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Identifying Knowledge and Understanding of Learning Disabilities in High School Students Classified with Learning Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

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Research indicates that students with learning disabilities know little about their condition. The purpose of this study was to investigate the depth and breadth of high school students' understanding of their learning disabilities. Using semi-structured individual interviews, the researcher collected, transcribed, and analyzed data to determine 12 participants' knowledge of learning disabilities, about how they learn, and about their potential to succeed in school and adult life. Results indicate varying levels of self-knowledge and varying perceptions of future success.

Keywords: learning disabilities, high school, knowledge, perceptions, success, school, post school

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Carson knows that he is in a regular English class and in a special reading class to help him. He assumes this is because he is a bad writer. He believes that he has never been good at writing, and doesn't have much confidence in the subject. In class, when his teacher assigns writing assignments, he puts his head down and refuses to participate. He doesn't want anyone to see how hard writing is for him, and he would rather take a '0' on the assignment. His teacher assumes that he is either lazy or ill-behaved because of his habit of non-participation, and does not know how to help him succeed. What Carson doesn't know is that he has a specific learning disability, and that he has access to the accommodation of doing written assignments verbally, instead of writing them out. His lack of knowledge negatively affects him, his grade, his teacher's perceptions of him, and in the long run, will negatively affect his future.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) defines a specific learning disability (SLD) as:

> A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006)

According to U.S. Department of Education, for the 2011-2012 school year, 36% of all students being served in special education were classified as having a specific learning disability (SLD). That is 2,431,000 students that are classified as having SLD (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). According to the Twenty-Ninth Annual Report to Congress on the

Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2007), one in every five students has a learning disability, making SLD one of the most prevalent disabilities.

Unfortunately, outcomes can be startlingly bleak for students with SLD. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2011) in 2009, a total of 246,990 students with disabilities graduated from high school with a diploma. Of these, 151,016 were students with SLD. Eight percent, or 49,294, high school dropouts for the 2008-2009 school year were students with SLD. Unfortunately, students who drop out of high school face grim statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) 30.3% of high school dropouts for the 2013-2014 school year are currently unemployed, and those who are fortunate enough to secure employment have gross annual incomes markedly lower than those with diplomas. High school dropouts from the year 2012 earn, on average $488 a week, whereas those with a diploma and no other schooling earn on average $668 a month (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). Not only are students with SLD more likely to make less money, but they also have a much higher chance of ending up in jail. Of those with some type of disability currently in juvenile corrections, 38.6% have specific learning disabilities, the second highest rate of prevalence after emotional disturbance (Quinn, Osher, Poirier, Rutherford, & Leone, 2005).

Even those students with SLD who graduate and attend a post-secondary institution are impacted. According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2, 2009) only 48.7% of students with SLD who attended a post-secondary institution earn a diploma, certification, or license. The study found that 49.4% of the students with SLD were currently unemployed and looking for paid work. (NLTS2, 2009). The unfortunate truth is that almost 50,000 students with SLD dropout of high school annually, many students with SLD end up in

correctional facilities, many attempt, but do not succeed, at a post-secondary institution, and many find themselves unemployed. This is due in part to a lack of knowledge and understanding of their disability and its implications. There is a need for students with SLD to better understand their condition and learn how they can be successful in high school and in post-high life.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Existing literature describes student knowledge of learning disabilities; teacher and administrator knowledge of disabilities; parent knowledge of learning disabilities; positive self-concept, self-realization, and self-advocacy; negative self-perception in students with learning disabilities; and transition. Salient data regarding the current study are presented below.

Student Knowledge of Learning Disabilities

Research indicates that students with SLD do not have consistent or concrete knowledge about their disabilities. Cosden, Elliott, Noble, and Kelemen (1999) conducted a study interviewing 95 elementary and junior high students with SLD about how informed they were about their disability. When asked the question "Have you talked with others about your learning problems?" 39% of elementary students and 20% of junior high students answered "No." When asked "Who told you about your learning problems?" the results were the same: 39% of elementary and 20% of junior high students answered "No one." When asked, "What is a learning disability?" 91% of elementary and 27% of junior high students answered "I don't know."

One third of junior high students indicated that SLD dealt with one specific area of learning, while another third described SLD as general learning problems. Students also showed a lack of understanding about how their disabilities affect them. When asked, "How will problems with learning impact you as you grow older?" Sixty percent of elementary students and 30% of junior high students believed that they would simply outgrow their disabilities. Eisenman and Tascione (2002) analyzed interviews, surveys, and written responses of students ages 17-19 and found that most of the students could not remember ever talking about their

disabilities or needs with an adult at their school, and had only superficial knowledge about their disability (Eisenman & Tascione, 2002).

Across all ages of schooling, students show a lack of knowledge or competent understanding about their learning disabilities, and how learning disabilities affect them currently and in the future. Unfortunately for students with SLD, general education teachers and administrators appear to be just as misinformed or uninformed about SLD.

Teacher and Administrator Knowledge of Learning Disabilities

Abernathy and Taylor (2009) asked general education teachers questions like "How do you inform students of a newly identified disability?" and "What do you do during the school year to help students learn about and understand their disability?" The data showed that general education teachers were more likely to pass on the responsibility to someone else rather than explain learning disabilities themselves. This is due seemingly in part to the fact that teachers lack the knowledge necessary to explain and discuss learning disabilities. They are also often unwilling to discuss SLD with impacted students.

In Japan, Kataoka, van Kraayenoord, and Elkins (2004) gave both teachers and administrators a 55 or 56 question survey concerning perceptions of SLD. Results indicated that school principals and general education teachers have different ideas and opinions about SLD. Teachers indicated that they believed that insufficient knowledge and support of SLD was a main cause of learning disabilities. Teachers also were primarily concerned with the practicality of educating students with learning disabilities, whereas principals were concerned with broader issues, like the connections between the classroom and community and professional development. Overall, the study indicated that both principals and teachers need more in-depth and intensive information and training about learning disabilities.

Students have also expressed concern about the lack of knowledge about SLD on the part of their teachers. Barga (1996) interviewed and observed 9 students with SLD who were enrolled in a 4-year university and found that the participants repeatedly verbalized the opinion that school personnel need to become better acquainted with SLD and the many issues that surround them. They even stressed the need for more formal SLD training for teachers, professors, administrators, and other school personnel. Participants believed that training would help educators become more aware and sensitive to the needs of students with SLD, and be able to better serve them without stigma or alienation.

Teachers also shared the desire for more formal training. Akins (1988) organized a group to offer support and knowledge to parents and teachers for students with SLD. Interviews with the group members demonstrated that teachers believed that simply receiving training and information about students with SLD broadened their teaching techniques for all children, not just children with disabilities. Teachers are not the only ones who could use training and correct information regarding students with learning disabilities; research done by Akins and others indicates the parents of these students feel uninformed or misinformed as well.

Parent Knowledge of Learning Disabilities

Parents indicated in the Akins study (1988) that understanding more about their child's disability helped them to be more aware of their child's feelings and frustrations, and helped them help their children cope with areas of difficulty. One parent stated that he felt that he would have made his child's situation worse had he not received the information about SLD provided through the study. Research indicates that many parents have very different perceptions than their children, and even their children's teachers, about the effects of SLD then and in the future. McLoughlin, Clark, Mauck, and Petrosko (1987) compared the perceptions of

graduated students with SLD to the perceptions of their parents about post-high life. Students consistently expressed more ambitious post-secondary plans for themselves than their parents expressed for them. Often students included four years of college in their plans, while their parents indicated that vocational school or a junior college would be the highest level of education obtainable. Furthermore, the students rated themselves similarly to most people in their academic, social, and vocational/career skills, while parents rated their students' performance lower compared to most people, particularly in reading, writing, and socialization. Of those surveyed, about 1/3 of the students were currently employed. (McLoughlin, Clark, Mauck, & Petrosko, 1987).

While the students felt that they were unhappy with their current areas of employment, parents perceived their children to be even unhappier. Parents even described themselves as unhappy with their children's employment choices and situations. Parents also seem to have a more severe outlook about their children than the teachers. Stone (1997) conducted a similar study comparing the perceptions of students with SLD, their parents,' and their teachers' perceptions of SLD and what a student with SLD is able to do.

It is important to note that parents indicated that they were judging their students' skills relative to all students of the same age, while teachers were rating students compared to other students with SLD. Of the 21 skill areas in the survey, parents rated their students below-average in 16 areas and average in five: general ability, oral expression, social skills, peer relations, and motor skills.

Parents in the Stone (1997) study perceived their students as socially typical, whereas in the Akins study (1988) parents did not, parents tended to rate their students lower than the teachers did. When comparing the ratings of parents and students, the parents had markedly less

positive perceptions of their students' capabilities than the students had of themselves. Both the studies by Akins and by Stone elicit questions about who is more realistic, the parents, or the students? However, there is an underlying issue that is perhaps more important: do either of these groups have the proper education and information necessary about SLD to support their assumptions? Research is needed to fill in the gaps and to reconcile the differences in perceptions and expectations of students with learning disabilities.

Positive Self-Concept, Self-Realization, and Self-Advocacy

Not only is basic knowledge of their disabilities important, successful students must also be able to apply their knowledge in real world settings through self-advocacy and self-determination. Anctil, Ishikawa, and Scott (2008) surveyed college students with SLD about successful and failed attempts at various academic pursuits. The study provides a model of academic identity development that focuses on self-determination, persistence, competence, career decision-making, and self-realization.

The participants' stories provide direct support for self-realization as an element of resilience, which is crucial for success during and after high school. Students who are successful appeared to have a mature understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses, which in turn resulted in a level of self-awareness and self-realization that led to a positive academic identity. This positive self-image facilitates success in post-secondary endeavors for all students, not just those with SLD.

Garner (2008) surveyed three students with SLD who graduated from college. All of the respondents believed that students needed to learn about their unique disabilities, accept them, and advocate for themselves. Both studies indicate that it takes perseverance, hard work, and a

positive outlook for students with SLD to be successful. Unfortunately, the research indicates that students with SLD do not generally have the knowledge to help them take necessary action.

Negative Self-Perception in Students with Learning Disabilities

Meltzer, Katzir, Miller, Reddy, and Roditi (2004) had students rate themselves on their academic performance and compared these ratings to teacher ratings on the same domains. They found that for students with SLD, perceptions of greater difficulty found in the writing domain were not associated with ability level, but were associated with less frequent strategy use. Students with SLD tend to use fewer academic strategies and make less effort on academic tasks that they perceive to be too difficult or make them feel uncomfortable.

Instead of using strategies like successful students, students with SLD use few if any strategies. This lack of strategy use could be perpetuated by the negative self-concept that many students with SLD hold. Lackaye and Margalit (2006) administered various mood (hope, loneliness) questionnaires to seventh grade students with SLD and found that participants felt lower levels of self-efficacy, of sense of coherence, of positive mood, and of hope than the comparison group. Participants also reported more loneliness and higher levels of negative mood than their peers.

This study confirmed earlier research that the deficit in achievement of students with SLD is demonstrated through their lack of investment of effort and beliefs about their ability to perform a task more so than inability to do the task. These students experience personal and interpersonal distress and depressive moods and have less hope for a better future than their non-disabled peers. Students with SLD who achieve success often have strong and intricate support systems through their family members and other important persons, as indicated by Barga's (1996) study of students with SLD who successfully completed college. Barga found that the

primary positive coping technique of students with SLD was reliance on benefactors. Instead of relying on benefactors, many students with SLD maintain negative and pervasive moods of doubt and feelings of inadequacy.

According to Rothman and Cosden (1995) students often believe they are inadequate even when testing does not support these ideas. Participants, grades three through six, were given self-perceptions and social support scales. Rothman and Cosden found that students with negative views of themselves felt less cognitively competent, which was not substantiated by test scores. The researchers concluded that students with SLD generalize concerns about their specific academic weaknesses to their general self-esteem, that is, their academic weaknesses cause them to feel negatively about themselves in general. They also concluded that understanding their own disabilities is an important first step in students' abilities to develop positive self-concept. Transitionally, students need to develop these positive techniques to increase their likelihood of success.

Transition

Janiga and Costenbader (2002) surveyed coordinators of special services for students with disabilities at 174 colleges and universities in New York State assessing their satisfaction with the transition services provided in high school for students with SLD enrolled at their institutions. The results revealed that respondents were least satisfied with the self-advocacy skills of students with SLD. Respondents were asked to identify areas of need, and the three most suggested areas were to improve students' self-advocacy skills, to increase students' understanding of their disability and specific needs, and to improve students' study skills before college. Even those who are successful enough to make it to a post-secondary institution appear to be lacking self-advocacy skills and knowledge about their own disabilities and weaknesses.

Moreover, those who work with these students see the negative effects of this lack of knowledge. Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) discussed strategies for bridging the gap between high school and college for students with learning disabilities. Of the eight suggested strategies, the first was to teach students about their disabilities and strategies to compensate. They suggested this because research indicates such little understanding about disabilities on the part of students. Their second suggested strategy was to teach students to self-advocate. These two studies indicate a strong need for self-advocacy training in schools, as well as formal training and explanation about SLD, how SLD personally affects students, and what strategies can be used to compensate for academic and social deficits.

Hong, Ivy, Gonzalez, and Ehrensberger (2007) suggested that the skills necessary for successful transition out of high school should be taught to students in high school. They suggested that skills such as self-knowledge and self-advocacy should be taught to high school students with disabilities to better prepare them for participation in post-secondary settings. Getzel and Thoma (2008) studied 34 students with disabilities who had graduated from high school and were attending either a two- or four-year colleges. They interviewed participants about what skills they considered necessary to be successful in their setting (college). The theme of self-awareness came up multiple times. All participants indicated that self-awareness of their disability was crucial to their success as students. In addition, the students indicated that they would have been better prepared for college if they had received instruction on self-advocacy, self-awareness, goal setting, and problem solving in high school. This indicates that participants did not receive instruction or training on these skills before finishing school.

There is a researched and substantiated need for instruction about learning disabilities for students, school personnel and parents. Research is needed to indicate what high school students

with SLD actually know about their disabilities and what knowledge they are lacking so decisions can be made about what high school educators, parents and students should be instructing, planning, and practicing while students are still in school. High school is the last stop before these students will attempt post-high lives and experiences.

Conceptual Framework

Students with learning disabilities can spend up to12 years in special education, yet as the research suggests they often know little about their disabilities, how their disabilities impact them, and how to advocate for appropriate assistance. Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, and Eddy (2005) posed a conceptual framework for self-advocacy in students with disabilities in which knowledge of self is a primary component. Yet Cosden et al. (1999) and Eisenman and Tascione (2002) found that students' factual knowledge of their condition, in contrast to beliefs and perceptions, is lacking or superficial at best. Research indicates that students with SLD often feel less self-efficacy, have less hope for the future, invest less effort in effective strategies for learning, and have generally low perceptions of their abilities. Successful students with SLD, on the other hand, understand their strengths and weaknesses and learn to advocate for themselves (Anctil et al., 2008; Garner, 2008).

Based on Test et al.'s (2005) self-advocacy framework, this study posits that self-knowledge is integral to self-understanding and is prerequisite to effectual personal decision making. The purpose of the study is to investigate what secondary students with specific learning disabilities know about their own disabilities. The results of the study can inform parents and practitioners about the possible need for more formal and explicit instruction on the nature of SLD and how to understand and accommodate for them.

Research Question

This study addresses three questions:

1. What do students in grades 9-12 who have active IEPs for learning disabilities know about learning disabilities?
2. What do students in grades 9-12 who have active IEPs for learning disabilities know about how they learn?
3. What do students in grades 9-12 who have active IEPs for learning disabilities know about their potential to succeed in school and adult life?

Chapter 3: Methods

This research utilized qualitative interviews about students' knowledge, understanding, and perceptions about learning disabilities. This section describes the participants, settings, procedures and data analysis used in this study. The study was approved by the Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, and by the districts and schools under the study. The parents of each participant provided written consent for the participation of their child in the study, and each participant provided written assent to take part in the study (see Appendix B).

Participants

The participants of this study were students in grades 9 through 12 who were enrolled in different public high schools in a suburban Utah school district. Participants were all high school students who were currently being served in special education and were classified with specific learning disabilities according to the Utah State Special Education Rules (Utah State Board of Education, 2007). High school students were selected because of their imminent transition into post-high life and experiences, and because previous research has focused on students in middle school (Mishna, Muskat, Farnia, & Wiener, 2011) and students grades 3 through 5 (publication pending). The participants included both male (seven) and female (five) students, with ages ranging from 14 to 18 years (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender
1	16	Male
2	16	Female
3	15	Female
4	15	Female
5	16	Male
6	15	Male
7	15	Male
8	17	Male
9	17	Male
10	18	Female
11	17	Female
12	16	Male

Setting

Interviews took place at two high schools in the Utah valley area. The first school has a population of 1,303 total students. The demographics of this school are .5% American Indian, 1.3% Asian, .8% African American, 26% Hispanic, 2% Pacific Islander, 3% mixed race, 66% white, 44% low income, 8% special education, and 4.9% English Language Learners. The second school has a population of 2,032 total students. The demographics of the second school are .3% American Indian, 1.1% Asian, .7% African American, 7.9% Hispanic, 1.3% Pacific

Islander, 2.3% mixed race, 86% white, 19% low income, 9.7% special education, and 1% English Language Learners.

Instrument

The Self Advocacy Interview (SAI) for students is a standardized interview to determine the knowledge base of students in specific areas regarding their learning (Brunello-Prudencio, 2001) (see Appendix A). Standardized interviewing uses questions in a set sequence and is commonly used in multiple sites or with larger samples (Patton, 2002). The SAI was developed by Brunello-Prudencio (2001), piloted with several high school students and revised to address ambiguous questions. Mishna et al. (2011) used the SAI in a study of 68 students with learning disabilities in grades 6 through 8 in a Catholic school district in Canada.

The different sections of the SAI were used to collect information in three different areas. The first area on knowledge included four questions focused on what students knew about their learning disability. Questions in this section addressed whether students knew what a learning disability was and if they thought they had a learning disability. The second area centered on learning styles and asked 14 questions regarding whether or not the students believed they had a learning style, and determined if students realized how or when they learned differently or experienced difficulty. The third and final area included 10 questions and focused on whether students believed they had the ability to be successful in school and if they believed they had the ability to succeed in post-high life.

Procedure

The author conducted the interviews after training by her faculty mentor. Interviews were conducted at a private room at each high school. The interviewer and the participants sat across from each other at a table with the door open. The setting was as quiet and distraction free as

possible, so both the student and the interviewer could concentrate. A recording device was placed on the table and activated during the interviews to record questions and responses for transcription. Interviews lasted between five and ten minutes and took place during one of the students' special education classes.

Different portions of the SAI were administered depending on how participants answered the questions. The interview is standardized with set questions in a set order, but if students responded, for example, with a "no" response to the second question in section one then the interviewer skipped questions three and four and moved to section two. Similarly, if students reported that they did not have a learning disability the interviewer moved past the third section of the SAI and concluded the interview.

Data Analysis

The researcher and her faculty mentor, hereafter called the analysts, used a six step systematic approach of thematic analysis to independently analyze data, a method used to find patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative approach allowed for research to go beyond the data calculated from the interviews into a focused, in depth look at what the commonalities and inconsistencies were among students. The six steps involved are (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining and naming the themes, and (f) producing the concluding report. Each is described in more detail below.

Become familiar with the data. After transcribing all the interviews, the analysts read over the transcribed responses multiple times. Reading through the transcribed interviews gave the analysts the opportunity to become immersed in the data and become familiarized with the

responses. The more familiar the analysts became with the data, the more initial codes and themes arose and become apparent.

Generate initial codes. Once the transcriptions had been read and the analysts were familiar with the data, initial codes were generated. The analysts went through the transcribed responses and generated codes that accurately labeled and separated the data. Initial codes that were generated represented overall ideas that accurately reflected the data.

Search for themes. After the data were reviewed and coded, the analysts went through the data and searched for initial themes. Many overarching themes were initially recognized and grouped together.

Review the themes. Once the initial themes were found, they were reviewed for accuracy and consistency. Some themes were broadened to absorb others. Other smaller themes were grouped into larger overall themes.

Define and name themes. The analysts grouped all the appropriate themes to represent all of the participants' responses. These themes were then defined and named for the appropriate categories to represent the data. The responses were then listed under theme headings.

Produce the concluding report. Once the data were organized and sorted accordingly, the analysts wrote up a concluding report that described the responses and summarized the data appropriately.

Chapter 4: Results

This study's findings are reported in the following sections: students' knowledge of learning disabilities, students' knowledge of personal learning styles, students' knowledge of potential to succeed in school and in adult life. Each section is described below.

Students' Knowledge of Learning Disabilities

Respondents were asked to discuss their knowledge about learning disabilities. Four of the respondents described learning disabilities in comparison to the abilities of other students. For example, "Um, like when you have difficulty learning something in a harder way, I guess, than a normal person, or a regular one that doesn't have a disability." Three described learning disabilities as a general problem with learning. Three described learning disabilities as a problem with a specific skill, like concentration or comprehension. One respondent described learning disabilities as needing extra help.

When asked if they had a learning disability ten of the respondents answered affirmatively. One respondent answered sometimes and one respondent did not believe that he or she had a learning disability. Of the twelve respondents, six described their personal learning disability as a problem with reading. Four respondents described their learning disability as their performance compared to other students. For example, "I feel like I have a reading disability so I'm not like, I'm kind of like slow. I feel like I'm slower than other kids so that's kind of like a disadvantage for me." Two respondents related their personal learning disability to a certain skill, like identifying main concepts or the ability to maintain focus, and one described an overall struggle in school.

When asked how they believe their personal learning disability affected them, three respondents said that their learning disability affects their memory. Two said that their learning

disability affects their ability to keep up with the instructional pace of their teachers. One of these students stated, “Its harder to get things done at the rate that teachers want us to.” Two responded that their learning disability affects their ability to perform to the same standards as their peers, as this student answered, “It’s just, like when I’m trying you learn something new I have to go over it and over it and over it more than other people have to.”

Students’ Knowledge of How They Learn

Respondents were asked if they believe people learn the same way or differently. Eleven said they believe people learn differently. Of these 11, one elaborated on how people learned differently “I think everybody learns differently, cause they all have, like, different perspectives. Like some people are hands on, some people are mental, some people have to like, physically see it to be able to process it at the same time.” One answered that he or she believes people learn the same way.

Respondents were asked to describe how they learn best. Three said they learn best with hands on activities, and another three said they learn best in one-on-one or small group settings. Two respondents answered that music helps them learn, and another two answered that explicit instruction or having material read aloud helps them learn. The remaining two respondents answered that they learn best in certain environments, such as with teachers that understand their disability or when it is quiet. One respondent said of teachers that understand disabilities, “I learn best when there’s other people that get my disability and they can help me.”

Respondents were asked to explain why their ideal learning environment is best for them. Four respondents cited the pacing and grouping of the class as an ideal environment. For example, “Because (then) if its like a whole class thing, I’m like the shy type person, so its like harder for me to get everything when everyone else has a different speed of me. So it’s easier for

like, everyone to go in a group and be the same speed as me. It helps me." Three credited environments or situations that helped them focus. Two respondents answered they are able to learn because of their skills, strengths, or abilities. The remaining two respondents gave mixed answers, including information about the learning environment and "I don't know."

Respondents were asked to describe when it was hard for them to learn, and four cited poor teaching practice as the reason for their struggle to learn. Of those four, two referred specifically to teachers talking too fast, and the other two referred to teachers just talking and handing out worksheets. For example one student described, "Um, when the teacher talks really, really fast and doesn't go over it and when they let other people talk but not you" while another said, "Probably when the teacher is more like, here is a paper, do it this way and you kind of just get left stranded, I guess." Three respondents cited poor environmental factors making learning difficult, such as being in a big group, noisy and chaotic classrooms, and other students talking. The remaining five respondents gave various answers that included a difficult workload, reading ability, skill deficits, and lack of materials.

Respondents were asked to explain why certain situations made learning more difficult for them. Three described teacher practices that make learning difficult. Teacher practices described included teachers moving on too quickly, teachers not re-teaching or explaining, and teachers not allowing students to ask questions. Four respondents attributed their difficulty to distractions or lack of concentration, and two blamed their own skill deficits, but were vague. For example, "'Cause I can't really remember anything" and "I suck at reading" were their responses. Three other respondents gave multiple answers that included workload, need of specific accommodations, and comparison to peers.

Respondents were asked which subjects in school they considered to be strengths, and four answered that they had strengths in multiple subject areas. Two reported English or reading, and two said math was their strength. The remaining four respondents gave answers that included history, science, electives like ballroom dance and choir, and no subjects.

Respondents were asked to explain why their subject strengths were strengths for them. Three said teachers were responsible for their subject strengths. For example, "Because my teachers like, explain the whole thing, like (they) explain it and if we need help then they help us." Three others said an interest in the subject matter is why they consider a subject area a strength. Two stated that their subject strengths are in areas that make more sense and are easier. The remaining two respondents gave different answers related to grades and subject matter.

Respondents were asked which subjects they struggled with, and four respondents answered that multiple, many, or all subjects were areas of weakness. Three cited history or science as their subject of weakness. Two said that reading or English was an area of weakness for them, and two answered that math was their area of weakness. Only one respondent cited an elective class.

Respondents were asked to explain why they considered their subject weaknesses to be so. Six respondents cited a subject's difficulty or being confusing as the reason for subject weakness. Three cited their own skill deficits as the reason for their poor performance in certain subject areas, for example, "I don't know I've never been a great reader." The two remaining respondents answered that subjects of weakness do not seem worth the effort.

When respondents were asked if there was a particular teacher that taught them best, six named a teacher, three named a teacher and gave an explanation, two named multiple teachers, and one believed all teachers helped them learn. When asked to describe why the denominated

teachers were helpful, six described a teacher's strategy or instructional practice. Instructional practices mentioned include giving one-on-one assistance, giving extra explanation of concepts, giving examples, and not moving too quickly. Five respondents referred to a teacher's character or personality. One of these students stated, "Because (the teacher) didn't seem like it was just like a job, (the teacher) kind of, um, interacted with you, tried finding out what you struggled with and tried being more like a friend and helping you like that and not just being 'I'm your teacher here's a paper' and stuff."

Respondents were asked to describe the way they study and whether or not it is helpful. Five respondents go over notes and study guides to study, four prefer to work with a partner and be quizzed on studied material. Two respondents do not study. When asked if their study habits were effective, eight respondents answered "yes," two answered "no," and one answered "sometimes." When asked why their study habits were effective or not, three used the term "sticking" when referring to remembering information. For example, "Because when I look over things over and over again just to memorize it for a test I think it gets stuck in my head so I'll remember it easily." Two said that teachers were the reason their study habits were successful, and two referred to being generally prepared for tests because of studying. Remaining respondents gave mixed answers ranging from "I don't know" to studying being unimportant.

Students' Knowledge of Their Potential to Succeed in School and in Adult Life

Respondents were asked how well or poorly they believe they do in school, and nine answered that they did pretty well, two explained about their grades or performance in certain subjects, and one believed that he or she does poorly in school. When asked why they believed they do well or poorly, five referred to their grades or class scores. For example, "Because I usually only have one F and I got it up at the last term." Two referred to skills or their own

ability, two referred to outside factors or others, such as teachers or friends, and one referred to learning.

Respondents were asked if they believed people with learning disabilities can do well in school. Nine said yes, and the remaining three said yes, with stipulations such as "If they pay attention and try hard." When asked why they believe that people with learning disabilities can do well in school, four referred to level of effort and how hard a person tries. Four spoke to the idea that just because a person has a learning disability doesn't mean he or she cannot achieve. For example, "They're just like everybody else, just because they got a learning disability don't mean anything, they can still learn the same thing, it just takes a little bit more time." Three said the reason was because of the help and support that people with learning disabilities receive, which one respondent summarized adeptly: "Because they get extra help so we should all be at the same level because we get the support that we need." One referred to a specific study skill as the reason for success.

When respondents were asked if they believed they could personally succeed in school, 10 answered yes, and two answered yes, with a stipulation such as "Yeah of course, if I just strive to get A's and stuff like that." Respondents were asked why they believed they could be successful in school. Five attributed their potential success to the help they receive, such "Because if I need extra help I can always ask my teachers and they are, er, what's the word, they need to help us I guess." Five others attributed their success to their own skills or potential. For example, "Just like I said, because everyone has potential and if I work hard then I can get the same education in the same period as everyone else." The remaining two respondents did not know.

Respondents were asked is they believed people with learning disabilities could finish high school. Ten of the respondents answered yes, while the remaining two respondents answered yes with a stipulation like "Yeah, if they have enough help." When asked to explain why they believe people with learning disabilities can finish high school, four referred to the help, as this respondent answered, "Because we can, everyone can finish high school and if we get the extra help that we need and take advantage of that we can graduate with everyone else." Four spoke about how people with learning disabilities are just like everyone else, for example, "Because we are just like other people, we just need the right people, and if we can't get the right people then just work with what you've got." Two respondents referred to hard work, and the remaining two did not know.

When respondents were asked if they believe they could personally finish high school, nine answered yes, two were unsure, and one said yes if he or she received help. Respondents were also asked why they believe they can or cannot finish high school. Four attributed their ability to finish high school to the help they receive. Another four referred to their own hard work and their desire to finish as the reason for their ability to finish high school. For example, "Again, if you work hard then, um, you can, I can finish high school. Because its not like oh you, and you, and you can't finish high school because you can't read very well. Its just working hard and you can finish." The remaining respondents gave mixed responses ranging from being unsure to the difficulty of school.

Respondents were asked if people with learning disabilities can go to college. Nine of respondents answered yes, two were unsure, and one answered yes with the stipulation of needing help. When asked why they believe people with learning disabilities can or cannot go to college, four referred to the help people with learning disabilities receive, four referred to a

desire and choice to go to college, two referred to skill deficit or rigor of college, and the remaining two respondents gave mixed responses. One of the students that was unsure said, "That is a big one since I doubt I can go to college with a disability because everyone says that they, um, take really fast notes and I can't do that cause my brain only can look at the screen for like a minute then write down what I remember then look at it again and I really doubt that's gunna happen."

When asked if they are personally capable of going to college, eight said yes, three said no, and one was unsure. Respondents were also asked why they believe they are or are not able to go to college. Five referred to their ability to work hard and having a desire to go to college as their reason. For example, "Because I, um, work very hard on everything I do. I might not get a very good grade but I work super hard to get a good grade." Three referred to their lack ability or to the rigor of college, two referred to the help that they expect to receive at college, and the remaining two referred to the possibility of multiple options at college.

Respondents were asked if people with learning disabilities could go into a wide variety of jobs. Five respondents answered yes, four answered that it depends on the kind of work, two were unsure, and one answered no. When asked why people with learning disabilities can or cannot go into a wide variety of jobs, respondents gave mixed answers that included desire and past achievement, need for extra time, and hard work. One respondent said the following in reference to the type of job affecting likelihood of success, "Mmm, I guess it just depends on how much they want to learn it I guess, because I know a few people that want to be astronauts and stuff and you just got to be realistic, I guess, and yeah."

When respondents were asked if they personally can go into a wide variety of jobs, six answered yes, three answered no, and the remaining respondents gave mixed answers that

included unsure and giving reasons for yes and no. Respondents were also asked why they can or cannot not go into a wide variety of jobs. Four referred to skill or skill deficit, two referred to needing prior knowledge or training, two referred to working hard and their work ethic, and two referred to past training. Some students were much more positive about the prospect of working in a variety of fields, like this respondents answer, "I just need to learn how to do the job first, and that's about it, yeah." Others, however, were much less positive. For example, "Because I don't feel like I can go into something that I haven't even studied for exactly, but I could go into something (around that range) I studied for but if you go into something like mathematics and you failed all your math, it's not going to work." Or this respondent's answer, "Because, like with me, I have to remember all the stuff and it's not going to, yeah you just have to learn it right on the spot and I'm not very good at that so, yeah."

Chapter 5: Discussion

All respondents described learning disabilities as learning differently than others or as difficulties with learning, especially in reading. This corresponds to research indicating that reading is the most commonly identified academic deficit for those with learning disabilities (Cortiella, 2011). Respondents reported a range of learning disability effects, from memory to pacing to level of performance when compared to peers. None of the respondents related learning weaknesses to their learning disabilities. When asked about specific subject weaknesses, no respondents related their areas of weakness to their learning disabilities. The lack of responses involving learning disabilities supports what Cosden et al. (1999) found, that elementary and junior high students do not have a firm understanding of their disabilities, and what Eisenman and Tascinoe (2002) suggested, that many high school students with learning disabilities have never spoken with an adult about their disabilities.

According to Anctil, Ishikawa, and Scott (2008), students with a mature understanding of their strengths and weaknesses are more likely to be successful, and in the current study, respondents did not appear to have an understanding of how their learning disabilities affected their strengths and weaknesses. No respondents discussed their learning disability as a reason for not doing well in school. Results support the findings of both Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) and Janiga and Costenbader (2002) that in order to be successful in postsecondary education, students with disabilities need to be instructed about their disabilities.

Results from McLoughlin et al. (1987) suggest that parents have more negative perceptions about student ability than the students themselves, which is supported by the current study. However, McLoughlin et al. also found that students with disabilities rated themselves

similarly or the same as their non-disabled peers in the area of vocational or career possibilities, which is differs from the current study.

Limitations

This study is limited in its capacity due to the stigma of the term "disability" and the wide and varied range of personal definitions of the term "learning disability." Respondents had varied understanding of the term because, as supported by the literature, students are not often taught what it means to have a learning disability. The lack of understanding and confusion around the term "learning disability" may have affected the accuracy and generalizability of responses.

The study is also limited due to the sample size. There were 12 interviews, which is a small sample of high school students with active IEPs for learning disabilities. The small sample size and geographic area of the study were small, which affects the breadth of the study and makes conclusions difficult to apply to other high school students with learning disabilities. A more varied population would provide additional insights and perspectives not achieved in this study. A greater geographic area would likely increase the range of viewpoints and give a stronger possibility of generalizing results.

For the purpose of this study the only demographic information collected was gender and age. Additional demographic information about each participant could have also provided interesting and more dimensional information to the study. This information could provide further insights into cultural trends and add depth to the study.

Implications for Research

The results of this study are confined to the limited understanding of the clinical term "learning disability". Results indicate that students do not all have the same understanding of the term. Further research would benefit from instructing students on the clinical characteristics of

learning disabilities, interviewing them, and measuring whether or not students' perceptions change. Valuable information could be gained from comparing the difference between student responses before being formally instructed on the clinical characteristics of learning disabilities and after receiving instruction.

The results of a replicated study would benefit from a larger sample population across a larger geographic area. Increasing the sample size in replication in a wider, more varied geographic area would increase both the scope and provide stronger results, increasing the likelihood of generalization.

Implications for Practice

Special education and general education teachers may gain insight about the need to help students with learning disabilities understand how their disability affects them. This study indicates that students may not know exactly how their disabilities affect them academically. Teachers may also gain insight about the implications for instructing students about the differences in their learning and addressing them not as hindrances, but instead as opportunities to find strategies that work for them.

Teachers of students with learning disabilities students may also gain insight about students' positive perceptions about their ability to perform well in school and enroll in postsecondary education. The literature indicates that teachers and parents have less positive perceptions about students with learning disabilities (McLoughlin et al., 1987). The current study indicates that students have more positive perceptions about their ability to succeed in these areas. Practitioners may use this information to guide students with learning disabilities in their transition planning.

Conclusion

Results indicate that this sample of high school students with learning disabilities understands that their condition causes difficulties with learning and that certain learning environments and teacher practices are helpful. Results also indicate that the research participants believe that all students learn differently, but they do not attribute their academic strengths and weaknesses to their learning disability. This indicates that students do not have a firm understanding of how their disability affects their academic functioning.

Participants also indicated that the accommodations and help that they receive are meaningful to them and their success as students. Results also indicate that students have positive attitudes about their potential to graduate from high school and attend college, but perceptions about finding work in a variety of areas are more negative. This suggests that students may have different views of their postsecondary opportunities than existing literature has suggested. Overall, this study has added valuable information to the existing body of literature about this population of students and their knowledge and perceptions of their disabilities.

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APPENDIX A: Guiding Questions for Interviews

Name:_____

Date:_____

Age:_____ Date of Birth:_____

After a brief and friendly chit-chat:
Today, I am going to ask you a few questions and I would like for you to answer them to the best of your ability. Throughout this whole time, we will be tape recorded. The recording will be destroyed after the research is completed. Try not to be worried or nervous. This is not a test. All I want you to do is try your best. Do you have any questions? (Any questions will be answered at this time).

I. Knowledge of learning disability

1. Can you tell me what a learning disability is?

2. Do you think you have a learning disability?

3. Tell me about your learning disability.

4. How does it affect you?

II. Knowledge of learning styles

1. Do you think people learn the same way or differently?

2. Tell me when or how you learn best?

3. Why?

4. When do you find it hard to learn?

5. Why?

6. What subjects are you good at?

7. Why?

8. What subjects are you not good at?

9. Why?

10. Which teacher do you think teaches you best?

11. Why do you think you learn more with that teacher?

12. When you have a test, how do you study for it?

13. Do you think the way you study helps you learn?

14. Why?

III. Knowledge of the ability to succeed

1. How do you think you do in school?

2. Why?

3. Do you think you can do well in school even though you have a learning disability?

4. Why? (only if previous answer is 'yes')

5. Do you think people with learning disabilities, like yourself, can finish high school?

6. Why? (only if previous answer is 'yes')

7. Do you think people with learning disabilities, like yourself, can go to college or university?

8. Why? (only if previous answer is 'yes')

9. Do you think that students with learning disabilities, like yourself, can go into a wide variety of areas for jobs?

10. What kind of jobs do you think people with learning disabilities can get?

APPENDIX B: Consent Forms

Parental Permission Form

Introduction

My name is Kylie Roth. I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University. I am conducting a research study about what high school students with specific learning disabilities know about their personal disability and what they believe about their ability to succeed in school and adult life I am inviting your child to take part in the research because he or she is a high school student classified with a specific learning disability.

Procedures

If you agree to let your child participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- your child will be interviewed for approximately forty-five (45) minutes about your personal learning disability
- the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your child's statements
- the interview will take place at your child's high school in a quiet, private room after the school day has ended
- total time commitment for your child will be forty-five (45) minutes

Risks

There is a risk of loss of privacy, which the researcher will reduce by not using any real names or other identifiers in the written report. The researcher will also keep all data in a locked file cabinet in a secure location. Only the researcher will have access to the data. At the end of the study, data will be kept locked in a filing cabinet in a locked office for two years following the study.

There may be some discomfort caused by being asked some of the questions. You child may answer only those questions that your child wants to, or you child may stop the entire process at any time without affecting his/her standing in school or grades in class.

Confidentiality

The research data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet within a locked faculty office on BYU campus and only the researcher will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the data will be kept in the researcher's locked filing cabinet in the locked office for two years following the study.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to your child. It is hoped, however, that through your child's participation researchers may learn about high school students' knowledge and understanding of their specific learning disabilities, which will inform teachers and researchers about student preparation for learning self-advocacy skills.

Compensation

Your child will receive a $10.00 Visa gift card for your participation; compensation will not be prorated.

Questions about the Research

Please direct any further questions about the study to Kylie Roth at (719) 337-8376. You may also contact Gordon Gibb at 801-422-4915.

Questions about your child's rights as a study participant or to submit comment or complaints about the study should be directed to the IRB Administrator, Brigham Young University, A-285 ASB, Provo, UT 84602. Call (801) 422-1461 or send emails to irb@byu.edu.

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to decline to have your child participate in this research study. You may withdraw you child's participation at any point without affecting your child's grade or standing in school.

Child's Name: _____

Parent Name: _____ Parent signature: _____

Date:_____

Student Assent Form

What is this study about?
My name is Kylie Roth. I am from Brigham Young University. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Your parents know we are talking with you about the study. This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it.
In this study, we want to learn about what you know about the way you learn, and how that effects you in school and how it effects your life after school.

What am I being asked to do?
If you decide to be in the study, we will ask you to answer questions during a 30 to 45 minute interview. The interview will be recorded, unless you don't want to be recorded. No recording will happen without your permission.

What are the benefits to me for taking part in the study?
Taking part in this research study may not help you in any way, but it might help us learn what other kids know about how they learn and how this effects them.

Can anything bad happen if I am in this study?
We think there are a few risks to you by being in the study, but some kids might become worried or sad because of some of the questions we ask. You don't have to answer any of the questions you don't want to answer. If you become upset, let us know and we will have your teacher help you with those feelings.

Who will know that I am in the study?
We won't tell anybody that you are in this study and everything you tell us and do will be private. Your parent may know that you took part in the study, but we won't tell them anything you said or did, either. When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won't include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study.

Do I have to be in the study?
No, you don't. The choice is up to you. No one will get angry or upset if you don't want to do this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don't want to be in the study anymore.

What if I have questions?
If you have questions at any time, you can ask us and you can talk to your parents about the study. We will give you a copy of this form to keep. If you want to ask us questions about the study, contact Kylie Roth at (719) 337-8376
You will receive a $10.00 Visa gift card for being in this research study.
Before you say yes to be in this study what questions do you have about the study?
If you want to be in this study, please sign and print your name.
___Yes, I give my permission to have my voice recorded.
___No, I do not give my permission to have my voice recorded.

Name (Printed): _____
Signature: _____ Date: _____