaluation of learning skills, Amy was assigned a tutor and a psychologist. Amy recalls how, at the end of her first session, she filled out a form evaluating the usefulness of the session. At the end of the form, the question was asked: “How do you feel right now?” She wrote: “Hopeless . . . I just feel like nothing’s going to help me anymore” (III, 50). Amy felt she had no control over her life. She spent all her waking hours studying, did poorly on tests, and struggled to keep up with reading and papers. She felt that she had to just take things as they came, as though she was at the mercy of wherever life might take her. Eighteen months later, she feels confident and is no longer afraid of life. She has repeatedly told the psychologist, “Thanks for getting my life back.” Amy feels that because the psychologist also has a learning disability he is much more able to understand and help her. He has enabled her not only to understand her learning disability but to view it as a potential strength. Amy, beleaguered for years by an unexplained “foe,” now feels empowered to be successful.

Amy knows that many students are not willing to spend time with a study group, but Amy finds that studying with a group can be beneficial, with the group’s effectiveness depending on the people in it. As she says, “It has to be somebody as determined as you are who doesn’t think you’re crazy” (III, 60). She describes the last one she was a part of for a human biology class which was the best one she’s ever been in which met directly after class. They reviewed the lecture, then prepared and wrote notes. The group started with three, but another person joined later. At exam
time, they studied together a lot. But she adds, “You still have to know the material yourself” (III, 60).

Family

Her mother, Mrs. A., has noticed the change in direction in Amy’s life. For her, this is a positive sign in what has too often been a stormy sea of family friction. Like many mothers, Mrs. A. has been caught in the middle, feeling sympathy for a child who, through no fault of her own, has some learning challenges. As she says, “Sometimes I have to quarrel with my husband too because like it’s my own child. If there’s something wrong, we have to support her. Otherwise, who else will? He thinks, Well, she’s so old already. Right?” (III, 70)

Part of the tension is due to “traditional” thinking within a high-achieving Asian culture. Mr. A. thinks his children should be executives in the business world, doctors, or lawyers. But the family has had to dispense with that traditional thinking and, as Mrs. A. points out, “The world moves on” and she wants to change her thinking and learn also (III, 71) She tries to share where she is coming from with Amy: “I tell her. You are very lucky. You’re in Canada. You can get help from school. You also get help from your doctor... In Hong Kong, they don’t do this type of thing” (III, 72).

Changing thinking has not come easily to this family. Mrs. A. says:

Even from little she was kind of struggling, I sent her to piano lessons... she doesn’t move on as fast... [and there’s a lot of] peer pressure. And the [other] parents say, “Oh, my daughter is doing this” or “my son is doing this” and parents don’t want to be left out. They send their kids to what everyone is doing, but not everyone has the same result so I guess when she is now older she looks bad. She says, “My mom sent me to piano, but I didn’t do good” and “My mom sent me to
math program and I quit. . . . Same with dance.” She said, “No, I don’t like it.” (III, 72)

Amy admittedly spends nearly all her waking weekday hours doing school work. She does not have a job, and her family, most notably her father, feels she doesn’t pull her weight around the house. Mrs. A. says,

My husband sometimes really gets mad. He’ll say she’s such a big child . . . but she treats this home like a hotel. Go to sleep, study, no contribution. The two of them . . . it’s one on the other side. Sometimes I feel . . . tired. So my husband make a big noise. And I’ll say, “Well, you’d rather spend another year for her studies or you care for these dishes. Right? I’d rather have her study harder and get through earlier than be stuck in the university another year and have to pay another $5,000 . . . just because of those dishes [that Amy didn’t do]!” (III, 73)

Like many mothers, Mrs. A. tries to support her daughter in every possible way. A recent experience shows Mrs. A.’s growing understanding of and involvement in Amy’s life. Just before summer holidays and for the first time, Amy, on her own initiative, applied for a summer job through a Summer Job Service at York. The job involved taking care of two young autistic children for 2 hours each day. When the prospective employing family asked her to come and interview, Amy’s parents decided to go with her. Her mother, who knows her daughter well, wanted to make sure that this very first job would be a good “fit” for Amy because if it were not and she was hurt again by failure, “all the work, all the confidence she’s built up will be down the drain” (III, 75). Amy’s dad was planning to take her to the interview, but Mrs. A. decided to go along because she wanted to show some support. She also knew that Amy’s father, short on patience, would be raising his voice when things didn’t work out and Amy would cry. Intuitively, she decided to go along because she thought she might be needed.
The family headed toward the interview site, about 10 miles away. Unfortunately, while taking down the directions, Amy missed writing north or south for one of the roads. Tempers, especially her father's, started to rise. When the interview time was only 5 minutes away, the family was still looking—by now frantically—for the right house. Tension in the car was high. Miraculously, Amy arrived on time and was offered the job.

Although it was for only 2 hours per day, 5 days per week for 4 months, her mother celebrated this new venture with her daughter. However, Amy’s father said: “Only 2 hours? An hour to come and an hour to go. So for 4 hours you only get 2 hours. By public transit you need an hour to get there and an hour to come home” (III, 75). But her mother saw the bigger picture: this was experience that Amy could write on her resume, a first; she could also see how happy her daughter was to have gotten this job by herself. That was what really mattered most.

Teachers

When asked to name or describe helpful teachers in her university experience, Amy could think of none. At a university level, most negotiations with teachers have been cared for by her tutor who asks the professor, on Amy’s behalf, for extra time on papers. Occasionally, when she has requested professors to sign exam forms asking for additional time (she is allowed 60% more time), a teacher will say, “If you need any help just come to me” (III, 38), but Amy has never felt like taking them up on their offer. She notes that female professors are more likely to offer help than male.

Amy says there are several reasons why she has never taken up her professors’ offers. First, she’s not sure if they are sincere. Also, with the excellent tutoring she
was receiving through the LDP at the university, she felt she didn’t need the teachers’ help. Third, after she approached professors to sign her exam forms, they then knew her name and would call on her in class; however, she didn’t want to be singled out. Finally, she wants to learn to manage by herself as much as possible. She wants to be independent because, as she says, “You can only depend on yourself” (DF 25).

Writing and Study Skills

For Amy, organization in writing is most difficult. To keep herself from straying, she usually writes subtitles that she continues to refer to as she writes each section. This keeps her thoughts in check because she can keep comparing what she is writing to the title of each subsection. She has learned to write her introduction first, especially the thesis, so that she knows what she is writing about.

Amy shared a recent essay from a sociology class, for which she had received a B. The essay, a look at technology and how it impacts learning disabilities, focuses on how the psychological, social, and physical needs of the LD student are aided by technology. A clear thesis statement is located near the end of the second paragraph. Topic sentences introduce each of the subsequent paragraphs. The essay moves awkwardly from paragraph to paragraph, even with obvious transitional words and phrases like however, moreover, therefore, in general, and more importantly. Although she has sufficient information from outside sources, the material does not “hang together” smoothly. To a certain extent, the essay becomes more compare/contrast among adaptive technologies than informational, although the introduction doesn’t seem to indicate that direction.
Amy describes herself as having good ideas for writing projects, but being unable to retain them for long. In order to compensate for this tendency to forget ideas before they’re written, she enters all the ideas on a given subject that she can think of on her word processor. Then she slots other supporting ideas down as she thinks of them.

Amy has discovered several study techniques which work for her. Besides listening to lectures on tape and taking notes on those lectures, just before the exam she listens again to the tape—often while travelling on the hour-long bus trip between her home outside of Toronto to the university. In order to be adequately prepared for the test, she also slots times in a planner so that she will have sufficient study time—even 2 or 3 weeks before the test.

Although Amy has had difficulty memorizing material for tests, she is becoming better at it. Sometimes she resorts to mnemonics, but more often she color codes her notes. For difficult chapters of abstract material, she highlights the main points. After physically working with the text often enough, she “can actually see the color coding” in her head and can read her notes, somewhat like persons who have photographic memories.

She described a human anatomy class which required both memorization and correct spelling. She says, “I was very concerned [and said] ‘Oh, I can’t memorize it’” (III, 27). But again Amy made technology work for her. She videoed diagrams for the lab textbook, put her TV on mute and practiced naming off the parts. Whatever she named or misspelled incorrectly, she did over again until she got it correct.
resourcefulness paid off. Amy was grateful for her C+ grade, which was higher than the class average.

Social

Although Amy has some friends, there have never been many. She feels that one of her problems in getting and keeping friends is that she can’t express her ideas properly, the way she wants to. She says,

I’m always searching for words. . . . When I speak to others, [my speech is] all over the place. I know my friends are just . . . lost when I speak . . . because I will be speaking about an idea, but then the next minute I will be speaking about a totally different one. And I don’t even notice. I have no clue. (III, 54)

Another problem that has developed since she’s become more comfortable with her learning disability is her desire to educate her friends. She says, “I find that I scare them off because I like sharing my stories. I want people to learn . . . what I’ve learned. I just think people would be smarter” (III, 64). At the same time, while she’s trying to educate people, Amy finds that she is “too open with people. . . . I just talk and I can’t stop. . . . I think people get very turned off by that” (III, 64).

A relationship with a boyfriend that lasted for 1½ years ended recently because Amy felt that she was relying on him too much and that scared her. She is learning to rely on her own powers now and “can’t stand people controlling [me] because for the last 21 years of my life everyone has been telling me what to do and I have actually hated that so much” (III, 65).

Looking Ahead

Mrs. A. thinks her daughter is like a turtle in her shell. She says, “I’m kind of waiting for her to come out of her shell and just be part of us like everyone else. But
many times I see her hiding herself in the shell so I guess I can’t see it everyday. . . . Until she comes out there’s not much I can do but just pray to God” (III, 74).

Mrs. A. understands that giving her the confidence to do what she wants to do is important, and then “when she gets there . . . and I’m sure that’s the time she will come out of her shell. She [will] feel proud of her job, proud of herself, and that’s the time” (III, 74).

Although about a year ago Amy wondered whether she would ever finish university, she is full of hope now. Amy wants to share her new understanding about learning disabilities as a profession. Careers in Early Childhood Education or rehabilitation interest her the most. Both Amy and her mother recognize that Amy’s friends and peers are already doing well financially in their chosen professions. As Mrs. A. observes, “Some of the families’ kids are not so smart, but they have money so they can get a job easily” (III, 78). Amy wants to help disabled people, in a profession that probably won’t be paying an “executive” salary or that won’t be particularly admired as a moneymaker. But her mother points out that she cannot change how people view “helping” professions. Amy needs to do what she feels called to do.

The other challenge is helping Amy’s father to think differently about his daughter. He would like her to choose a profession which will reap excellent monetary rewards. Changing her husband’s understanding and appreciation for altruism is more of an undertaking than Mrs. A. is willing to assume, though she does admit that her husband “has to conquer his thinking and be proud that his daughter is helping someone instead of competing with this or that family” (III, 79).
Summary

For Amy, help through York University’s LDP has made her life worth living, providing her with hope and optimism for the future. She says: “Before I actually started counseling, I didn’t want to share any of my experiences because I thought that it would be shameful . . . something bad. But, I basically tell everyone, because I’m me now” (III, 53).

Through the strength she has received in accepting and understanding herself, Amy has come to see a learning disability as a strength, as something positive. She adds:

It’s not a weakness. Because I find that a lot of people that have not experienced this—or anything difficult, they are kind of like living in a dream world. . . . It’s not real life. . . . Whenever they want it, it comes to them. Whenever they don’t want it, it’s like you know . . . they can just leave it so easily. . . . I’m just not like that . . . I have to accept that it [a learning disability] is going to be with me for the rest of my life. I can’t say, “Okay, we’re throwing it in the garbage now, you know.” (III, 53)

Amy admitted that sometimes she feels her expectations for herself are too high. When I asked whether she had realistic expectations, she replied, “I don’t know. I haven’t really thought of that. I can make them realistic by achieving them” (III, 67).

Most significantly, Amy could not name one helpful teacher in her entire educational experience. This silence was significant. As Chase (1995) points out, to be able to dialogue with the narrative (Amy’s story), a person first must listen carefully to the gaps, silences, and contradictions. Although Amy didn’t find teachers helpful, neither did I sense any resentment toward them. They appeared to be neutral players in an otherwise difficult game called “getting an education.”
CHAPTER 6

SHELLEY: “FOOD FOR THE INCA GODS”

Pooh looked at his two paws. He knew that one of them was the right, and he knew that when you had decided which one of them was the right, then the other one was the left, but he never could remember how to begin.

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

Introduction

Meeting Shelley for the first time reminded me again of how invisible learning disabilities really are. Just looking at her, there was no indication that school might be at all difficult for her or that she was dyslexic. Tall and attractive, she had a sparkle in her eye; she conducted herself with ease. As we chatted, I discovered that she had a ready laugh and a fine sense of humor, was articulate, and gave the appearance of having a strong sense of who she was. I also learned, while she was riding in the car with me and directing me to a good “conversation” place, that, as with Winnie-the-Pooh, “left” sometimes meant “right.”

Shelley is a 21-year-old, fourth-year liberal arts student at Andrews University. She chose to attend this school because her family had lived in the area for nearly a decade, she had a number of friends in the vicinity already, and initially it was less expensive to attend a school in a state where she had already established residence. She also confessed that she didn’t “do changes” really well and if she
stayed in the same community with which she felt familiar, she would have fewer adjustments to make. At the time the decision was made, she felt she could handle a few unknowns in her life, but not a lot.

Although Andrews University was not her parents' first choice for her because they felt there were other colleges that were better equipped to help her to be successful, they had left the choice to her because they felt that, as an emerging adult, she should have more say in her future. Ultimately, the choice of school was hers.

In addition to offering a liberal arts education, Andrews includes a seminary, a School of Education, a School of Business, and a School of Technology. Its enrollment is approximately 1,700 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate students. The majority of its faculty and students, like Shelley, adhere to the Seventh-day Adventist faith.

Early Memories

Shelley’s earliest memories are from the prairies of North Dakota where she was born. She has fond memories of visiting some of the farms where friends of her parents lived. She liked the warmth and friendliness of those farmers. She liked seeing and being around the farm animals and playing with the farm children, especially ones who were her own age, because there seemed to be no shortage of entertaining things to do. But there were a couple of boys much older than she whom she also adored. They, along with their dog Laddie, were like older brothers. They provided her with plenty of wholesome memories, including feeding the chickens and

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finding the buffalo rock out in the middle of the field which, in a previous century, the buffalo used to rub against on sultry summer days while passing through.

Shelley remembers her early childhood as being fun. In addition to having a black cocker spaniel/terrier-mix dog named Licorice, she also had a favourite aunt, a teacher, who lived with her family. Her aunt liked children, and especially enjoyed doing things with Shelley. Her family was close-knit, with reunions every other year or so which brought family members from all over the United States and Canada to one geographical location. There they had a pleasant time doing things together and catching up on the details of each others' lives since the last get-together. Annual summer vacations included trips to places like Waterton-Glacier National Park on the Montana-Alberta border, trips to see Anne of Green Gables' countryside in Prince Edward Island, Canada, and summers at her grandparents' farm located among the wine-grape vineyards of northern California. Early childhood was a good time.

It was in Eastern United States that Shelley actually started school—several times, really. According to her mother, Shelley first went to a pre-school close to home at age 5. Actually, the school was designed for handicapped (both physically and mentally) children and the director wanted to have a few "normal" children to act as "patterns." According to the director, Shelley was a model student and definitely ready for "real" school. But her mother, a secondary school teacher at the time, wasn't so sure, so the next year Shelley went to a private, home-school kindergarten with about six students which was operated by a friend. No learning problems were reported.
Her mother reports always having this little question mark in the back of her mind about her daughter’s relationship to school. She had kept Shelley out of school until age 7½ because there appeared to be no interest in school-related things like reading or writing. Although she could write her name, it was with great difficulty and the letters were awkwardly formed. Whenever she tried to introduce “book”-related exercises at home, Shelley wasn’t interested. A friend had loaned them the Home Study International kindergarten curriculum, and although the material was attractive, Shelley didn’t show much interest. According to Shelley’s mother, 

There were no attempts to try to decipher words on her own, although she loved to listen to tapes and be read to. Though she was surrounded by books and we went to the library often, she looked at pictures but never once asked what a word was. In other words, there were no attempts to decode language, and that seemed strange to me because I remember [as a young child] trying desperately to make words make sense so I could read. (IV, 50)

Even though Shelley’s mother recalls these uneasy feelings in the back of her mind, she also remembers that both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers said Shelley was ready to start school. And the first grade teacher, who was a family friend, waived the usual entrance test required of first graders because she was sure that Shelley was ready for her formal education to begin. So, her mother says, “I figured I was just way overprotective as a mother, that I ought to relax, and she would get along just fine” (IV, 50).

*Early School Experiences*

For most students, early elementary school is the beginning of a great adventure. An entirely new world opens up to them as they begin to read, to interact
with a variety of children, and begin to become independent learners. They play, they
learn, they laugh, they talk . . . sometimes all at once.

But for Shelley, elementary school was like a “bad dream.” She adds: “I don’t
recall liking it very much” (IV, 2). Her mother uses similar language, calling
elementary school “a nightmare” (IV, 50). She recalls:

I remember her eagerly going off to school for Grade 1 . . . She was so
enthusiastic. But right from the start she never seemed happy about school. She
seemed anxious—always. Since I taught at the same school, I would go into her
classroom sometimes. On more than one occasion she was crying. She had come
to an impasse in some work that she was doing, had been warned not to disturb
the teacher, and she wouldn’t give herself permission to skip a question. She used
to stay in for recess an awful lot because her work wasn’t done. (IV, 51)

Shelley recalls getting “through the first question, but [for the second
question] . . . I could hardly write it down, proofread or whatever, and soon I would
get—then it was sort of like there was a brick wall [and] I couldn’t get past that” (IV,
2). She describes not knowing what to do next, so she listened while the teacher was
explaining how to do the section to other kids and then she would continue. She says,
“When the teacher would help them it was crystal clear for me. But somehow just
doing it by myself it didn’t really work out very well” (IV, 3). Strongly auditory, she
needed to hear the instructions, rather than just trying to read them for herself.
Although she could “read” the words, they had no meaning for her. They might as
well have been a different language.

What Shelley remembers from first and second grades was having to stay in
during recess to finish school work. But, as she explains, “It wasn’t helpful for me to
stay in during recess because I couldn’t read [understand] the instructions in order to
do the work” (IV, 3). So she sat in her desk, knowing that she had to stay there until
her work was finished, and looked out the window at her classmates having fun outside.

Her mother is still puzzled by this early elementary experience. Her daughter consistently received A's in school, seemed to be able to read—though with considerable hesitation and only after some coaxing. The only suggestion her teacher made during these years was at the end of Grade 1 when she noted that Shelley should practice reading for increased fluency. Another cryptic remark on a first-grade report card said that Shelley was easily distracted.

This perplexing school experience continued through Grades 1 and 2. Then the family moved to a new location and, inevitably, a new school. Her mother remembers Shelley's first day at her new school. The first day was over and I was lying down beside her on her bed and we were chatting before she went to sleep. I asked her how her day had gone. She said, "Mom, those first graders can read better than I can." That kind of surprised me, but I remember thinking that she just needed a bit of time to get used to a new school. She'd always been kind of an anxious child. She'd relax after a bit. (IV, 51)

Again, the classroom was multi-grade and Shelley was distracted much of the time. Keeping focused seemed to be a perpetual problem when many activities were happening at the same time. Because Shelley didn't complete her work at school, she ended up bringing much of it home. Also, because the school was operating on a tight budget, they could not afford to buy textbooks or workbooks. So most of the pages used in the classroom had been copied on a photocopier. Shelley remembers the unfinished papers piling up in her desk, one by one. She says, "I remember my desk—it was a really neat desk but it was very full of things, you know, that were half
finished, partially finished. One, two, three things finished on it. Everything was half finished or partially finished" (IV, 4).

Shelley brought home incredible amounts of work, most of it incomplete from the day at school. In fact, from the amount of work to be completed at home, it seemed that she had done nothing at school all day long. As her mother recollects, “I remember the teacher sending home a terse statement with a whole pile of uncompleted worksheets saying, ‘These are the papers that Shelley needs to complete.’ There were so many of them—35, I think—that I laughed” (IV, 51).

In the midst of a dark sky, one elementary teacher is fondly remembered. It was her fourth- and fifth-grade teacher. He seemed to love what he did and “he read to us all the time” (IV, 4). According to Shelley, “He loved math and science . . . and history and geography and art and . . . he read us tons of books” (IV, 4). Aside from fourth grade when she had two girlfriends with whom she had a good time, she says she didn’t enjoy elementary school socially because she “went to a small school and the people at my school were very weird” (IV, 5).

Shelley’s mother recalls elementary school as one protracted unpleasant experience:

During the summer Shelley was a different child: relaxed, pleasant, and carefree. But the storm clouds rolled into our house every August when school started. I would drop a fairly pleasant child off at school on Monday morning and dread picking her up in the evening. She was snarly, unpleasant, uptight, and I was frequently the one to catch the brunt of her unpleasantness.

She had such a difficult time with spelling. I even remember being upset with her because she misspelled her own name on a project she had done in fifth grade. And in frustration, she got upset with me. It was not a happy time.
She would not read aloud. Ever. She never read a book on her own. She would play quietly, often “organizing” things. I had purchased her a set of fancy 64 pencil crayons... She would spend hours arranging them in “families.” She had families of everything—Sylvanians, Barbies, stuffed animals.

As I look back on it now, I believe this “organizing” propensity may have been an attempt to bring order out of what to her was a chaotic world—a world which she didn’t understand and where she didn’t seem to fit. To be able to organize something gave her some reference point to stability. (IV, 51-52)

High School

High school, according to Shelley, was better than elementary school in nearly every way. Attending a larger parochial school of about 250 students in a community about a 15-minute drive from home, almost from the start Shelley liked it better than the small elementary school she’d been attending. Actually, after the terror of the first day, life got better almost immediately.

But the first day was the nadir of her high-school experience. She knew about two other people from elementary school, she was painfully shy, she couldn’t locate the appropriate classrooms, was unused to school bells ringing and signalling that she had just a few minutes to get to her locker and the next class, and, to compound problems, she couldn’t get her locker open. She laughs about the entire first-day experience now, but at the time it was pretty traumatic.

Some classes seemed easier than in elementary school, particularly the classes in which her teachers knew her well and “looked out for [her]” (IV, 5). She identified several teachers who were willing to stick up for her and, as she describes humorously, “talk to the evil teachers that weren’t willing to help me.” She liked the bus tours (to Montreal, to Washington, DC, to the East Coast), where she could “see...
all the stuff instead of it being dry and you are being tested over some dry book” (IV, 6).

But Shelley enjoyed high school socially the best. There were more people who were like her and a wider circle of friends from which to choose (IV, 5). Because of her shyness and tendency to withdraw, a very thoughtful teacher teamed her up with several senior girls who included her in many of their activities. This made a significant difference in her initial high-school experience.

_The College Experience_

Visiting Shelley in her college room in the home where she boarded, I noticed a number of contemporary posters. One of them was a picture of a kitten with a blow dryer creating a minor whirlwind. The cat has a pained expression on its face. “I’m having a bad hair day,” it says, wryly. Other posters featured a German castle on the Rhine River, plus a series of calendar pictures from Provençe, the charming, Old World section of southern France made famous in the early 1990s by English-born writer Peter Mayle. As I surveyed the neatness of her room, with books lined up in near military precision, I was impressed by the orderliness. Even her closet, door open, had sweaters neatly stacked, shoes carefully lined up, and hangers arranged in an orderly fashion. I had the feeling that if I asked her where an item in the room was, she could locate it instantly.

When I commented on the European pictures, she smiled and explained that she’d love to go to Europe to learn a foreign language, but would prefer to do it in a non-academic setting. She laughed as she said that with her obviously French name
that somewhere in her brain, she was sure, there was a bit of French trying to get out. After all, her grandparents spoke French before they ever learned English. But she thought she'd like to go to Switzerland to work as a nanny where she could learn French on the job. She has avoided studying all foreign languages in school because English was difficult already, and to avoid having to study a foreign language she has switched her major to one that does not require a foreign language to graduate.

Another, less obvious, collection of writing on her wall intrigued me. Written on little white pieces of paper right by the door and on the mirror over the sink were some inspirational quotes and Bible verses like 1 Pet 5:7 (“Cast all your anxiety upon Him, for He cares for you”). I was impressed by all these encouraging words.

She pointed to a drawer where she keeps “favorite things” to cheer herself up when she’s down. I took a look. Lots of fun stickers, like Curious George, Winnie-the-Pooh, pretty stationery, an amazing collection of colorful pens, even a few puzzles were part of the collection of mood lifters housed in the drawer. I saw bright orange note paper which Shelley designed for a computer class. It featured a line drawing of a rabbit and said, “You’re some bunny!” Another note pad has a picture of a Shakespearean court jester who said, “If only I had a brain!” I liked her sense of humor.

Shelley has attended three colleges so far. Undecided about a major, she began at Andrews, where she lived in the dormitory for the first three quarters. The general dormitory noise and roommates with opposite schedules made getting sufficient sleep difficult. Since she likes to sew and design, she made a last-minute decision to attend another Seventh-day Adventist college on the West Coast that offered Interior Design
her second year. She stayed just 1 week before she panicked. The last-minute decision to attend meant there was insufficient time to put together adequate support. She returned to the relative safety of Andrews University where she had already developed a support system.

For the first quarter of her third year of college, she attended school in Europe. She describes this experience as “one big mistake.” Although she enjoyed many of the people there, the “school” part just didn’t work and completely clouded her experience. Internet correspondence to her parents includes statements like these:

“I don’t think I was meant to be happy. I think I was forever meant to be looking for somewhere else. Isn’t that sad?” (DF 70).

“I would rather fail the class than continue in complete boredom” (DF 70).

“This is just not for me and there is nothing I can do or anyone else can do about it” (DF 71).

“I’m so sorry I have wasted so much of your money. This is just not working” (DF 105).

She was unable to do all the writing assignments, although she was taking less than a full load. Teachers were unwilling to allow her to do any of her written assignments orally, plus at least one of the classes was requiring considerable writing about abstract subjects. Reluctant to be a burden to anyone, Shelley tried to manage on her own, despite offers from at least one teacher to help her and the availability of a tutor.

Shelley, who operates best in a predictable environment and who has difficulty taking care of other tasks in her life until her environment is “in order,” had
several roommates until she found one who seemed compatible as not only a room-sharer but also a friend. Although her life improved, by this time catching up academically seemed all but impossible. For a final three-page paper in the abstract history class, she was completely blank. One of her teachers had met with her frequently and tried to help her, but he felt she was not being cooperative and was unwilling to give her an "incomplete." In fact, she had given up on herself. She completed the quarter with a B+, a B-, and an F, the first she had ever received. For the first time, she realized that not all her academic dreams were realistic.

All in the Family

Because dyslexia generally runs in families, I was curious to know if she had other relatives with similar learning characteristics. Shelley assured me that several of her relatives have similar learning characteristics. All of these individuals would never have recognized this common thread had they not become aware of her learning challenges.

Shelley recalls her paternal grandmother saying that she never understood why school was so difficult. As a college student in the early 1940s, she thought that perhaps it was because she had to work so hard to pay her school tuition that she just never had time to study properly. But school and school-related assignments which required writing, spelling, and memorization were always a struggle. She also had trouble finding the "right" words (dysnomia), frequently backtracking, starting over, and saying "um" more than most. Her own family used to tease her about always getting ahead of herself.
After Shelley’s dyslexia was diagnosed, she realized that she had many of the same learning characteristics. So did Shelley’s dad, who admits he cannot remember his own telephone number. It seems to be a family “thing.”

Looking to the future, I was curious to know what Shelley would do when one of her children comes home from school and says, “I hate reading”? She didn’t miss a beat, but replied, laughing, “I think those Inca sacrifices were really dyslexic children” (IV, 38).

Support

Unlike the other LD students interviewed, Shelley has never been in special education classes during her academic career. This may be because she has spent her entire academic life in Seventh-day Adventist schools, usually too small to offer academic support to struggling students. For most of her elementary schooling she went to a small parochial school with fewer than 60 students and three full-time teachers.

In Grade 4 the teacher, recognizing that she was lagging behind in reading, spent extra time with her for about 10-15 minutes daily, trying to teach her the Alpha-phonics system. But it wasn’t until her music teacher pointed out that Shelley was still not reading notes after 5 years of private lessons that her parents decided to have her tested. After her dyslexia was diagnosed at the Andrews University Reading Center between fifth and sixth grade, she was tutored at the Reading Center for approximately a year. Between Grades 10 and 11 she also had some additional
reading tutoring. In addition, she has had other tutors for specific subject matter like biology.

In Grade 9 she was required to take remedial math, a course which she despised because it was the “dummy” math class for the people who couldn’t care less about school. All her friends were in regular algebra class. She describes her experience as follows:

I was totally humiliated to think that I needed to be in this loser class. The teacher was great, but the students were not like me at all. They didn’t want to be educated. Period. They skipped class, they didn’t pay attention, and they rarely did their homework. I went to great extremes to make sure that my friends wouldn’t find out that I was in this class, though when I look back at the experience I’m sure they knew. The math class was not far from the home ec room and, because I worked for the home ec teacher, I would “hide out” in that room or in a nearby bathroom until the halls had pretty much cleared. When all my friends were gone, I would emerge from wherever I was hiding and dart into the math room with all those people who could have cared less about math. It was mortifying. (IV, 58)

A similar scenario took place in college, though by this time in her life, it was not nearly so mortifying. Because she had had so many academic difficulties and was accepted on Academic Probation (not because of grade point average, but because she had minimal science/math subjects), her parents felt she should have some initiation into college by learning better study skills. They encouraged her to enroll in a College Success course, offered to incoming freshman as a support-style class for at-risk students. At the end of the first session, she realized she was not in the right place again. She was surrounded by students who lacked motivation. They didn’t go to their classes, attended reluctantly if they were there at all, and had many other priorities besides school on their agendas.
One of the class requirements involved getting teachers to sign a bright green piece of paper saying that the student had attended the days’ classes. Shelley, who conscientiously attended every class and faithfully did each assignment, was mortified. After a couple of weeks of this sort of humiliation, her College Success teacher said she didn’t have to get the signatures any more. Clearly, she was motivated to learn. She felt the class was a waste of time for her, but she got a few hours of academic credit for it.

Shelley qualifies what she considers “support.” Just calling a service support doesn’t necessarily make it that. For her, support seems to be a feeling of wanting to help, which is conveyed through empathy and relationship. As she says,

If the support people don’t believe in you and you’re always having to prove yourself to these people, that totally defeats support because then you are concentrating the whole time on winning these people over to your side, so then they can really support you. (IV, 25-26)

In Shelley’s case, her family has provided significant hands-on support throughout elementary and high school. This included reading to her, assisting with homework, and often reteaching at least some of the day’s work. Because they have moved away and are not as available to help, Shelley looks to friends who live in the area for assistance, especially with writing. Maintaining some of the same support system that she had in high school is one of the primary reasons why she keeps returning to Andrews. For example, a former high-school English teacher still helps her with writing, mostly with organization and editing. This same teacher helped her with algebra during her freshman year. Another former high-school teacher reads to her when she becomes bogged down with reading assignments.
At the same time, like any young person, Shelley wishes she were more on her own, not dependent on academic support from teachers and parents.

Something that I’d always wished for is that I could be more independent. I always wanted to do it [schoolwork] myself. And that’s kind of my personality. But, I don’t know whether it would have been better for me to deal with things on my own. . . . I used to always wish that I could have . . . I would have liked to have gone away during high school. I think that it’s probably good experience for people that do that. But I wasn’t able to do that. (IV, 12)

Shelley rarely uses the usual support centers, like the writing or math center. She admits to having tried only once or twice, but felt the experience was too intimidating and, therefore, unhelpful. A faculty member, Dr. W., whom Shelley named as being particularly helpful, explained that the centers were usually staffed by other students who are untrained. He says,

I imagine those kinds of centers are intimidating to any student. It’s hard to ask your fellow student for help. Now, the writing center is somewhat better in that it is sometimes staffed by, at least for short periods of time, by faculty and/or graduate students. But, with the teaching loads that we have, they [administration] have not made that financially possible. So, yes, it’s mostly students in both cases. (IV, 43)

Shelley would like the luxury of being able to walk through one door to receive help. Upon submission of appropriate documentation, there would be advocating, notification to teachers (upon student request) of a learning disability, and there would be both emotional and academic help as needed. Dr. W. agrees that the dream of one center would be helpful to LD students at Andrews. He says, “There would be a staff who had no other job, who understood, who had the training, and who would be continually engaged in the process of learning about the latest research on various aspects, the latest techniques that seem to work” (IV, 43).
Dr. W.'s interest in learning disabilities comes as a result of years of dealing with disabilities within his own family. The responsibility for teaching his brother was largely his. He recalled how awhile back his parents had made some inquiries to Andrews about some kind of program for a dyslexic brother.

They were talking at the time with the College of Technology... and asking about whether they had any programs for LD students and they, of course, were very encouraging about him coming.... But now, knowing what I do about the College of Technology, it is very beneficial for some types of students who want to go into those sorts of things. But if you don't have interest in... computer work or photography or hands-on technology of some kind, then you're out in the cold. (IV, 44)

Because Shelley spoke so enthusiastically about Dr. W., I was curious about how this teacher made sure that LD students fit into the class. He says he tries to make the LD student's place in class just as normal as possible because he's pretty certain that what that student wants is not to stand out from the other students.

Shelley takes her tests with everyone else so that is not a problem. Shelley often does her essays orally for the entire class, but that is not particularly noteworthy because other students do oral reports from time to time.

Shelley admits that she is slow to accept help, even when it is offered. When she was attending school abroad, her advisor urged her several times to go to the Tutorial Center, but for Shelley that was a near impossibility. Only in desperation, when life had gotten completely unmanageable, did she finally go. To her surprise, the experience was a good one. She wrote:

Last night I went to the Tutorial Center for the first time. [X] read to me for about 45 minutes. What was the best was that she started off by telling me that her mother read books onto tape for her brother. Isn’t that nice of her to say? Kind of like she understands and doesn’t think I am a freak. (DF 75)
Stress Producers

School-related stress and/or anxiety is the key accompanying characteristic of dyslexia. Anxiety accompanies the out-of-control feelings that many LD students have. Often frustrated and misunderstood, learning disabled students become angry and/or withdrawn. Shelley readily confesses that school stress has been pretty ongoing, and she can tell when she’s getting stressed. She says, “It starts . . . shrinking my world. When I’m not stressed, my world is pretty big, but when I’m stressed I start worrying about less and less of the outside things and my whole life becomes consumed with . . . the assignment or whatever” (IV, 32).

For Shelley the most stress comes from an assignment that she does not understand. Also, meeting with the teacher of each new class is difficult and uncertain because she never knows whether a teacher will be understanding and helpful or be rigid and uncompromising. For example, last quarter she was very stressed out at the beginning trying to get classes organized and figuring out a different plan to get the work completed because she wasn’t sure whether the new teachers involved were going to be helpful.

Not understanding the assignment or dealing with abstract material is another stress producer. Teachers who give examples, handouts, and clearly outline what they are expecting are most appreciated. For example, one of the most difficult assignments she did one quarter was an annotated bibliography. She had never done one before and didn’t understand what was required. As she explains, the teacher could have given an example of one, talked about it in class, and maybe even broken down the assignment into smaller components, instead of making it sound so onerous.
A steady exercise routine and spending time with friends, particularly laughing with them, are the two principle ways that Shelley deals with stress. At Andrews, just about anything done with friends, though, adds balance to her life whether it’s going to the beach, getting ice cream, having supper together, or just running errands with them. Friends are what make life worth living for Shelley and help her to forget about the stress that school causes.

Teachers

Not surprisingly, Shelley is most frustrated by teachers who are unwilling to help her or who don’t seem to believe that her learning difficulties are real, “like, are you really what you say you are?” (IV, 30). She is frustrated when “they think I’m trying to pull the wool over their eyes” (IV, 30), as though they think she just is being lazy and doesn’t want to write papers or long essay exams for them. They seem to have no idea the long hours she puts in, when minor accommodations would make such a difference.

Talking with teachers is never easy. An e-mail excerpt details this:

I talked to Dr. Z. this afternoon. I am not quite sure how that went except I didn’t feel good after it. He told me that he is sure that if I just try harder . . . I can get it. And he knows I am an intelligent person but . . . some of us [are] just lovely people and not the school type. (DF 73)

Teachers willing to make even minor changes in their requirements make all the difference in the world for Shelley. For example, in one literature class she had extreme difficulty writing the essay tests, largely because it included a lot of detail and spelling had to be perfect. She felt she knew the material globally but was unable to write it down in satisfactory form. After talking with the instructor, he agreed to let
her talk her answers into a tape recorder, while another teacher proctored the test. Her grade changed dramatically from an F to an A-.

Another class, a Bible class, required significant amounts of memorization. Shelley knew this would never work for her and asked the teacher if there were not something else that she could do in place of the required memorization. He readily agreed, asking her instead to read and review a book that he had nearly completed writing. Both Shelley and the teacher felt that this was a worthwhile experience for both of them. He appreciated her insightful comments, and she was much less anxious about having to remember specific memory texts.

Shelley is the first to admit that occasionally having her do her tests orally takes more time and is an inconvenience to the teacher. But for her it makes a significant difference. And, as her mother says, “Isn’t that what good teaching is? Making it possible for all students to be successful?” (IV, p. 57)

A recent 3-month experience of teaching herself provided Shelley with a real eye-opener to the power and flexibility that teachers really have. Like many students, she had the impression that all assignments were fixed items that were absolutely necessary to a student’s learning. She had never really stopped to think that it is the teacher who really determines what the assignment is all about. As she says, “It all depends on the teacher. I mean, a teacher can give or take back any assignment they please. And so it’s not set in stone . . . [although] some teachers would love you to think that it were” (IV, 29).

Other teachers have been willing to accommodate, but have made it plain that this probably isn’t “fair” to do this. Extending this line of thought, Shelley can see
great lines of students waiting for special consideration, except she doubts that very
many would be doing that; even she doesn’t look forward to asking for help or
accommodation and would give anything not to have to seek accommodation, to be
able to function like the majority of students.

Shelley likes to feel that a teacher really wants to get to know his or her
students. Some teachers actively try to create a sense of distance . . . “like ‘please
worship me’ attitude,” but Shelley prefers to feel “like the teacher’s on your side. It’s
nice to think that people hope the best for you and help you do your best instead of
trying to rip you down so they look higher” (IV, 37). What she seems to be saying is
that the relationship she has with the teacher may affect her stress level almost as
much as the subject matter.

Anxiety understandably decreases when teachers are willing to accommodate
her learning needs by offering alternate testing and/or assignments. Requiring fewer
long papers and accepting shorter papers, allowing Shelley to answer essay questions
in a tape recorder rather than writing, cutting down on required memory work and
substituting with more global questions seem to lower her stress level. Shelley has
some definite thoughts of her own on this subject: “If I was ever to be a teacher . . . I
would not be a distant, godlike creature–unapproachable–and sitting on my special
throne with a rod of lightening to shoot down my poor students” (DF 75).

Shelley has little use for teachers who are preoccupied with testing fairness.
She describes a conversation with a Bible teacher who had been alerted to her
dyslexia:
I had a talk with my Bible teacher this morning. I am afraid he doesn’t know much. Doubt if he ever heard of dyslexia before he met me. He is concerned with testing me fairly. I think “rigorous” was the word he used. He wants to test me differently but still keep it rigorous. That is typical too of someone who knows nothing of dyslexia. Afraid he will have to lower his standards when that’s the last thing he ought to be concerned with. (DF 103)

Self-perception

Shelley describes herself as having a good time socially in college. Unlike high school, where she felt she had to study all the time so she didn’t have time to develop much in the way of friendships (IV, 34), her social life in college seems to be more balanced. She considers herself to be a loyal and devoted friend who dedicates her total attention to her friends (IV, 36). She describes herself as being more of a “floater” who is a member of several social groups, rather than just being dedicated to one small group of friends.

One of the side affects of dyslexia is that students need significantly more rest than others do. Regular and appropriate amounts of sleep are very important. But roommates don’t always appreciate people who go to sleep “early.” An e-mail communication describes this tension: “I don’t think my roommates like it very much when I go to bed at 11 p.m. . . . I could hear them muttering about it last night.” Shelley adds in a hurt tone, “It is GREAT to feel loved where you are. That is all I will say” (DF 72).

There are other times when friends seem to be in short supply, when isolation seems to have taken over. She writes: “I don’t think I was meant to be happy. I think I was forever meant to be looking for somewhere else. Isn’t that sad? I’m trying to
think of where I have been happy and what made me that way. . . . I wonder what I am doing wrong here” (DF 70).

Writing

Shelley surprised herself during her first year of university. In both her English Composition classes she received A’s, a first for her. Because the classes were highly structured, set-by-step, in a relaxed atmosphere, Shelley felt that she could be successful. Because most of the writing was concrete and reflective, based on her own experience, she was able to handle the material without significant difficulty. Also, the papers were only about 1,000-1,500 words long.

But writing longer papers—especially when they are more abstract—continues to torment Shelley. Occasionally teachers will give her shorter assignments which are helpful only if the subject matter is concrete. An e-mail to her parents explains her thoughts when a teacher who didn’t believe learning disabilities existed gave her a writing assignment: “He told me that he thought that I was a good ‘talker’ and that writing is just like talking on paper so why should paper writing be hard for me” (DF 73).

For one of her essays, Shelley dictated while someone else typed. When she handed the paper in to her teacher he was “very surprised” even “shocked” when she told him how she had gotten her essay done. He asked her for a detailed description of how she had done it: “I think at first he thought [the typist] had done it for me. Finally he said, ‘You have a huge amount of information in your head and you don’t really want to write it down but you can if you have to.’” She concludes: “So I think that he
thinks I just don’t want to write it down. She also explained to him how she and
another teacher at a different university occasionally did projects” (DF 80).

Dr. Z. took special note of that fact, that I had the information in my head and just
needed to have a one-word prompt sometimes. I explained it to him as if I had
taken a trip to the seaside and when I got back my grandmother met me at the
station. At first I had about 15 minutes worth of the first things to tell her. Then
she asked me if I had taken a boat ride. And then that sparked 10 more minutes
and then she asked about a special beach museum. And then I told her all about
that. He seemed very interested in that little story. (DF 80)

An examination of a required history essay indicates many difficulties typical
of students with language processing disorders. The most obvious is spelling
problems, particularly when spell checkers don’t catch the errors: “form” for “from,”
“stile” for “style,” and “their, there, and they’re” are used interchangeably. One
curious habit is the way Shelley consistently separates compound words (e.g. my self,
when ever). Apostrophes are non-existent, and the occasional run-on sentence
appears. Writing reflectively or about concrete subjects works fairly well for Shelley
because there is already a structure in place. Shelley uses sources frequently, but
clearly is unsure of the correct “form” these sources should take. Because the paper
had a linear aspect to it, she admits that the history paper was easier to do than most.

Summary

Success for Shelley has been learning to self-advocate. Progressively during
her college experience she has learned to approach teachers, to explain the
accommodation she needs and why she needs it. Although pessimistic when she first
approaches a teacher, once she senses that they are willing to be helpful, she works
extraordinarily hard to justify their “faith” in her. She wants to be successful, to show
them that their flexibility was well placed. This “I want to show you” attitude drives her to succeed.

Accepting her learning disability has been an important part of her maturing experience in college also. Shelley has moved beyond the “I can ignore it” stage and is learning that accommodation will be necessary when certain requirements, like long papers and memorization of complex vocabulary, are required. Negotiating early with the teacher about time requirements and the possibility of smaller assignments, with some oral, is becoming part of her early-semester routine.

She tends to worry over assignments she doesn’t understand until they become major blocks in her mind. Taking the initiative to discover exactly what the teacher wants is a skill Shelley is learning, but sometimes she hesitates when she senses potential teacher disapproval.

Shelley tires of having to negotiate with each teacher, however. She feels she has to educate each one about her learning disability and wishes teachers were more informed. She also would love to have support coming from one office, which would actively help her navigate academia. Knowing which teachers to avoid and knowing that someone would be able to help her when her own support system is unavailable would all help her relax and enjoy college more. Sometimes she just needs someone to talk to who understands learning disabilities. Sometimes she needs someone to understand how much energy it takes to remember which is her right hand.
CHAPTER 7

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Winnie-the-Pooh sat down at the foot of the tree, put his head between his paws and began to think. First of all he said to himself: “That buzzing-noise means something. You don’t get a buzzing-noise like that, just buzzing and buzzing, without its meaning something.”

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

Introduction

I have examined the lives of four learning disabled college who will graduate within a year. Like Winnie-the-Pooh, I hear some buzzing which I believe points to explanations of how these students managed college.

Because of my interest and involvement with LD college students as both a parent and teacher, I began with some general questions that, through my own experience and reading, I wished to investigate further. In this chapter I make connections between the themes that emerge from the study and the literature and discuss the similarities and differences. Tables of supporting quotations from the participants are included with each theme.

Although these four students have learning disabilities, they are close to successfully completing their college education. Researchers have studied how LD adults manage to be successful in their work (Gerber et al., 1992). Several studies examined life perspectives of LD adults (Gerber & Reiff, 1991; Murphy, 1992) and
discussed indications for success in the LD young adult's life generally. One study (Spekman et al., 1992), which studies success in the lives of young LD adults, mentions characteristics such as a realistic adaptation to life events, using appropriate goal setting and goal directedness. Risk and resilience have been studied in connection with university students (Miller, 1997) and adults with learning disabilities (Spekman, Herman, & Vogel, 1993).

As I examined the literature and talked with the informants, a picture began to develop regarding their successful management of college. Understandably, variations exist amongst the informants. On the whole, however, significant brush strokes from their experience begin to stand out amidst their educational picture.

*Understanding and Accepting a Learning Disability*

Understanding how one learns is empowerment for anyone, but appears to be essential for the learning disabled student. Studies confirm that the more informed LD students are about their learning disability, the more likely they are to ask for help when necessary (Allard et al., 1987; Spekman et al., 1992; Vogel, Hruby, & Adelman, 1993). Self-awareness acts as a protective factor in helping the LD person to manage life, as is acceptance of one's particular learning foibles (Morrison & Cosden, 1997). Early studies indicated that LD students who did not push beyond passivity and denial and who lacked an understanding of their learning disability were more likely to flounder (Seligman, 1975).

Learning disabilities are most pronounced within an academic environment, where weaknesses are magnified. After all, according to Gerber and Reiff (1991), "it
was the educational system that played the major role in making learning difficult” (p. 139). Also, it is because they are specific, rather than pervasive, that learning disabilities interfere mostly with a student’s academic progress (Padget, 1998). Because school uses primarily the venues of reading and writing for learning, the two weakest areas of the dyslexic student, these weaknesses become critical deficits, even roadblocks. In all four cases, reading and writing struggles, despite years of remediation in all cases, were cited as ongoing nemeses, with each student acutely aware of the perpetual effort to try to keep up with reading and writing assignments.

The degree of self-understanding varied amongst the informants. Wendy could best articulate her learning disability, explaining in both “technical” language and lay terms her language processing, including auditory discrimination weakness, and processing difficulty. She also explained more concretely that what she hears “gets scrambled up by the time it goes to my brain” (II, 1). Although the other three students didn’t have a technical vocabulary to use in describing their disability, descriptors like “difficulty reading and writing,” “slow reading,” “slower processing,” “poor spelling,” “difficulty with organization,” and “trouble with abstract ideas” all entered the conversations. Anna seemed most puzzled and least conversant about her LD, although she had no questions about the reality of learning differently from her peers. Occasionally, in the midst of our conversations, she wondered aloud if learning disabilities really exist.

It is noteworthy that LD students may have a greater sense of academic self-awareness than their peers. They often understand not only their strengths and weaknesses, but also the academic circumstances required for their own success.
better than their non-LD peers (Stage & Milne, 1996). This seems to be the case among all four subjects (see Table 1), who readily admitted that they were slow readers and processors. Several had difficulties with specialized vocabulary and, for Anna and Wendy, this difficulty resulted in a change of major. For Amy and Shelley, the specialized vocabulary at least steered them away from certain fields. But all were keenly aware of the circumstances under which they could be successful.

All four found academic writing to be “a nightmare,” though Wendy and Shelley enjoy reflective writing, journal regularly, and like to experiment with creative writing. The rigors of academic writing, which requires careful organization, synthesis, and finding information outside one’s self, however, proved extraordinarily difficult for all four students, resulting in considerable anguish. All the students required someone to help them write academic papers. For Anna, a friend who did preliminary research abbreviated the amount of reading needing to be done. Later, this same friend helped with editing and proofing. Amy relied heavily on a tutor for help with organization and proofing, and Wendy depended on the Writing Center for extensive help in editing and proofing, although she had figured out an organizational system of rearranging colored cards. Shelley lobbied to do as many oral essays as possible. When writing was required, she depended on a mentor for assistance with organization and synthesis, or dictated the information to a typist.

Anna, Wendy, and Shelley enjoyed class discussions and thrived when they could do at least some of their essays or tests orally, allowing them to concentrate on ideas instead of production. Two mentioned that they found abstract concepts
difficult. Whenever students had a choice, they looked for classes where they could depend on their oral skills and which required less writing.

Table 1

**Understanding and Accepting a Learning Disability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
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<tr>
<td>I have auditory discrimination [difficulty]. The spelling is poor. The writing is poor . . . And I'll have to edit a paper maybe five times before I print it out and give it to a teacher. If I don't . . . they can't even understand it. I'm a very slow reader. I can do better orally than I can reading out loud or writing it and handing it in to the teacher.</td>
<td>I don't really have a good understanding [of my LD] because I wasn't really told what was going on half the time. I think it has something to do with the processing speed . . . takes a little longer . . . also just pure boredom. I wish someone [could do] a brain dissection and could pinpoint and say, &quot;Well, there's a red block right there, and that's what's blocking it.&quot; I can't do multiple choice.</td>
<td>Writing for me is very disorganized . . . I also have grammar problems and spelling, and my vocabulary is poor. I also take medication to help me concentrate and remember things. Even a year ago I wouldn't have considered talking to anyone [about my LD]. I wouldn't even have gone to my parents because they wouldn't understand.</td>
<td>What I'm good at, I'm very good at. What I'm bad at, I'm very bad at. School work seemed to take me a lot longer. [I have] difficulty with writing and reading. I need cueing or prompting and then I can remember.</td>
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The College Experience

Making College Work

All four students attended college because they wanted to. Their high-school peers were progressing to college, two students had parents with college degrees, and all four students felt that a college degree was an essential part of life preparation that they wanted to experience. They also indicated they enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of a college environment.

For many students, the shift from high school to higher education is one from dependence to independence. For college students with LD, independence comes more slowly. Reiff (2001) suggests that the college setting places students with LD under considerable pressure since they must adapt to a new environment, plus develop coping strategies while learning to rely less on parents and built-in high-school support systems. Transitioning from the more closely monitored world of high school to the wide open spaces of college is difficult for LD students, where the number of hours of classroom instructional time is significantly diminished. In college more time is often spent outside of class on school-related work, including independent study (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992). Also, unlike high school where accommodations are normally built into the program for students with LD, college students must be more aggressive in self-advocacy. Skills in self-advocating and expressing needs to others, particularly teachers, are vital for survival, but usually require practice.

York University students Amy and Anna both experienced severe difficulty academically during their first year. Anna, operating through Atkinson College, a
program geared to part-time adult students, particularly found the university setting a challenge. Although she already had a 2-year college diploma in hand, she missed the close mentoring of her community college LD counselor, whom she describes as being very approachable and willing to help her in any way possible. Whatever accommodations she asked for, he worked to get them. Although accepted at Atkinson through the LD program, she did not resonate with her counselor there. She felt he was unwilling to allow any accommodations besides extra time on tests. This rigidity, plus her sheer tiredness with having to cope academically, seems to have soured much of her experience. She dropped out after failing her first university class. A half year went by before she found the courage to try again.

For Amy, who had survived high school through grit and determination outside the umbrella of special education, university turned out to be more than she bargained for. It wasn’t until a friend mentioned the university’s LDP that she decided to take action. The real panic that she would be asked to leave due to poor grades precipitated what seems to be the first real initiative on her part toward active problem solving. Until then, she had doggedly studied to get through high school and had passively accepted that she was who she was—to the point of “forgetting” that she had spent her entire elementary years in special education. It was Amy’s determination to get help that precipitated the turn-around in her educational experience. Once she began operating under the umbrella of the LDP she experienced success, both academically and affectively, and felt that someone understood her. As her self-understanding has increased, so has her self-confidence (see Table 2).
Table 2

*The College Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
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<td>My mother . . . called the professor and the head of that department . . . and let them be aware of my legal rights, they were very helpful with her. But as soon as they got off the phone, it was like I got the blunt end of the deal. When the dyslexic loses momentum, the dyslexic loses the battle. . . It's like the window of opportunity is much more fragile. . . Much care should be given to not missing a window of opportunity—especially during these college years. Because they drop out and do whatever they can do to make a living . . . and they don't finish.</td>
<td>You come from high school . . . and you go to college, and you don't get anything. You tend to get a little bit freaked out because you don’t have these supports. It's basically at the university it's really survival of the fittest sort of attitude. When you’ve been in special education for as long as I have, you have dependency issues in education. They push you out to university and say, “It’s up to you now to do what you want,” which is fine, but you might need somebody to hold your hand for the first month, just to see.</td>
<td>Although people said I couldn’t do it, I knew I could. . . People kept on feeding me negative thoughts, just criticized so . . . you just have to put your foot down. [My first year in university] was a big shock to me because it’s so different from high school. No one holds your hand and guides you anywhere.</td>
<td>College is much better than high school. . . I can do it fine. I would rather fail the class than continue in complete boredom. Before this afternoon, I was just starting to feel like I could manage here [at college], but I don’t think it is going to work now.</td>
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Both Wendy and Shelley have had yo-yo experiences in college. Wendy, arriving from a public college which actively supported LD students through its LD program, felt lost at Andrews. Negotiations have had to be made directly with teachers, with varying results. For both girls, this need to personally negotiate has caused considerable apprehension. Both have used support from mentors, some teachers, and their own families. No academic support system specifically for LD students existed. Both students indicate that an office specifically to support LD students would have gone a long way toward easing their stress levels, particularly during the first 2 years of their college experience. Because the support issue is so important to students with LD, it will be discussed more in its own separate category. In addition, Wendy has had ongoing problems with advisement and is currently working with her third advisor in 4 years.

Emotional Stability and Coping Strategies

Self-perception

After observing how easily their classmates managed reading and writing skills, all four recognized in first grade that they functioned differently. In addition, all felt that other students frequently ostracized them and that their teachers found them difficult and time consuming. Being unable to function in the same way as other students becomes isolating, which in turn reinforces negative thoughts about themselves.

The way one views and feels about one’s self is important. Students with learning disabilities who understand and accept their disabilities are more likely to
have a more positive sense of self (Gerber & Reiff, 1991; Morrison & Cosden, 1997). Edward DeBono (1976) suggests that emotions are more important than anything else in the art of thinking and learning. This idea of emotions affecting learning was relatively new two decades ago, when educators still thought that learning disabilities could be “cured” and little thought was given to the affective side of learning. Studies of the effects of learning disabilities on self-esteem have yielded conflicting results. Some studies of students with LD have found that they have lower self-esteem than non-LD (Jarvis & Justice, 1992; Saracoglu et al., 1989; Wright & Stimmel, 1984) and that low self-esteem, which is already largely in place by third grade (Chapman, 1988), will persist throughout the school years. Not all studies across-the-board found lowered self-esteem results, however. Cosden and McNamara (1997) determined that although LD college students had lower grades, test scores, and perceptions of their scholastic and intellectual abilities than non-LDs, they did not differ in their perceptions of global self-worth. Outside of the classroom, they viewed themselves to be just as worthwhile as the next student. What is encouraging is that studies suggest that self-perceptions are not fixed attributes, but can change because of new experiences (Rutter, 1987). Amy most dramatically indicates this change that can occur. She now thinks of her learning disability as a strength (III, 53) and sees herself as a strong person capable of achieving much (see Table 3).

Throughout our conversations, I became increasingly more conscious of the connection between perceptions of well-being and being in control of their lives. In a study of successful LD adults, Gerber et al. (1992) identified control as the key to success among LD adults who “spent their lives deciding and learning how to
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Perception</th>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
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<td>I'd say I try really hard. I push myself really hard.</td>
<td>I used to cry all the time when I came home from school. Just saying, &quot;I'm not normal, I'm not normal... Other children are better than I am... Why am I so stupid?&quot;</td>
<td>I think the thing that I do [best] is working around stuff. I am like an expert at solving problems.</td>
<td>[Dyslexia] kind of pushed me into overdeveloping sides of my personality, like trying to be humorous sometimes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I won't kill myself if I don’t get an A. And I don’t beat myself up if I get a C... but I want to achieve and I want to get good grades... Sometimes it doesn’t happen... I'll just pick myself up and go on to something else.</td>
<td>It’s hard to be assertive when you don’t have the emotional foundation to be. I’m definitely an arts person. I’m really good at improvising... That's one of the frameworks of drama.</td>
<td>I work like a machine.</td>
<td>I think [my friends] see me as a very strong person who doesn’t put up with other people’s whatever. I can pretty much get through... any difficult situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When I get a good grade, it makes me feel good... It makes up for all those years when [I] haven’t.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Something that I’d always wished for is [to be more independent... And that’s kind of my personality.</td>
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take control of their existence" (p. 479). For Amy, in particular, getting control of her life has been a significant benchmark. It was her psychologist in York University's LDP who gave her control of her life so that she feels that she understands her learning disability "in every aspect" (III, 48).

All four students were quick to acknowledge that academically they had areas of significant weakness. As Shelley was quick to point out, “What I am good at, I’m very good at. What I’m bad at, I’m very bad at” (IV, 1). These extreme highs and lows are the perpetual foe of LD students in school settings. Though they were ready to acknowledge challenges within the academic world, all four were also aware of
past negative baggage. All have been to counselors and, as Amy said simply, “I have learned to let go of negative feelings of the past” (III, 9).

For each of the informants, the school experience had become increasingly more positive (though not necessarily easier) as she progressed up the academic ladder. This may largely have been the result of significant mentors who by now were lending a hand as these students negotiated academia. Werner (1993) found that adolescents with positive self-perceptions always had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally. This often was support from parent or family member or occasionally an unrelated adult from an organization (such as church or school).

Stress

It is sensible that in a society where literacy skills are highly valued, students with learning disabilities may be more vulnerable to emotional problems than their non-LD counterparts (Morrison & Cosden, 1997). All four subjects spoke of having to cope with stress due to academic difficulties, of the ensuing fatigue that accompanies stress, and of needing more sleep than their peers. All had devised ways to get the sleep they needed. For example, both Wendy and Shelley lived off-campus, Wendy by herself and Shelley in a home with one other adult who was often away. According to Cronin (1994, p. 133), fatigue is common among dyslexics, “who spend every waking hour ‘on guard’ in an attempt to structure their environment.” Despite extensive remediation, decoding continues to be laborious and energy-sapping for
dyslexics all of their lives (Shaywitz, 1996). Continually processing language, then, becomes tiring, if not exhausting (see Table 4).

Stress is also related to the negative personal baggage about school which LD students carry. Three of the four students told stories of “hiding out” during elementary or high-school years to avoid being seen going to special education or remedial classes. Those memories are still vividly recalled. Barga (1996) relates similar stories of students who went to great extremes to keep their “differentness” from their classmates. All four students readily acknowledge that they learn differently and, depending on the subject matter and how the class is taught, may or may not need some accommodations. Although each student relates differently to this need, all appear to have significant apprehension surrounding each new teacher they encounter. They are anxious until they have established an equilibrium of “control” between themselves, the subject matter, and the teacher. A support system within the university to help students cope with this anxiety and to alert LD students as to faculty to avoid either because of teaching style or attitude would alleviate some of this stress.

Gregg and Ferri (1998) point out that researchers are now beginning to find that the personality profiles of LD students in college seem to be different from those of college students without LD. Both short- and long-term stress leading to anxiety have been well-documented (Hoy et al., 1997). Persons stressed over long periods of time can become either hypersensitive or insensitive to their surroundings, conditions affecting both vigilance and attentional competencies (Grinspoon & Bakalor, 1991, cited in Gregg & Ferri, 1998).
### School-Related Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worship or prayer is the main thing that helps me deal with stress.</td>
<td>I get enormous amounts of stress. And then, when I have enormous amounts of stress, my motivation level goes down to like below 40, and I don’t do anything. I sit there, and I sit there, and I just stew.</td>
<td>I try to... work very hard during the week days and then weekends I just take off, and I’m just a wreck. No class is comfortable for me. Every class is hard.</td>
<td>School’s pretty stressful... it starts kind of shrinking my world... When I’m stressed I start worrying about less and less of the outside things and my whole life becomes consumed with... the assignment or whatever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get very nervous when I know that there’s a timed test.</td>
<td>My papers cause me a great amount of anxiety... and pressure.</td>
<td>I’m very uptight about everything... every little thing because I want to do so well, and I try to make sure that things won’t go wrong... Just being stressed about every little thing tends to create more stress... You get used to it... Stress is something that I feel I should have.</td>
<td>If I have a good time, you know [with my friends]... we’re laughing a lot. That’s stress relieving. When I get too much [school work], I can’t do it all. And then... my mind goes blank and I can’t do anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It seems like actually the traits of dyslexia... when I’m stressed out are worse.</td>
<td>It takes me a lot longer to do stuff and I have to go over things sometimes I don’t want to go over and I get tired a lot.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I require... 8 to 9 hours of sleep... for my brain to really relax and kind of have down time.</td>
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</table>

Although stress and anxiety were significant and persistent during the lives of each of the informants, so too was an ability to rise out of the ashes and try again. All four students spoke of high stress due to failing classes and of feeling overwhelmed and defeated by poor grades, despite having studied harder than their peers whose grades were superior. In spite of these repeated disappointments in performance, all four students exhibited spirit. They were not interested in giving up. This unquenchable spirit was identified by Beardslee (1989, p. 267) as resilience, or an
“unusually good adaptation in face of severe stress” and a vital ingredient for successful adults with LD (Spekman et al., 1993).

Despite unpleasantness, then, students were generally optimistic about the future. Although there are, no doubt, dark moments, during our conversations each student was more often optimistic and hopeful. Even during emotionally intense stories, several students indicated that they could step outside of the situation with humor and a positive perspective. Some wounds persist. Anna appeared to have experienced considerable trauma during her elementary school years which still causes considerable pain, but she is quick to point out that these challenging experiences will make her a more understanding and caring teacher.

**Relationships**

All four girls are grateful for their college friends (see Table 5). Three of the informants remember excruciatingly friendless elementary years when they felt rejected by and isolated from their non-LD peers. Perhaps it is because of their formerly friendless days that they place high value on their current friends who provide a normalcy that their academic environment does not. Meeting with friends outside academic settings creates a level playing field and serves as a stress reliever, where LD students can be themselves using oral language and humor, their strong suits (Murphy, 1992).

Anna, Wendy, and Shelley say they have lots of friends, are good with people, and feel both comfortable and confident in social situations. Anna especially revels in
Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wendy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lots of friends. I'm a social bug . . . lots of friends in many different cultural groups . . . I like to do a lot of different stuff, so I am always out and doing things and visiting people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>They'll either say that I am very classy, or they feel intimidated by me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I go out with a guy on a date . . . I just get very bored by the conversation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna . . . wasn't going to spend any of her time with people who were not going to be achieving something in their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People always really like me, whether I want them to or not.</td>
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</table>
having an audience, says that people usually like her whether she wants them to or not, and admits she can melt into almost any social situation. Although Amy socializes with friends on weekends as a way to forget about academics, she does not have any close friends. She muses that when she should have been developing relationships she didn’t have the confidence and now that she is reconciled about having a learning disability she may drive people away because she *likes* to talk and educate people about learning disabilities. At the same time, she yearns for friends and observes that she may tend to shut people out because she fears a lack of acceptance.

Shelley, too, tends to become uneasy and backs away from friends who start to inquire about why she is so stressed about classes. As she explains, “When it [dyslexia] comes up or people start wondering what’s going on . . . then it probably kind of gets in the way of being friends because then I . . . start shutting off doors for them to question me” (IV, 33). That door-shutting usually means withdrawing. Shelley wishes she had some friends with whom she could talk light-heartedly about dyslexia because then it wouldn’t overwhelm her so frequently.

Peers were found to play an important role in the functioning of students with LD. Cosden and McNamara (1997) indicate that LD students reported higher levels of support from friends in terms of social acceptance than non-LD students. This seems to fly in the face of other literature which indicates that LD students at all grade levels often misread social cues and therefore have problems with their social skills and relationships (Jarvis & Justice, 1992; Vogel & Forness, 1992). For Wendy, Shelley, and Anna, this simply was not the case.
Support Systems

Teachers

According to Shaywitz (1998), "The management of dyslexia in students in college is based on accommodation rather than remediation" (p. 311). Either directly or indirectly, most of this accommodation comes from teachers. Although all the students shared stories of unsympathetic college teachers, there were just as many heartening accounts of teachers willing to accommodate.

Attitudes are changing from the Minner and Prater (1984) study which found that identifying LD students resulted in university instructors viewing the students negatively. The same study indicated that faculty members were pessimistic about LD students’ abilities and their own abilities to work with them. Several years later Matthews, Anderson and Skolnick (1987) found that university faculty were generally willing to accommodate by extending test time and deadlines for class projects as well as allow students to respond orally to essay questions. However, there was more reluctance to allow extra credit or alternate assignments, proofreading errors, or course substitution. Houck, Asselin, Troutman, and Arrington (1992) found faculty willing to make course-related accommodations for LD students and believed that these accommodations were fair. Although LD students saw faculty as being unfamiliar with referral procedures, they did feel that teachers were generally sensitive to their special needs. By this time teachers also felt strongly that LD students were able to complete university. See Table 6.

Often in our conversations, students expressed a longing for college teachers who knew more about learning disabilities. Having to educate each teacher regarding
Table 6

Experiences with College Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
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<tr>
<td>The professors . . . most all of them want to see documentation. They think I am lying to them . . . like I’m trying to pull a fast one.</td>
<td>The [good] prof is . . . really into discussion and there is no right or wrong answer; and he’s very open minded. . . . He doesn’t use words like huge vocab . . . he’s really relaxed. . . . really open to what students have to say.</td>
<td>When I got them to sign exam forms, the two professors said, “If you need any help, just come to me. . . . The only bad thing is, now they know me. They always pick on me, you know. . . . I’m just kidding.</td>
<td>It was nice not to have to educate the teacher . . . because he already knew [about dyslexia].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At [the state college I attended] I never had a problem with a professor. I never had to say . . . “Legally this is what I am entitled to.”</td>
<td>His notes are very structured and easy [to follow]. . . . You can tell that he enjoys teaching the course.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. S. . . . has been kind of a model of what every teacher ought to be . . . totally changing the class around . . . so it will work for me. So I can do it . . . without making it “easier.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>After dealing with a lot of professors and having some negative experiences, I kind of try to avoid that. . . . Whatever they want, I’ll try to work with them . . . rather than what I want.</td>
<td>There are profs who have been in the business for years. . . . They are meant to teach . . . 400 level graduate courses. Their vocabulary and their thoughts are way off the scale. My Intro. to Sociology was just God-awful.</td>
<td>[I feel uncomfortable] when I don’t know the teacher and the teacher is trying to create this kind of distance . . . like “please worship me” attitude.</td>
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<tr>
<td>To be successful in college, you need to have at least one teacher that you really like and that really helps you.</td>
<td>The prof . . . was extremely intimidating. . . . He talked so fast.</td>
<td>[At Andrews, I’d like to see] aggressive teachers who see that my name is on their class list—in italics, or something. They . . . talk to me, they lay out all these wonderful possibilities of what they’d like to do for me.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[When I have] problems with a class, a lot of professors even pray with me. They take the time to make sure that I understand. I feel like they actually care about my . . . career.</td>
<td>Why shouldn’t professors take a . . . course on how to teach? You know they need one.</td>
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a specific disability is time consuming and demoralizing, particularly if the teacher appears to be skeptical. One of the reasons Shelley chose her major was because her advisor had previous experience with and already understood dyslexia. She was one of the first teachers that Shelley did not have to educate. A need exists for ongoing education of college faculty regarding best teaching practices and learning disabilities. Teachers who teach as though they have learning disabled students in their classroom will be more effective teachers. Several of the teachers identified as “helpful” said they would like the university to educate them regarding learning disabilities.

It is encouraging and worthwhile to note that all but one student were able to identify a number of helpful college instructors. Because teacher relationships are so important to LD students’ success in college (Vogel & Adelman, 1990), I asked each student to identify at least one teacher who had been particularly helpful. See Table 7.

It is noteworthy that Amy was unable to identify even one university teacher who had been “helpful.” Further questioning about teachers in elementary and secondary school indicated that not one teacher stood out in her mind as being helpful. This may have contributed to her lack of interest in getting to know teachers personally, although no doubt other factors including university class size contributed to her anonymity. The only academically helpful person Amy could identify throughout her entire educational experience was a peer tutor to whom she had been assigned after contacting the York LDP.

Of equal interest is the fact that Amy did not see teachers particularly negatively either. She recounted one negative experience which she remembered only after some prodding, but generally teachers were neutral, neither helpful nor
Table 7

**Composite Characteristics of Helpful Teachers**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>States orally and writes a brief outline of what will be accomplished during the class period. Clear expectations of the finished product. Summarizes occasionally during the class period. Uses a variety of ways to assist in learning (visual aids, audio, hands-on). Allows the student to do some essays/exams orally or taped. Allows additional time on examinations, gives sample tests. Flexible about assignment deadlines. Willing to give incompletes. Allows the student to &quot;shine&quot; in her own way (e.g., giving an oral report in class instead of a written essay). Creates alternate assignments. Creates extra credit assignments. Finds &quot;breakdown&quot; point in student’s learning. Able to adapt to student’s needs without compromising evaluation process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Willing to accommodate and to see that accommodation as necessary to the student’s well-being, not an act of charity. Willing to help problem solve without “dumbing down” the course. Understands that “fairness” is about creating a level playing field so the LD student can experience success in his/her own way. Is moderately informed about learning disabilities. Takes student concerns seriously. As appropriate, prays with student. Is non-hierarchical and informal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Is interested in and affirms the student as a person, not just as a student with an LD. Is willing to invest in a personal relationship to the extent that the LD student feels comfortable in seeking help.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
unhelpful. This may be because Amy appears to see herself as fighting against "it" (her learning disability) by herself. Not one to level blame at anyone else, she has turned toward the enemy within. This may be why she had come to feel that there was no hope for her future—until a psychologist redirected her sights.

Family

All families but one appear to have accepted their daughters' learning disability. Instead of continuing to question whether there really is a learning disability, three of the four families have been in problem-solving mode for many years. The exception seems to be Amy's family who, until about a year ago, appeared to have taken the position that, if they ignored Amy's problems, they might go away. Help from the York LDP has educated Amy about her LD and, indirectly, Amy's mother. Amy's father, however, seems unable to acknowledge that a neurological problem exists. Instead, he chooses to think that Amy "just isn't paying attention." It is noteworthy that Amy thinks she and her father share the same disability, and her mother still finds herself mediating between her husband, who wants everything done immediately, and her daughter, who is willing to take her time (III, 70).

Although the average age of the subjects was 24, all were still dependent on their families for support except one, who was living free of charge with non-biological family friends. Two of the students planned to get full-time jobs after graduation; two were taking general degrees that did not lead to specific job entry. Studies indicate that learning disabled students remain dependent on their families for longer periods of time than their non-LD counterparts, though both groups shared
similar aspirations of independence (Ryan, 1994). All four students spoke fervently of independence, perhaps because they have had to depend on others for help during so much of their academic lives. This much-desired independence is part of the longing often felt by LD persons to be in control of their lives (Spekman et al., 1992, 1993).

One theme that emerges is that parents—in this study, mothers—may continue to advocate for their children beyond high school. Anna’s mother was worn out from advocating by the time her daughter arrived at college, leaving Anna to fight for herself. When Amy applied to York University, her parents met with the appropriate admissions people on behalf of their daughter because her high-school grades were low. Of significance is the fact that they did not use Amy’s learning disability as a reason for her lower high-school average.

Support from parents (Miller, 1997), particularly mothers (Barga, 1993) is cited as integral to success in LD students. Both Wendy’s and Shelley’s mothers are the primary advocates for their daughter at Andrews, although both fathers offer generous amounts of encouragement and support to their daughters. During their daughters’ first 2 years at Andrews, both mothers intervened directly and regularly with teachers and administrators on their daughters’ behalf. See Table 8.

Learning disabilities within families unquestionably have the potential for creating significant strains in relationships between parents and their LD children (Barbaro, 1982). Wright and Stimmel (1984) discovered that LD subjects were twice as likely as their non-LD counterparts to report poor relationships between themselves and their parents. This appeared to be true for both of the students attending York University. For example, after what seemed like complete burnout from ongoing
struggles with the educational system, Anna’s mother has directed her attention elsewhere. Although Anna admits that her mother advocated and intervened for her often during the tempestuous elementary and, to a certain extent, high-school years, when she arrived at college she was on her own. Some feelings of abandonment appear to persist.

Amy, though still living at home, has felt largely unsupported by her parents who did not understand her learning disability and, due to their culture, seemed unwilling and unable to accept their daughter’s disability. Although her mother is beginning to seek understanding regarding her daughter, Amy still perceives her father as being unaccepting. Because of this often volatile family situation, Amy has necessarily reached out to her psychologist, whom she feels has provided more encouragement than she has ever received before in her life. He has given her hope for the future and has encouraged her to see her disability as a strength, not a weakness. This new way of looking at herself has empowered her toward tentatively speaking with her mother about her disability and sharing the hope of being able to help other disabled students after she graduates.

Two of the students, Wendy and Shelley, felt their families provided extensive support and openly expressed appreciation. This is consistent with findings by Greenbaum et al. (1995), who found that college success was in part fostered by supportive families offering emotional—and often financial—help. It may be noteworthy that both of these students attend a private, parochial Christian school where belief in family solidarity is an important religious tenet. Their parents prayed with them, affirmed them often as individuals and children of God, negotiated
Table 8

**Family Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
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<tr>
<td>My mom is very supportive. At times when I feel like I can’t go on . . . I’ll call her and I’ll be crying. She’ll give me a lot of support, pray with me . . . spiritual backing . . . just [to] calm me down and [keep] me focussed on God. My mom always gives me really good feedback. Students need to hear wonder stories of how well they’re doing. They need [to be] propped up because it’s a tough, tough world. I’ve noticed that sometimes it can be bad if your parents are very supportive. I think it’s maybe easier to be kind of like the dumb student.</td>
<td>I can’t work with my mother. . . . It’s just impatience on my part. I’ve basically done it [college] on my own. [Prior to college] she [my mother] defended me in a lot of circumstances. . . . She used to comfort me a lot . . . because I was treated like crap. My mother again had to write nasty letters explaining . . . this was really unfair practice. It took its toll on both of us. It wasn’t very good.</td>
<td>My mom says that she [is] proud of me for getting so far. And she knows how hard I work. [My parents were] not understanding at first. They knew there’s a problem. They chose to ignore it [my LD]. At least that’s what I think. My relationship, especially with my mom, has gotten a lot better and I tell her some things—not a lot. As she [Amy] got older, it was harder for me to get involved in every little thing.</td>
<td>[My family] have been important, but not as important as they were, say in high school or elementary school. My parents . . . seem to think that I can do it [complete college]. My parents have been pretty good at teaching me what I am supposed to do and then I have been able to go and do that pretty successfully.</td>
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directly with the university on their children's behalf to obtain support and/or appropriate accommodation, and maintained close contact with their children despite living 500 miles away. Although neither felt parental pressure to get a college degree, both indicated that their parents seemed to believe that they could do it and acted as cheerleaders in motivating them toward that end. Depending on the difficulty of the classes, more or less cheerleading was needed from the home front.

Non-family

All four informants have developed relationships with non-family mentors, relationships that they considered essential to their academic success. Barga (1993) maintains that while non-LD students often rely on more general support networks, LD students found mentorship relationships critical to success. These mentors or "benefactors" were "individuals who could be relied upon to assist the LD students through academic and personal problems" (pp. 12-13). LD persons considered successful (that is, engaged in positive social and educational/employment activities) described significant mentorship relationships with teachers, therapists, employers, or friends as critical to their success (Demakis & McAdams, 1994; Spekman et al., 1992, 1993). Furthermore, Werner (1990) found that the resourceful LD persons were extraordinarily skilled at recruiting others to serve in the mentor role. This appeared to be true for Anna and, especially, Shelley, who had an amazing network of support to tap into. See Table 9.

Because Shelley had attended high school in the same area as the university she was attending, an ongoing mentorship with several high-school teachers who had
Table 9

Non-Family Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[When I'm floundering in a class] I usually try to go to the professor and tell him I'm lost and that I need help. If the professor doesn't offer me help, then I ask where else could I seek help. My professors rarely grant me extra time on tests. I have even let them be aware that I am granted that. I had counseling here on campus.</td>
<td>I get extra time on tests and that's it. They do offer a lot more things. To get a tutor you have to go through so much, like you have to have this certain criteria, you've got to go on a waiting list and it takes awhile. Why should I have to keep having to prove myself? . . . I don't take a lot of initiatives just because it's sort of an attitude thing. The only person that's really helped me a lot is Eleni [a friend].</td>
<td>He [the counselor] has helped me the most actually. I take medication [Drexalin, a stimulant] during the week [to help me focus]. Before I'd get my friends to proofread [my papers]; now I get my tutor . . . because he just knows what I need . . . to do for organization. He [my tutor] doesn't do it for me; I have to do it for myself . . . so I am taught to do it, and no one else is doing it for me. I get 60% more time on tests.</td>
<td>You can call lots of things support, but if it's not truly supportive . . . that totally defeats support. I would never go to the academic help place . . . because I just don't see them as being very helpful. I don't know them; they don't know me. Mrs. X is willing to do anything to get me through. She volunteers to read to me and help me to study for a test, anything. Ms. Y has helped me through two or three difficult classes . . . and also proofreads my papers for me. I don't think I've ever gone to a math center. I just do better with people . . . I already know and trust, and that know me and know that I'm not stupid.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
taken a particular interest in her continued throughout college. These teachers, now
good friends, read textbooks orally to her, cooperated with the university to give her
oral instead of written tests when necessary, and helped her draft and proofread longer
papers. More importantly, they provided positive encouragement and reinforcement at
critical times when Shelley felt her academic life was spinning out of control. Shelley
seemed most adept at getting people to work with her toward her goals.

Anna also relied on non-family members for academic help. For Anna, who
has lived with family friends for several years while attending university, her chief
support has come from an elementary teacher, who works with LD students, and for
whom Anna works as an assistant. This teacher provided both practical help in
completing preliminary research for Anna, and acted as a sounding board when Anna
was frustrated.

Wendy used the writing and math centers to help her with her assignments.
She was also aggressive about going to the teacher to ask for help when necessary.

Amy has been mentored the least during college, but has high praise for a peer
tutor who helped her toward becoming an independent writer, and also a psychologist
who, she says, has given her back her life by helping her to take control.

*Formal Academic Support*

Because of the increasing number of LD students attempting college during
the 1990s, larger institutions especially have worked to provide support for their
students. York University’s learning disabilities program (LDP) was established in
the 1980s. After submission of a psycho-educational assessment and an initial in-
house intake assessment, students are assigned tutors, a case manager, and a psychologist, if necessary. A career counselor is also available. Notice of necessary accommodations is sent to appropriate professors, books on tape are ordered, note-takers provided, if necessary, and students are invited to take non-credit skills classes (like assertiveness training and how to write academic papers) as they wish. A class for LD students is offered for credit, and LD students are encouraged to enroll early in their college program. The class is geared toward building camaraderie, sharpening self-advocacy skills, and building the student’s LD information base. Assistive technology is available to LD students and books on tape are ordered from the Trent Library.

At Andrews University, LD students generally negotiate on their own. Lacking any official organization or support, LD students have, in recent years, worked variously through the Reading Center, Academic Support, and the University Center for Assessment and Learning. Matters pertaining to LD students are now handled by the office of the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs.

Finn (1997) found that LD staff had an “extraordinary” impact on students’ university experience. She also found that, while literature emphasizes the need for staff to be specialized, LD “specialists” were not as important to the students as the assistance and support they gave. One-on-one teaching is most often favored as the optimum learning experience for LD students (Vogel et al., 1993). For Amy, a peer tutor in the LDP who showed her how to write papers was most significant because he allowed her to become more independent. Of the students interviewed, Amy used academic support the most, checking in often and taking advantage of workshops and
available technology. Although all four informants clearly stated their goal of independence, for Amy this goal was emphasized often. She sees the resources of York's LDP helping her toward that end.

A delicate balance exists between offering support that will get an LD student through college and helping students to be successful in life. The LD student should not become overly dependent on LD support services. While ongoing support appears to be necessary to LD college students, aspiring to independence is always the ultimate goal (Yost, Shaw, Cullen, & Bigaj, 1994). Perhaps the best help support staff can give students is a better self-understanding of their specific learning disability (Vogel & Adelman, 1990), how it affects their learning, and how to help themselves become more independent.

Technology

Although all four students expressed gratefulness for word processors, especially grammar and spellcheck functions, only one of the students used technology beyond word processing. Amy regularly used and depended on adaptive technology including the Kurzweil 1000, with which she scans articles which will then be "read" to her. Although Shelley had used Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic in high school, she prefers and has managed to find persons willing to read orally if she is unable to read all the material herself. Part of the problem is the availability of the books that are required for the course. Amy, on the other hand, depends on recorded books, ordered through the LDP, in order to accomplish the reading.
Amy expressed some frustration in trying to make technology work for her, however, because she has had to invest considerable time teaching herself to use the technology. Anna has tried listening to JAWS, another program which “reads” whatever is on the screen, but was “turned off” by the sound of the robot-like voice. She said it made her feel like a “freak.”

Small vs. Large Institutional Support

Although close teacher/student relationships seemed to seldom exist at a large university, within the umbrella of the LDP there appeared to be significant nurturing. Once a student was identified as learning disabled, a variety of resources was available including tutors, psychologists, career counselors, liaisons between teacher and student, adaptive technology (including JAWS, Kurzweil, recorded books, word processors), coping classes, and more. The LDP allowed students to connect and share strategies and experiences with other LD students. Although a student might choose not to accept this help, it is, nevertheless, available and one of the informants used the LDP services extensively.

Frustration with the LDP centered around issues like lack of adequate training in using specific adaptive technology or specific individuals within the center who were not as helpful as they might be. Fortunately, students can usually switch to another support person if there seem to be difficulties.

At Andrews University, counseling is available free, though not specifically by persons trained in learning disabilities. Academic support primarily is available through the reading, writing, and math centers with peer tutors who are not trained...
specifically to assist LD students. LD students negotiate on a teacher-by-teacher basis, with little support outside of other teachers, advisors, or parents. One advantage of this is that when a teacher is willing to provide accommodation, often the LD student benefits from additional mentoring by the teacher. Teachers are usually the first to admit that teaching is more than dispensing information because the rewards of teaching are found in helping and getting to know students. At a small university, this is more likely to happen because LD students have little choice but to contact their teachers when they are performing poorly.

Not one of the students or teachers interviewed was aware of any program to assist LD students. All indicated that a need for a clearly identified program exists. Following its establishment, every Andrews student and faculty member should be aware that LD service exists and know where it is located. LD students should know their legal rights and of their need to self-disclose and provide supporting documentation. Once documentation is presented to an appropriately designated individual, one who is informed and cares for and about LD students, accommodations should be agreed upon, based on need. With student permission, teachers should be notified, thus removing the ongoing fear that accompanies approaching an authority figure.

The majority of accommodations (like additional time on tests, alternate assignments, note-takers) cost an institution very little. Adaptive technology is more expensive, but books on tape are free to a student after a one-time fee. Other student needs like peer note-takers and tutors can be negotiated. All accommodations are not

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provided to all students, but on a case-by-case basis to offset the student’s learning disability.

Under Section 504 (Rehabilitation Act of 1973) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), postsecondary institutions receiving federal funds (only a handful do not) must not discriminate against otherwise qualified students with disabilities. This means that "if a student is qualified when the disability is not considered, he or she must be provided access to postsecondary institutions" (Madaus, 1997, p. 28).

**Plans for the Future**

Hope and optimism are vital components in bringing about success. According to Daniel Goleman (1997), students with high levels of optimism work harder and more creatively in achieving educational success. They have goals that seem achievable and a plan to reach those goals. When I first began our interviewing, three of the four students spoke optimistically about the future. Anna and Wendy were looking forward to teaching elementary students. Both spoke of their desire to make their classrooms warm and caring places so that children would not have to struggle in unfriendly environments as they did. However, during the closing phase of our conversations, 6 to 9 months later, I noticed some subtle adjustment to their life goals. See Table 10.

Anna, who had spent several years as a classroom assistant and was now nearing the end of her B.Ed. program, admitted she was feeling progressively more uncomfortable about a career in education. She spoke of being very aware of how
Table 10

The Future

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wendy</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Shelley</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to have a degree in something. I wanted to achieve something, so I could say, “I did it.”</td>
<td>I think I’m still going to have to keep pushing harder and harder. There are certain things that I want to accomplish. But it’s difficult . . . to say what my future is going to hold. Things change every day.</td>
<td>[With the help of a psychologist] now . . . I know I can control where life takes me. I can . . . be confident of what . . . I’m faced with. And I’m not afraid of it.</td>
<td>I don’t have a clue. That’s why I make up these fun stories. That’s what I’d like to see, but I don’t know that you ever get those things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to publish the book that I am working on.</td>
<td>Sometimes I am [optimistic about my future] and sometimes I’m not. Sometimes I go through bouts of depression. And then other days, I’m like, “You know what, like I think I can do it.”</td>
<td>I have to accept that [my LD] is going to be with me for the rest of my life. So, that’s how it is. I can’t let go of it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would . . . like to be teaching on an Indian reservation. I would like to achieve that, and say that I have done it.</td>
<td></td>
<td>I have very high expectations for myself. . . . I can make them realistic by achieving them.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

much anxiety the classroom still produces within her psyche and muses about whether it is a carryover from childhood. Now that she is only a few months away from achieving her goal, she ponders whether she can actually teach in a typical classroom setting. She feels there are so many stressed-out children in her classroom that remind her of herself. To a lesser extent, Wendy expressed an interest in ways to be in teaching, but eventually work with smaller groups of children, perhaps as a reading instructor. However, during our most recent conversation, she indicated she had been offered and was considering accepting a teaching job offer in a multi-grade classroom.
Amy knows she wants to work with disabled children, but is uncertain what she will do next. Tentative plans are for her to continue in graduate school. Least sure about life goals is Shelley, who admits she is not sure what she would like to do with her general studies degree and, when asked what she will do next, most frequently tells inquirers that she’s going to Switzerland to be a nanny or, if really pressed, says she’s planning to marry a Lindt chocolate heir and reside in Europe. These explanations are offered partly in jest, but partly, she says, as a decoy to get people talking about their Europe experience so that attention is diverted away from her and her apparent lack of high-powered career aspirations.

And what of the future? The lifelong persistence of learning disabilities throughout adulthood is well-documented (Gerber & Reiff, 1991). Studies of self-reports indicate that problems associated with disabilities may even worsen with time (Gerber et al., 1990). And because learning disabilities tend to run in families (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), it is essential that LD students not only understand their disability as it affects their own learning but be aware that subsequent generations may inherit similar characteristics of varying intensity.

**Conclusion**

Although getting through college is the chief immediate goal of each of these subjects, this accomplishment alone does not guarantee a “successful” life as much as the internal characteristics that have helped them to achieve this goal. These qualities like persistence, optimism, self-understanding, and taking control of one’s life must continue within their inner selves throughout their lives. While graduating from
college is an admirable achievement, it is this inner strength which will help students with learning disabilities throughout life.

Nevertheless, graduating from college is still a useful and commendable goal. Vogel and Adelman (1990) determined that college graduates were more likely to have a better understanding of their learning disability which would transfer to a more positive employment experience upon graduation. A longitudinal study follow-up of these four subjects would provide fruitful information regarding this.

Summary of Cross-Case Analysis

Although I understood that the students whom I interviewed had the qualities that would enable them to complete university, I am gratified to see where those qualities fit within the literature of successful young adults. For the two students attending a large public university, the college experience began the most tenuously. Negotiating the transition between high school and college appears to be a critical point in LD students’ college success. Had both students connected positively with the LD program sooner, their college stay would have been more favorable from the beginning.

Transition from high school and academy to college was also shaky for Wendy and Shelley. Both students at Andrews University wished for a “home” for LD students, where they would be mentored and given support as needed. Each student was negotiating with teachers on her own, an experience that was both intimidating and anxiety-laden. Both felt the need of a support center which would give them help with advisement, academic skills, and emotional support. Both wished
for a system which would allow them to self-identify as learning disabled to one office. A system of flagging would be in place, at their request, so that teachers would be alerted to their learning needs. This is consistent with the conditions of Section 504 (Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

All four students see themselves as hard workers who spend considerably more time on academics than most of their non-LD counterparts. They have learned to accept this, but occasionally bitterness creeps into the conversation. Nevertheless, they understand they will continue to experience considerable stress from “all things academic.” A larger unanswered question is whether these students understand they will need to continue to expend more effort than their non-LD counterparts in order to thrive in the workplace (Gerber et al., 1992).

LD students value friends above all else and more than their non-LD counterparts. LD students consider themselves to be loyal and to have a sense of humor. Without friends, their lives are not worth living. Among friends they are treated as equals in an environment that otherwise treats them rather badly at times, resulting in low grades and feelings of failure simply because they learn differently. Unlike most other studies of LD students and relationships, three of the four students said they enjoy the company of many friends.

The single most significant influence on these students’ success is the mentoring they receive. Every student in this study attributes her survival to special friends and/or family who have helped unselfishly in a variety of ways, mostly academic but frequently as morale boosters.
Teachers are the critical point at which success or failure in a class takes place. Rigidity and lack of rapport with the student quickly closes the door to a learning opportunity. How the teacher relates to the student appears to be as important as class requirements. Already feeling inadequate and “stupid,” LD students will go to great lengths to perform well for teachers who indicate that they believe the student can be successful.
CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY

When [I] asked Pooh what the opposite of an Introduction was, he said "The what of a what?" which didn’t help [me] as much as [I] had hoped, but luckily Owl kept his head and told [me] that the opposite of an Introduction, my dear Pooh, was a Contradiction; and, as he is very good at long words, I am sure that that’s what it is.

A. A. Milne, The World of Pooh

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lives of four college students who were close to completing college. The students, all with learning disabilities, have described their own experiences within tertiary-level education, in terms of their families, friends, and teachers. In chapter 1, I identified three questions to guide my research and, in this summary, I return to these questions. Although these queries have been largely discussed in the cross-case analysis, I look again at each and restate my findings which sometimes, as Owl explains, are contradictions.

Summary Based on Original Research Questions

Question 1

What personal qualities are evident in teachers who take an interest in the college experience of LD students?
For each of these students, school is the setting which exacerbates the disability. When they began elementary school, all four students noticed almost immediately that they learned differently from their peers. As Wendy, Anna, Amy, and Shelley felt more isolated from their classmates and slid further and further behind in their work, the classroom became the scene of continuing angst. Helpful teachers became the balm for an ongoing experience of anxiety, frustration, and discouragement. College teachers who become preoccupied with “fairness” and “Are you what you say you really are?” issues create barriers to learning. According to Ernest Rose (1993),

Faculty must realize that providing accommodations for students with any disability [including a learning disability] is not voluntary or an act of charity, but an obligation by the fact that these students did meet the admissions criteria of the institution and, hence, are protected by law. (p. 136)

Based on the experience of the four students interviewed, helpfulness is indicated in a number of ways.

Identification and Problem Solving

Early in the students’ educational experience, helpful teachers were ones who identified difficulties and quickly moved to ameliorate them either by having parents withdraw the child from the anxiety-producing setting or by immediately acting, usually in tandem with parents, to provide additional help (Moats, 1996). Wendy was the only informant where this early help seemed to be positive, when a teacher alerted her mother that continuing in the educational setting would be detrimental and her mother withdrew her from the classroom and home schooled her. Although both Amy and Anna’s early teachers recognized they were having difficulty keeping up to their
peers, both girls were sent to special education classes which became entirely negative experiences. From their perspective, this act of separation seemed to be punishment for their inability to learn in the "traditional" ways and often included a watered-down curriculum. In the same way and in consultation with the LD college student, helpful teachers are willing to move quickly to make adjustments where needed before the LD student expends copious amounts of energy dealing with a stressful academic situation which quickly gets out of control.

**Being Supportive**

For LD students who have been misunderstood in the past, a teacher who cares and is supportive often becomes the key that unlocks a sense of worth within a student and inspires the student’s best efforts (Gander, 1996). Helpful teachers are identified as teachers who are willing to “go to bat” for the students. Wendy and Shelley mentioned teachers who were willing to talk to other teachers on their behalf. Helpful teachers assisted in problem solving, working toward a common goal of making college doable. “Helpfulness” is a perception that teachers are on the student’s side, assisting in the learning process, sometimes using unconventional ways. Helpfulness is an important part of the sense of community which invites all students to engage in the learning process (Keefe & Jenkins, 1997).

**Flexibility**

Helpful teachers are flexible. Shelley learned while working as a teacher assistant one quarter that teacher rigidity is, in a certain sense, self-imposed and even part of a personality. No assignment in a syllabus is written in concrete. While every
one of the four informants would have preferred to never have to ask for help or extended deadlines, they have learned that occasional help or "modification" of the course requirements is necessary for survival. Often, the accommodation is minimal. Shelley describes a teacher who, upon recognizing that memorizing lists was nearly impossible, questioned her orally, occasionally cueing her when she hit a wall and reassuring her, "Shelley, you know this. Tell me what it is" (IV, 23). This took about 10 minutes of the teacher's time. In a college class, in lieu of memorization, Shelley was asked to critique a manuscript her professor was writing. He was astonished by her insight and suggestions. Occasionally a teacher might be asked to rephrase a test question for her. Helpful teachers were ones who indicated that they knew she knew the answers but that she couldn't quite reproduce them in the same way that they wanted. This willingness to be flexible stems at least partially from the concept that students can help teachers teach more effectively. As Joyce and Weil (1996) point out, in working with "marginal" students, "many learners will help us [teachers] out if we let them. They would like to have a productive learning environment and will work with us to adapt the environment if we will give them the opportunity" (p. 395).

Organized and Predictable

Helpful college teachers are organized and predictable in their class presentations. These teachers provide either a written or oral framework for the material to be presented in class and generally follow the overall plan for the course. This allows LD students to make connections to what they already know so that they can retain more from the class presentation. A rough written outline goes a long way
toward making the LD student more comfortable in class. As Anna pointed out, helpful teachers often summarize portions of the class presentation, assisting all students—and especially those with learning disabilities—to synthesize the material for easier storage.

**Personableness**

Teachers who are helpful are willing to invest in nurturing relationships with their students. According to Reiff (1997), encouraging students with learning disabilities to develop positive relationships with teachers is an important part of academic advising. Both Wendy and Shelley shared stories of teachers who went out of their way to simply be friends because they enjoyed the informants as people. This relational aspect of teaching is often forgotten in the busyness that becomes a college teacher’s life. Nevertheless, for these two students this relationship building became vital in keeping the academic experience from unravelling when pressures were getting out of hand. In a sense, this is the relationship which Amy had forged with her psychologist who, by investing time in her, validated her importance and reinforced positive growth in her own self-understanding. Anna has a close relationship with the teacher for whom she has worked for several years as an assistant. This teacher understands Anna’s disability and has gone out of her way to become a friend and invaluable aid in getting Anna through university. For all four students, teachers or teacher-substitutes have become the success variable.

Helpful teachers keep the student moving forward. In this study, helpful teachers were not motivated to be helpful because they were afraid of a lawsuit. All
confessed to being unaware or only vaguely aware of laws requiring “reasonable accommodation” but quickly added that they were poorly informed. Instead, they were helpful because of a deep-seated and genuine concern for the success of each student. If a motivated, hard-working student was not being successful, helpful teachers pulled other techniques from their arsenal of teaching “tricks” to assist the student. Their goal and their perceived responsibility was to help the student to learn using whatever was required. As Wendy’s mother says, “The failure of the learning disabled child belongs to the educator and the educational system” (I, 92).

Question 2

What part do families play in LD students successfully completing college?

Two of the informants found families a mixed blessing. For Anna, “family” meant her mother who intervened often throughout elementary school and, to a lesser extent, in high school. By the time Anna finished high school, her mother, tired from the strain of advocating often for Anna, wished her well but made it clear that Anna was now on her own in continuing her education. For Anna, because her mother had been so involved in helping her, this was tantamount to abandonment, and some feelings of hostility on Anna’s part remain.

For Amy, while her parents have provided the necessities of food and shelter during her growing-up years, she thinks that they largely chose to ignore her learning challenges. This, according to Amy, is a reaction stemming from their Asian culture in which “defective” children are not valued. Until last year, no one in her family understood or attempted to understand her learning disability. When her parents made
a personal visit to York University admissions staff on Amy's behalf so that she would be accepted, they made no mention of a learning disability.

As Amy's psychologist has helped her to understand her disability, she has shared information with her mother, who is willing to listen and learn. Her father is not interested. I find it curious that her family has taken no initiative to educate themselves regarding learning disabilities. Indeed, after our interview, Amy's mother expressed profound thanks for explanations I provided about certain aspects of learning disabilities that she had never understood before. Such passivity is hard to understand when so much information on learning disabilities is available, particularly in the fourth largest metropolis in North America.

Wendy and Shelley have been surrounded by large, supportive families from the beginning. Wendy's family had the advantage of knowing that dyslexia was part of the family heritage. For Shelley, that understanding has come gradually and somewhat belatedly. Nevertheless, both girls express grateful appreciation for their families who have been helping them throughout their school years. For both, the support from the home front has taken the form of cheerleading and problem-solving. Occasionally, in times of crisis, parents of both girls travel to Andrews to help their daughters by reading to them or assisting with written assignments. In a sense, both families feel that their daughters' education is so important that it has become a family project.

Their mothers, in particular, have lobbied directly with teachers, support staff, and administrators on behalf of their daughters. One mother has threatened legal action if appropriate action was not taken immediately on her daughter's behalf.
The danger of continued intervention is that both girls are still more dependent on their families for support than either they or their families would like them to be. Finding the balance of when to help and when to stand back is the ongoing challenge of parents of LD children.

Question 3

In what ways do students identify that they have been able to manage their disability?

Managing a disability has much to do with being in control, a need for any healthy functioning individual. Students most in control had a good understanding of their disability and how they learned best. For each of these girls, managing her disability had begun long before college, though constant refinement continued. Several girls indicated that they had learned through mistakes which had become learning opportunities. Shelley, for example, attended another college abroad but had not connected with a solid support system. She realizes now that the dream of attending that college was unrealistic. As Reiff et al., (1994) point out, “We learn through our mistakes if we remain cognizant that mistakes are simply building blocks for eventually getting it right. Mistakes are, perhaps, our most powerful tool for learning” (p. 275). For Shelley, although the experience of studying abroad was disappointing, it helped her to sharpen her view of reality and perhaps her long-term goals.

Each girl recognized that she had to study not only longer but also harder than her peers in order to be successful. Occasionally twinges of bitterness crept into the
conversation, but not for long. Amy points out that having to work hard is not a bad thing in the end because it prepares her to continue working hard in her life. She has learned to carefully schedule every waking minute of her day to accomplish all that she needs to. According to Gerber and Reiff (1991), “Most . . . [LD] adults feel stronger for having had to struggle” (p. 139). Wendy, Amy, and Shelley describe themselves as “strong,” largely due to their own hard work to achieve their goals.

All students readily and gratefully acknowledged at least one mentor or “benefactor” upon whom they relied. Benefactors included a wide array of people from parents and teachers to special support persons who helped them as advocates, cheerleaders, emotional supporters, counselors, readers, researchers, proofreaders, and all-round dependable helpers. Without benefactors, all of the students stated they would either not have been able to finish college or would have found it much more difficult.

Benefactors were, in a sense, a mixed blessing, however. Each student spoke of wanting to be independent, which may be interpreted as being “in control,” yet each of these students was dependent to some degree on her benefactor who enabled her to be academically successful. This contradiction is the ongoing dilemma that plagues most learning disabled students despite years of remediation throughout elementary school and high school.

Another important element was a feeling of connectedness to both the teacher and/or other members of the class or to a goal. The more “relational” students are with their teachers, for example, the less anxious they appear to be. For teachers, this connectedness involves being accessible, saying “hello,” answering e-mails quickly,
generally getting a message across to students that they are important. Hallowell (1997) discusses this connectedness as a vital link to lessening anxiety in the workplace. It is a useful ingredient within the college classroom for all students, but appears to be vital to the four LD students I studied. This sense of community, of caring and nurturing, must be developed intentionally.

According to Gerber et al. (1992), the most successful adults with learning disabilities engaged in a "reframing" process which included recognizing one's disability, accepting it, understanding its implications, and taking action. Although it is clearly too early to see if these students have made life applications of these stages, their scholastic experience to this point seems to indicate that they have, for the most part, moved through these stages.

For Amy, management also meant making assistive technology work for her. Thanks to recorded textbooks which the university ordered, plus JAWS and Kurzweil readers provided by the university, Amy was able to manage her reading by herself. Technology was significant because it gave Amy a greater sense of independence, which could be interpreted as control. Although sometimes frustrated by it, nevertheless, she learned how to make it work to her benefit and finds satisfaction in helping other LD students who are baffled by this technology.

Recommendations

For Administrators of College Campuses

The following recommendations are made to administrators of college campuses:

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1. Know and understand the laws. For example, Section 504, The Rehabilitation Act (1973) prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability against an otherwise qualified person with a disability by any entity receiving federal financial assistance. This applies to all government financed institution and almost all private colleges and universities.

2. Recognize that colleges that recruit and admit students, including those with learning disabilities, have a moral obligation to provide the support necessary for those students to succeed.

3. Be aware that math, reading, and writing centers, and the occasional tutor, are not enough. It is painful for LD students to have to meet with a different tutor, a different face, each time. Many LD students will go to great lengths to protect themselves from this.

4. Understand the need for continuous and reliable support for LD students, preferably through a counselor/coordinator/tutor team who work specifically with LD students. Develop a policy of ongoing support for LD students that includes a plan of regular monitoring.

5. Recognize that a learning disability includes an affective side which must be nurtured positively. By the time LD students have survived elementary and high school years, many have self-esteem and anxiety issues that require healing.

6. Create an atmosphere of awareness and understanding on campus by actively seeking to educate faculty regarding laws, best teaching practices, and an understanding that learning disabilities impair the learning process, not the potential to learn.
7. Speak freely and intelligently about learning disabilities. Invite well-known LD persons to visit the campus and speak for assemblies.

8. Actively encourage LD students to self-disclose. At the college level, self-disclosure is necessary before the university can help an LD student.

9. Understand that in a post-secondary setting, federal laws mandate "reasonable accommodation" for LD students. Be aware that the choice of whether to allow the accommodation does not belong to the teacher, although how the accommodation is to be made might be negotiable.

10. Establish a policy that deals specifically with LD students and a committee that includes LD students to monitor its implementation.

For Parents of LD Students

The following recommendations are made to parents of LD students:

1. Affirm your child as a valued and worthwhile person who learns differently.

2. Know and understand the federal laws that protect LD college students.

3. Be pleasantly aggressive (not passive) and get to know key persons at the university who are responsible for your child’s education. Require accountability. Let university officials know you are closely following your LD child’s progress.

4. Be informed and willing to advocate for your LD child, particularly during early college years.

5. See that your LD college student begins college equipped with an adequate self-understanding and good self-advocating skills. Practice role playing a variety of
possible scenarios (e.g., teacher questioning an accommodation, teacher asking about a specific LD) to ensure that your child can respond without intimidation.

6. Look for a university with a clearly identified LD support program. Arrange to meet with staff before your LD child begins university.

7. Be sure that the university your child attends has an individually tailored plan for your child which appropriately trained personnel will monitor. This will include clearly specified accommodations, based upon need as indicated by psycho-educational assessments, that are distributed to respective faculty (at the student’s request) in a timely and informative manner.

8. After your child has self-reported with required documentation to appropriate university officials, monitor your child’s progress and comfort level. The desired goal of good university support is to gradually encourage the LD student to become an independent learner.

9. Watch for signs of excessive stress/anxiety in your child. Encourage the student to seek counseling, if necessary.

10. Always be positive and encouraging with your child. You are your child’s best cheerleader.

For Further Study

Learning disabilities studies would benefit from additional study of how students with learning disabilities cope in tertiary education. My study was limited to four students, two in a small Christian university in rural southwestern Michigan and two in a large public university serving a heavily populated urban area.
One of the values of case studies such as this is that educators and support staff who work with students with learning disabilities will be able to read about the experiences of students with learning disabilities. Included in this study is an examination of some key areas of student survival.

This information is useful for those who work in universities, but it may be even more important for high-school educators. The transition from high school to college has enormous potential for land mines for the student with learning disabilities. Awareness of how one learns, how to maximize available support, resilience, and goals to work toward are all essential elements in creating that smooth progression. In high school, students with learning disabilities must be forewarned and prepared for a different learning environment where students must be more independent, where student initiative must be taken, and where parents may not be readily available, either because of geography or exhaustion, to help as they did in elementary and high school.

Students with learning disabilities are learners who usually thrive in a one-on-one setting. This alone may be a powerful reason to home school a child in a family where learning disabilities are known to exist. Students with learning disabilities are most often tactile, experiential learners, a learning style which meshes well with the individualized instruction that home schooling can supply. All four students in this study recognized in first grade that they learned in ways that were unlike their classmates. This difference became progressively more negative throughout elementary school experience. Wendy, the only home-schooled informant, appears to have a slightly more positive view of her early education largely because her mother
removed her from school and home schooled her during particularly rocky years. Because of the dramatically increased popularity of home schooling in North America, a study of the success of young adults with learning disabilities who had been home schooled would be informative.

Another area that requires ongoing study is the question: What is support? Is it what the institution thinks is needed or is it what students think they need? Could it be both? Who will decide? A delicate balance exists between providing support and creating a more independent learner. Teaching the student how to learn is the primary goal of academic support. However, recognizing that college students with learning disabilities require appropriate accommodation and should be part of the problem-solving is essential. Once a college student has self-identified as learning disabled and been accepted by the university, a moral responsibility rests upon that institution to actively assist that student to be successful. Close monitoring of this success can only be accomplished by informed personnel who understand how important a university education is to the growing number of learning disabled students who arrive at their threshold. Most have had difficult, even painful, educational experiences simply because they learn differently. But they have learned. And they are worthy of an institution’s finest efforts.

Women, especially mothers, figured prominently in this study. They played key roles in mentoring the LD students for most (Anna), if not all of the students’ education (Wendy, Shelley). Is this typical of LD students? To what extent do mothers continue to assist their LD children in tertiary education?
Finally, although gender was not the focus of this study, all of the participants were women. Are women more willing than men to make themselves vulnerable by disclosing and speaking of their learning disabilities? Are they more willing than men to speak of their experiences?

The Very End

The 100-Acre Wood is a scary place where mysterious woozles, heffalumps, and other unknowns live. Venturing into the woods requires a little faith and a lot of bravery, qualities of which Pooh and friends are occasionally in short supply. But the 100-Acre Wood also has its own rewards because sometimes Something is found amongst the fir and beech trees, and the ferns and heathers.

After all, the Woods is where Owl lives and, according to Pooh, “. . . if anyone knows anything about anything, it’s Owl who knows something about something. . . . So there you are.”

Four college students with learning disabilities will soon be donning graduation regalia, having achieved their goals in what has been an often hostile environment. They are successful.

“*If anyone wants to clap,*” said Eeyore, *when he had read this,*

“*now is the time to do it.*”
The Learning Disabled College Student: Experiencing the Hundred-Acre Wood  
* A qualitative study *

I have been told that as part of a research effort a study is being conducted to understand how learning disabled students can be successful in college. It involves personal in-depth, open-ended interviews with selected students (and specific parents and teachers as identified by those students).

I have been told that it will be necessary for me to participate in several interview sessions in which both audio recordings and written transcripts will be made. These interviews will take place over the course of several weeks in a location that is mutually convenient to both me and the investigator. There are no known risks associated with this process.

I have been told that, while there may be no direct benefit to me at this time for participating in this project, the interviewer hopes that insights gained will help students, educators, and perhaps parents to better understand the components necessary for learning disabled students’ success in higher education.

I have been told that my identity in this project will not be disclosed in any published document.

I have been told that all characteristics of the records of the interviews which might personally identify me will be disposed of at the completion of this research project.

I understand that participation is voluntary, without remuneration, and that I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in this research at any time without prejudice to me.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by the investigator. My questions concerning this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this study. If I have additional questions or concerns, I may contact Frances Schander at (416) 250-6256 or e-mail her at kenschander@compuserve.com, or I may contact committee chairperson Dr. Shirley Freed (616) 471-6163 or e-mail her at freed@andrews.edu.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The list includes some of the general questions, followed by more specific follow-up questions, which I asked the informants. Generally, initial questions led to more specific ones.

Interview Questions for Students

What is your specific learning disability?
How do you see yourself as a student?
Tell me about when you first became aware of your learning disability.
What was elementary/high school like?
What is college like?
How do you think other people “see” you?
Tell me about a situation in which you feel confident? Not confident?
What is college like for you.
Why did you go to college?
Tell me about your first year in college
Tell me about easy/difficult classes.
How do you choose classes?
Describe a class in which you felt comfortable.
How do you manage classes?
Tell me about your reaction when you receive a low grade.
Tell me about school-related stress.
Tell me about your future . . .
How important has your family been to your college success?
How does your family relate to your learning disability?
Do other members of your family have learning disabilities?
What kind of support have you used before college?
What accommodations have you used in college?
What support is useful? Not useful?
Tell me what you do when you have difficulty with a class.
How does technology help you as a student?
Tell me about helpful people.
Tell me about your friends.
Do your friends know of your learning disability?
Does your learning disability affect your relationships with friends?
Interview Questions for Parents

What is your child's specific learning disability?
When did you first become aware that your child learned differently?
Tell me about your child's experience in elementary/high school/college.
Tell me about your child's strengths?
Do other family members share your child's learning disability?
How does your family relate to your child's LD?
Who in your immediate family have completed college?
Why did your child go to college?
Tell me what you see for your child's future.
Interview Questions for Teachers

X has identified you as being a "helpful" teacher. Can you tell me how you were "helpful?"
Are you aware of X’s learning disability?
What do you know about the rights of LD students?
What types of learning disabilities have you encountered in your classroom?
What strategies have you used in dealing with them?
What specific training have you had in dealing with LD students?
Are you aware of resources on campus for dealing with LD students?
Have you referred students to these sources?
How much personal reading on learning disabilities have you done, if any?
How could this college/university help you to meet the needs of these students?
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

This includes scheduled interviews, telephone conversations, and informal conversations related to each informant. Interviews relating to each informant (e.g. those with parents and teachers) are included. E-mail conversation dates are not included.

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Andrews University  
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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

Grade Expectations Learning Centers  
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1991-1997

Sandy Lake Academy  
Teacher, Music  
Bedford, NS  
1983-88

Greater Pittsburgh Junior Academy  
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1973-77

CERTIFICATION

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