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Analyzing the Dropout Phenomenon: A Qualitative Study on the Lived Early School Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities and its Impact on High School Completion

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Analyzing the Dropout Phenomenon:  
A Qualitative Study on the Lived Early School Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities and its Impact on High School Completion

A dissertation submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Joy Renae Harris

Committee in charge:

California State University San Marcos

Professor Dr. Erika Daniels, Chair
Professor Dr. Carol Van Vooren

University of California, San Diego

Professor Dr. Amanda Datnow

2016
The Dissertation of Joy Renae Harris is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

California State University, San Marcos

2016
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VITA

EDUCATION

1997    Bachelor of Science, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Eau Claire, WI
2002    Master of Science, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD
2005    Clear Administrative Services Credential II, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA
2016    Doctor of Education, University of California San Diego, San Diego, CA & California State University San Marcos, San Marcos, CA

EMPLOYMENT

1997    Special Education & General Education Teacher, Barbers Point Elementary, Kapolei, HI & Waipahu Elementary, Waipahu, HI
1999    Special Education Teacher, Bates Middle School, Annapolis, MD
2002    Site-based Diagnostic Resource Teacher, Wilson Middle School, San Diego, CA & Kearny High School, San Diego, CA
2004    Special Education Administrator, Kearny High School, San Diego, CA & Mission Bay High School, Mission Bay, CA
2008    Vice Principal, Mira Mesa High School, Mira Mesa, CA
2011    Vice Principal & Special Education Supervisor, Vista High School, Vista, CA
2013    Principal, James Dukes Elementary School, Ramona, CA
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Analyzing the Dropout Phenomenon: 
A Qualitative Study on the Lived Early School Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities and its Impact on High School Completion

by

Joy Renae Harris

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership
California State University San Marcos, 2016
University of California, San Diego, 2016
Professor Erika Daniels, Chair

Today’s high school student faces several complex experiences that impact his or her decision to stay in school. These factors, often a culmination of school events beginning in the elementary years, are correlated to a student’s likelihood of graduating from high school. Moreover, students with disabilities face additional factors that impact the likelihood of completing high school. Students with disabilities are less likely to earn a college degree, more likely to be underemployed or on public assistance, earn less income, and have higher rates of incarceration after leaving school. Not surprisingly, students with learning disabilities drop out at higher rates when compared to their non-disabled peers. This dissertation addresses the current state of the dropout phenomenon
among students with learning disabilities. It examines the early school experiences that students with learning disabilities face in order to add qualitative data to the existing quantitative research that studies students with learning disabilities who drop out.

This dissertation utilized a semi-structured interview protocol and a review of student and school records and solicited the input of eight study participants at one traditional high school in Southern California. Findings resulted in identifying four of the eight students as “At-risk” for school failure, and they were grouped accordingly. Students were asked questions related to their elementary, middle and high school experiences with relation to potential graduation outcomes. The Student Voice Theory guided the theoretical framework of this study. It was supported by a secondary framework, the Self Determination Theory, which guided the findings addressing the study sub-questions.

The results of the study concluded with three major themes addressing the research question and two major themes addressing the sub-questions. Findings within the themes resulted in subthemes within the themes. Overwhelmingly, the study results indicated relational experiences as being paramount to a student’s success, or perceived success, in high school. Additional findings indicated that students found school transitions and peer relationships to be salient factors in their success. Students in the “At-risk” cohort identified additional factors, learning difficulties and negative school transitions, as being significant. Findings resulted in the need for a success model to address the prevalent factors necessary to ensure high school completion for students who are learning disabled, and for those who are at-risk for failure.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

High school graduation is the beginning of a significant, yet complex, transition period for young adults. It signifies the beginning of a new era that embodies hope and change. For some, however, the prospect of completing high school is not promising. High school completion rates for the general population have steadily grown since 1947 when 51% of students completed high school compared to 89% of the population in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Although the high school completion rate of general education students has risen over the years, the completion rate of students identified with learning disabilities has not (U.S. DOE, OSEP, 2010; Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012; Kortering & Braziel, 2002). In the past decade, states and local educational agencies (LEAs) have become more and more aware of this pervasive problem, prompting the growing focus on studying the reasons why students, namely those with learning disabilities, drop out of high school.

Existing research on graduation rates of students with learning disabilities is limited. But what does exist admits that further analysis on the disparities between general education students and their peers with learning disabilities is needed to efficiently address the dropout issue (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002; Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). Two significant studies published by the US Department of Education address how students with disabilities are affected by the dropout phenomenon. The National Transitional Longitudinal Study-2 (NTLS-2) (2010) and the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) (2006) reveal foundational data to better help us understand why students with learning disabilities drop out. Additionally, policies such
as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), now the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) give a better explanation on how to improve the education of all students including those with disabilities. However, graduation rates of students with learning disabilities have not improved regardless of the policies and studies designed to support them.

The decision to drop out has great negative consequences to the student, but it also carries negative consequences to society. Young adults identified with learning disabilities face additional personal barriers, such as self-advocacy and motivation issues or a weakened sense of efficacy that contribute to the likelihood of completing high school. Furthermore, environmental factors such as negative familial and community influences, absenteeism and poor school engagement have a greater impact on the likelihood of a student graduating from high school. These young adults are more likely to be underemployed or on public assistance, have higher rates of incarceration after leaving school and earn less post-school income compared to adults without learning disabilities (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). Much more research examining early school experiences and school completion of students with learning disabilities is needed.

**Statement of the Problem**

The value of a diploma in today’s competitive job market is not what it was years ago. A high school diploma is associated with higher incomes and occupational status, and young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty
and to receive government assistance (Laird et al., 2007). In this information-driven age, the completion of high school is usually required for accessing post-secondary education (Child Trends Data Bank, 2013; Laird et al., 2006). Additionally, a high school diploma has become a minimum requirement for many job opportunities and for economic progress (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). Yet, for many high school students with learning disabilities, the prospect of graduating prepared for the job market feels rather bleak (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Successfully completing high school prepared for college or the work force is a challenging task for a student who faces the negative impact of learning disabilities. But the statistics have remained stagnant, indicating no significant changes over the decades. In 1984, the rate of school completion for students with learning disabilities was 58% compared to 70% of his or her general education peers (Office of Special Education, 1997). In 2011, 62% of youth with learning disabilities graduated with a diploma compared to 74% of their general education peers (McGee, 2011).

Students with learning disabilities have higher rates of unemployment, and they are more likely to be on public assistance when compared to their general education peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011; Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). In fact, in 2007, only 46% of students with learning disabilities had regular employment within two years of leaving school (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). Additionally, students with learning disabilities who are incarcerated outnumber their general education peers 3:1 and students with disabilities who drop out are 10% more likely to be been arrested compared to youth with disabilities who finished high school (Wagner et al., 2006).
For students with learning disabilities, the impact of leaving school without a diploma impacts more than his or her own personal pursuits. The economic and societal consequences resonate across society. A loss of tax revenue, higher spending on public assistance and higher crime rates of disabled dropouts puts significant financial strain on society, as funds earmarked for domestic programs are used by those who drop out (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Young people with learning disabilities who drop out of high school are simply not as prepared as their peers to face the demands of today’s workforce. More and more jobs in today’s market require some postsecondary education, therefore a deeper analysis on the dropout rate is appropriate.

Policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), previously No Child Left Behind, were designed to support the performance needs of students with disabilities. IDEA assures students with disabilities the right to a “free and appropriate public education” from ages 3 through 21. This process guarantees that students with disabilities are given fair and adequate access before turning 22 years of age (Schifter, 2011). ESSA, on the other hand, holds schools accountable for the graduation rates of all students, including those with learning disabilities. Despite safeguards provided by IDEA and the performance expectations outlined in the new ESSA, dropout rates for students with learning disabilities have not decreased when compared to their general education peers. The discrepancy between general education and special education students remains consistent regardless of the available research and interventions supporting students with disabilities. It is critical
now more than ever to address the graduation gap between students with disabilities and their peers without.

**Purpose of the Study**

Although there is much research pointing to the reasons why students leave school, studies on students who drop out of high school who also have learning disabilities are not quite as ample. Furthermore, the research on the impact of early school experiences with relation to dropping out is even more limited (Kortering & Braziel, 2002; Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). This study contributes to the existing quantitative research with a qualitative analysis that it is currently lacking. Studying the experiences leading up to dropping helps policy makers, school administrators and teachers to better understand the factors that contribute to the dropout phenomenon.

IDEA and ESSA play a significant role in the implementation of programs intended to lower the dropout rate of students with and without disabilities (Schifter, 2011). However, regardless of the intentions behind these policies, the graduation rates of students with learning disabilities continue to lag behind their general education peers. The purpose of this study was to explore the possible impact of elementary and middle school experiences on students with learning disabilities who are at risk for school high school failure. To further accomplish this purpose, the study investigated the early school experiences of students with learning disabilities in order to analyze their impact on high school completion.
Research Questions

The central research question for this study was:

What elementary and middle school experiences (academic and relational) do 10th grade students with learning disabilities report as influential with regards to intended high school completion?

The sub-questions were:

To what extent do early school experiences impact students identified as at-risk for dropping out compared to those who are not at risk for dropping out? What experiences are reported as significant in relation to a student’s likelihood of graduating?

Methodology

This study identifies, documents, and analyzes the lived elementary and middle school experiences of students with learning disabilities. Very little research with regards to the impact of these experiences on high school graduation has been conducted. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) (2010) and the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) (2006) provided quantitative evidence to identify factors related to school completion and dropping out. Findings from the study informed schools and districts on post-high school outcomes of students with and without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The findings of these studies suggest
the need for deeper qualitative analysis on why the dropout gap between general education students and students with learning disabilities is not closing despite policies established to support and improve the gap. This study will analyze the lived experiences of students with disabilities to fill in the research gaps that currently exist.

This qualitative analysis explores the early school experiences of 10th grade high school students with learning disabilities through a collective case study method. The case studies have two primary foci: (1) to study the school experiences of 10th grade students with learning disabilities as experienced by the students themselves, and (2) to provide an analysis of the students’ point of view that provides qualitative information that adds to the existing research. The researcher interviewed student participants and gathered data organized in two homogeneous groups, the “at-risk” group and the “non-at-risk” group. Student records were reviewed as a secondary source to triangulate the experiences reported by the students and to identify trends in the data. The results can assist teachers, administrators and policy makers appreciating how the school context affects high school graduation for the students with learning disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Student Voice Theory which provided the theoretical framework to conduct the research. A secondary framework, the Self-determination Theory, guided the portion of the study referencing the lived experiences of participants who were identified as at-risk.
Student Voice Theory (SVT). There is little research available studying the voices of students with disabilities and how they fare within the dropout phenomenon. An analysis of student voice, or the perceptions, viewpoints and stories, of how early school experiences impact school completion is needed. In fact, only a few key research studies have provided initial qualitative baseline information as to why youth with disabilities drop out of high school (Kortering & Braziel, 2001). SVT is a powerful framework to guide research that values and validates student perspectives. This study was focused on student perspective, making SVT the logical guiding method with which to work.

One of the primary tenants in SVT is communication through dialogue. This is defined as making-meaning conversation that requires participation and active listening from both participants (Rudduck, 2007). The voices of students with learning disabilities were the starting point for critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1989), and their experiences were referred to throughout the study. The voices of students may help researchers appreciate how school contexts shape student efficacy, and contribute or to discourage persistence in school (de la Ossa, 2005).

Self-determination Theory (SDT). Students can be proactive and engaged, or, alternatively, passive and alienated, largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The link between school experiences, the social context of learning and engagement was highlighted within the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and was further analyzed in this study.

SDT examines factors that enhance versus undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and well-being. Literature suggests that SDT is commonly referenced as a
central theoretical theme when feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness
enhance self-motivation and healthy psychological development (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
Research on Self-Determination Theory concludes that autonomy is a key component to
student success (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kramer et al., 2011). SDT suggests that our actions
are based on three innate and universal psychological needs: the feeling of ownership of
choices and behaviors (i.e. autonomy), the feeling of competence and relating to others
(Deci & Ryan, 2000). Support of these basic psychological needs has been correlated to
intrinsic motivation, which in turn has been linked to student engagement and academic
achievement (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The three needs are better be defined as:

- **Autonomy.** The experience of behavior as volitional and reflectively self-
  endorsed. In the classroom, students are autonomous when they willingly devote
time and energy to their studies.

- **Competence.** The experience of behavior as effectively enacted. In the
classroom, students are competent when they feel able to meet the challenges of
their schoolwork.

- **Relatedness.** Internalizing values and practices of those whom we feel connected
  and feeling a sense of belonging. In the classroom, relatedness is deeply
associated with a student’s feeling that the teacher genuinely likes and respects
him or her. (Niemiec & Ryan, p. 135)

Studies have shown that students with learning disabilities reported lower
academic and social self-efficacy beliefs when compared to their general education peers
(Baird et al., 2009; Klassen, 2010). In comparison to their general education peers,
students with learning disabilities face additional barriers that negatively interact with their drive and determination to complete school. Additionally, many students with learning disabilities demonstrate a lack of self-awareness and confidence during their school years (Caprara et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, declines in self-efficacy beliefs come at a time when academic achievement becomes critically important and when future and academic and vocational opportunities rest on successful navigation of adolescent schooling (Caprara et al., 2008; Klassen, 2010). Understanding their beliefs about themselves and their abilities is central to the analysis of why students with learning disabilities drop out.

The data gathered in this study relied on questions created to focus on these three needs. Using SDT as a theoretical guide helps teachers, administrators and policy makers to better understand why competence, autonomy and relatedness impact the likelihood of at-risk students with learning disabilities from graduating from high school. This theory was an appropriate framework when examining the at-risk population of this study because it assists to better understand the context to which graduation outcomes were affected by their sense of autonomy and relatedness. Findings from this study provide evidence supporting the value of involving youth in decisions that pertain to their future graduation outcomes.
Significance of the Study

National policies supporting the rights of students with disabilities have produced positive outcomes for the disabled community. IDEA assures students with disabilities the right to a “free and appropriate public education” (Schifter, 2011; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), formerly No Child Left Behind, aims to hold schools accountable to all students including those with learning disabilities (Schifter, 2011). Regardless of the intentions of these laws, the policies have failed to close the graduation gap between students with learning disabilities and those without disabilities. Dropouts with learning disabilities outnumber their general education peers almost 2:1. As one may surmise, the post-high school outcomes of students with learning disabilities are equally concerning.

Although there is little published quantitative research on the factors related to students with learning disabilities who drop out, there is even less qualitative data exploring the same. Much of the research that does exist concludes that we still have a great need to better understand what leads students with learning disabilities to drop out (Holden-Pitt, L., 2004; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). The research also concludes that deeper analysis on the available interventions for youth with learning disabilities is needed (US Census Bureau, 2011; Department of Education, 2012). The results of this study can be significant because they provide information about how early school experiences impact the likelihood of students with Learning Disabilities graduating. This is in spite of the graduation gap failure of local and national policies.
Key Terms

- **At-Risk (or High Risk) student.** Differences in the “high risk” indicators of gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status are controlled. Populations placed at high risk include youth with disabilities, students from low-income families and communities, and students with non-European American or non-Asian, single parent backgrounds. High risk areas typically include the southern and western regions of the county, and large urban areas (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002, p. 2).

- **Dropout.** The definition and the data sources currently used by the Office of Special Education Programs differs from the definition used by the National Center for Education Statistics (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Therefore, the definition of a “dropout” differs depending on the source. Furthermore, each state has its own guidelines for school completion and research therefore, is based on the individual policies identified per state. Not only do school, districts, states and the US Department of education possess a definition that determines the appropriate accountability mechanism to label a dropout; as well, each uses different methods to estimate graduation rates (Schifter, 2011). This creates little national autonomy in determining how to identify, and intervene with, students with disabilities.

- **Learning Disability.** According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, students identified under the category of Specific Learning Disability are categorized in one of twelve designated disabilities that qualify for services under
this provision. The Definition of the term *learning disability* has changed over the years. While previous definitions stated that a learning disability is based on specific areas of academic development and cognitive ability, the current definition differs slightly. Today, a learning disability is now a single, overall diagnosis, incorporating deficits that impact academic achievement.

- **Self-Determination Theory (SDT).** An approach using traditional empirical methods to understand human needs through self-determination, while employing an organismic meta-theory that highlights the importance of humans’ innate psychological needs (competence, relatedness and autonomy). These needs are the basis for personality integration. The satisfaction of these needs is essential for constructive social development and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

- **Student Outcomes.** The achieved results or the actual consequences of what a student has demonstrated or accomplished. They may be academic and occupational, as well as the intellectual, personal, civic development, attitudes, values, and beliefs that students attain as a result of education (Center for Assessment and Research Studies, 2003).

- **Student Voice Theory (SVT).** An approach placing emphasis on conducting research with students as opposed to on students by giving voice and agency to marginalized individuals through dialogue (Cook-Sather, 2007).
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The intent of this literature review is to discuss the primary bodies of existing research that both informed and framed this research. It discusses research concerning school completion of students with learning disabilities and synthesizes bodies of literature that relate to this topic. It examines the existing data related to the early school experiences of students with learning disabilities. Much research on the dropout phenomenon exists. But there is little research specifically analyzing how early school experiences of students with learning disabilities impact school completion. The literature in this review adds to the field and provides further evidence supporting the need to design “next steps” that aide in closing the graduation gap between general education students and students with learning disabilities.

Context

One of the most meaningful transitions in a young adult’s life is graduating from high school. But for many students with learning disabilities, namely students with deficits in one in one or more of the basic psychological processes, the likelihood of graduating from high school is bleak (McGee, 2011). Education Week, the nation’s leading education magazine, estimates that 1.3 million students from the class of 2010 did not graduate. Thus, our nation’s schools are losing more than 7,000 students per day (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2010; Rumberger, 2011). Approximately 62% of youth with learning disabilities graduate with a high school
diploma compared to 74% of their general education peers (Wagner et al., 2006). This statistic is meaningful because it demonstrates a continuing need for further qualitative research on the subject.

Evidence on what happens to youth with learning disabilities who drop out is limited and often inconsistent depending on the source (Kortering & Braziel, 2002). However, Wagner (2006) summarized her work with National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, concluding that youth who graduated had noticeably higher rates of employment, earnings, postsecondary schooling and community integration. Although participants with learning disabilities also report higher and more positive post-graduation outcomes, the rate for students with learning disabilities is lower compared to their non-disabled peers.

A high school diploma has become a minimum requirement for many employment opportunities. The rate of unemployment is not surprisingly the highest for people without a high school diploma and for those with disabilities; it is even higher (Wagner; Zablocki & Krezmiens, 2012; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson). In one study, school dropouts report unemployment rates as much as 40% higher than youth who have completed school (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). In another study, not graduating from high school decreases subsequent job prospects, with 52% of students with disabilities being employed after high school compared to 61% of their non-disabled peers (McGee, 2011).

The impact of students with disabilities dropping out is not only a high-stakes issue negatively impacting the students who drop out and the schools they attend, but the
consequences resonate across society. Students with disabilities who drop out are more likely to be on public assistance or in prison after high school (US Census Bureau, 2011; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Arrest rates of students with learning disabilities are alarming. Students with disabilities who dropped out were 10 percent more likely to have been arrested compared to youth with disabilities who finished high school (Wagner et al., 2006). Almost 62% of students with learning disabilities report at least one arrest after high school, and more than 80% of incarcerated individuals are high school dropouts (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson). More than one-third of dropouts with disabilities have spent a night in jail - three times the rate of youth with disabilities who finished high school (Wagner et al.).

**Definition.** Defining a “dropout” has been a challenging task in the United States. The federal government refers to a high school graduate as someone who earns “a regular high school diploma” (U.S. Department of Education, October 2008). But defining the term, “dropout” is not as easy to define. The federal government defines a dropout as someone who:

- Was enrolled in a school at some time during the previous school year
- Was not enrolled at the beginning (October 1) of the current school year
- Has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district- approved education program (including special education)
- Does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transferred to another public school district, private school or state- or district-approved
education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved education program

- Death

(U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Rumberger, 2012)

Detecting a student’s graduation status, or whether he or she is a dropout, is less straightforward than it may appear, regardless of the federal government’s definition (Rumberger, 2012). A student’s status is determined by whether he or she is enrolled in school. Yet, according to this definition, a student is able to leave school within the school year as long as he or she is enrolled by October 1 of the following year. However, just because students are enrolled does not mean that they attend; chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest predictors of school performance and potential school completion (Rumberger, 2012). Another factor impacting a student’s status is with regards to his or her “path” to graduating. According to this definition, students who receive an alternative graduation completion document such as a G.E.D., or a Certificate of Completion, are considered dropouts. These factors, coupled with the concern that students with disabilities may complete high school after the fourth year, presents valid challenges to the definition.

To accurately determine dropout rates, stakeholders first need reliable information about how long students, particularly those with learning disabilities, typically remain in high school. However, not only do schools, districts, states and the U.S. Department of Education not possess this information, they currently use different methods of estimating graduation rates (Schifter, 2011). States have used three different methods to track
graduation rates: the leaver rate, the event rate and the cohort rate. Figure 2.1 shows the percentage of methods used in the states.

![Method of Estimating High School Graduation Rates-2007]

*Figure 2.1. Percentage of methods estimating high school graduation rates.*

The following is an explanation of each method:

- The **leaver rate** method of summarizing high school graduation estimates the percentage of students who leave in a given year with a diploma compared to all students leaving in a given year (all reasons including graduation, dropping out, aging out and dying). The U.S. Department of Education and 21 states, including territories, use this method.

- The **event rate** method estimates the percentage of students with disabilities graduating with a diploma compared to the total special education enrollment for that class in that year. Fifteen states use this method.
• The cohort rate estimates the percentage of students who enter school in ninth grade and graduate four years later. This rate is adjusted for students who have officially reported transferring schools or for death. Prior to the 2006-7 school year, 19 states used this method.

(Shifter, 2011)

In an effort to establish a uniform and accurate measure of high school graduation rates that are comparable across the United States, an adjusted cohort rate, referred to as “the four-year graduation rate”, was to be implemented by every state starting in Fall 2008. The purpose was to improve understanding of the characteristics of the population of students who did not earn a diploma in 4 years. The U.S. Department of Education (October, 2008) elaborated,

“At a time when a high school diploma is the minimum credential needed for success in the labor force, high schools and districts with low rates of graduation should be held accountable for improving their graduation rates. States must set aggressive goals and annual targets in order to hold districts and schools accountable for graduating more of their students each year.” (p. 2)

The newly required amendment 34 C.F.R. 200.9, or Title I, of the No Child Left Behind Act contained an adjusted cohort rate formula to identify graduation rates which would be reported as school outcomes in defining a school’s “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) score (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The Title I amendment requires states and local education agencies (LEAs) report graduation outcomes of students, disaggregated
by subgroups, who attended school as reported by the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate. Final regulations of the amendment indicate that for a school or district to make AYP, it must meet or exceed the state’s graduation rate goal or demonstrate continuous and substantial improvement from the prior year toward meeting that goal (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This proves to be a difficult, if not impossible task, if data are not consistent in every state.

The cost of dropping out. In 2000, the average cost of educating a student identified as having a learning disability to earn a conventional diploma – some whom did not obtain this level of education – was $10,558 compared to $6,556 for a general education student (Parrish et al., 2003). Students with learning disabilities who drop out were more likely to be arrested, to change jobs often and to start families than youth who drop out from the general population (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). More than 80% of individuals incarcerated are high school dropouts (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Not surprisingly, people with learning disabilities outnumber those without disabilities by 3:1 in our jails (Wagner et al., 2006). Yet, tax payers spend approximately $51,000 per year to incarcerate one person, while it costs close to $11,000 – significantly less - educate a student with a learning disability (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002).

The cost effectiveness of a high school education is obvious. But we cannot determine the value of a diploma with dollars alone. The impact of leaving school without a diploma leads to grave personal outcomes for students, and students with disabilities continue to face additional barriers throughout their lifetimes. Students with learning disabilities are more likely to be financially dependent, change jobs often, or
start unwanted families (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002).
Regardless, even when students with learning disabilities enter the work force, they often
do not find outcomes to be favorable. Their preparedness usually lags behind their
general education peers, and the economy is negatively impacted by their productivity
(Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). Additionally, societal costs such as loss of tax revenue,
higher spending on public assistance and higher crime rates of disabled dropouts puts
significant financial strain on society, as funds earmarked for domestic programs are used
by those who drop out (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). These facts are serious reminders of
the necessity of ongoing research identifying the impact of school experiences on
graduation outcomes.

**Formative studies on graduation outcomes.** Today’s sobering academic and
graduation outcomes of students with learning disabilities mirror one another. However,
longitudinal research looking at graduation outcomes of students with learning
disabilities has been reported in primarily only two significant studies by the United
States Department of Education. The National Longitudinal and Transition Study-2
(NLTS-2) (2010) documented the longitudinal experiences of 11,000 students ages 13
through 16 as they transition into early adulthood from 2001 to 2011. The Special
Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) (2006) documented the school
experiences of a national sample of students as they moved from elementary to middle
school and from middle to high school from 2000 to 2006. It was used to assess
longitudinal changes of the cohort of students it assessed.
Policies on graduation outcomes. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, assures students with disabilities the right to a “free and appropriate public education” from ages 3 through 21. Students identified under the category of Specific Learning Disability are categorized in one of twelve designated disabilities that qualify for services under this provision. Although the type and level of services are different according to the need, every student identified with a learning disability is provided an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team that determines each student’s services and transition needs. This process guarantees that students with disabilities are given fair and adequate access to education before turning 22 years of age (Schifter, 2011). Despite protections established under IDEA, as well as numerous drop-out prevention initiatives, many students with disabilities have higher rates of dropout than students without disabilities (Zablicki & Krezmien, 2012).

Additional legislation has direct correlation to this phenomenon. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), high schools, districts and states became accountable for measuring and reporting their graduation rates. NCLB intended to promise meaningful benefit to all students through a high level of accountability. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), reauthorized from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind Act, indicates that schools across the country, regardless of subgroup population, became accountable for monitoring and reporting the four-year graduation rates of all students. Under this law, schools are not only responsible for the graduation of students in the aggregate, but also in disaggregated subgroups which includes the subgroup of students with disabilities (Schifter, 2011). Under the Title I requirements of ESSA, schools are identified as
“needing improvement” if their performance in all subgroups (including the Special Education subgroup) does not improve on a yearly basis. One of the criteria used to determine if a school or district makes “adequate yearly progress” is if students graduate within 4 years of entering high school (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). It became apparent, through the tracking of graduation rates of students with disabilities, that schools would face grave consequences if rates did not improve.

IDEA’s commitment to provide support systems to students with learning disabilities directed attention to the need to provide students with higher quality interventions at the primary and secondary levels. Yet, emerging research shows that youth with learning disabilities continue to drop out of school at a rate greatly exceeding that of their general education peers (Kortering & Braziel, 2002). The expectations of IDEA and ESSA, although both intended to improve instruction for students with disabilities, leave schools struggling to graduate students with disabilities according to the criteria identified within both laws.

Despite the provision of specialized education programs, the high stakes of dropout rate and the poor post-school outcomes for students with learning disabilities have only occasionally been the focus of dropout research (Kortering & Briziel, 1999; Reschley & Christenson, 2006). As a whole, students with disabilities are largely underrepresented in the existing research and literature on school experiences of students with learning disabilities is limited. This leaves us with unanswered questions as to how we can better ensure that students with learning disabilities are equipped to graduate from high school.
General Factors Affecting Early School Departure

Early school departure is a growing issue for researchers. A rich body of literature, especially from studies conducted in the last two decades, provides ample research that better assists us to understand the factors related to the dropout phenomenon. Although using common risk factors as the only variable to determine high school completion can be a relatively inefficient predictor of who will drop out, identifying these common risk factors can serve as a powerful forecast in assessing dropout factors of populations such as disabled students. Better understanding common risk factors helps to identify groups of students with the highest probability of dropping out (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Research shows two sets of factors as predictors of whether students will drop out or graduate from high school: one set is associated with the institutional characteristics of their schools and communities; the other set is associated with the individual characteristics of the students themselves (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

The institutional characteristics of schools and communities are a significant factor in a student’s decision to drop out. Some of the dropout factors that push students out of high school, such as repeating grades, low academic achievement and insufficient evidence that school personnel care about school performance, are commonly cited as the primary catalyst for dropping out (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). High school graduates are highly impacted by teacher factors such as empathy and school engagement, as well as higher absenteeism and retention, in relation to high school completion (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Environmental factors such as multiple school moves, failure to progress
in school and strained relationships with peers were also identified as impacting a students’ likelihood of graduating (Murray & Naranjo; Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

Of students who do not complete high school, 36% have a learning disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). On average, students with learning disabilities are more than three years behind their grade level, yet only 11% of them receive substantial modifications to the general education curriculum (NLTS-2, 2010). One quarter of all students with learning disabilities dropped out of high school in 2007 (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). The magnitude of these numbers prompts further questioning with regards to the link between poor academic performance and school completion. Students with disabilities are psychologically, academically and socially affected by their school experiences, often manifesting in their decision to drop out (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012). Students with learning disabilities face considerable challenges in high school, including their measurable levels of intelligence, poor academic achievement and a social history of failure or rejection (Kortering & Braziel, 2002).

Personal introspective characteristics play another significant factor in a student’s decision to drop out. A growing body of research demonstrates that environmental barriers such as attitudes and beliefs about his or her disability and lack of information about resources limit the post-high school outcomes of students with learning disabilities (Kortering & Braziel, 2002; Kramer et al., 2011). When these factors are coupled with indices of a school climate which includes references to interpersonal issues such as strained relationships with teachers, perceived lack of ability, and social problems, a
disturbing pattern leading to dropping out emerges. This pattern underscores the
likelihood that many of the students with learning disabilities are unable or unwilling to
complete four years of high school.

Youth with learning disabilities face strong personal barriers that impact their
likelihood of completing high school. The beliefs about one’s ability to succeed are very
apparent during the early school years. Lack of self-determination is identified as a
primary factor leading to dropping out (Schultz & Rubel, 2011; Suh, Suh & Houston,
2007). Students with disabilities, especially those who are at-risk for school completion,
are highly affected by self-advocacy and motivational issues, often translating to poor
school performance. When repeated failure becomes internalized, weakened beliefs
about one’s ability to achieve impacts his or her academic results. This weakened sense
of efficacy limits future school performance (Hampton & Mason, 2012). These
indicators, when combined with their measured potential to learn and actual achievement
levels, establish a high likelihood of academic failure which can lead to anti-social
behavior.

**Parental and Familial Experiences Outside the School Environment**

Students who are not only impacted by personal barriers, but also by influences
beyond school, are almost twice as likely as students without disabilities to earn a
diploma (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). Research suggests that strengthening the familial
environment is not one of the methods proven to improve student performance, and that
the impact, or size effect, of parental influence is low in comparison to other factors
(Hattie, 2003; Marzano, 2001). Affective school orientation comes from more influential
family experiences as their academic sense crystallizes (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997). High mobility, low educational expectations and permissive parenting, are associated with an increased risk of dropping out (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Poor community and familial influences often translates to poor school performance (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). Moreover, students with involved parents tend to exhibit higher achievement, have lower dropout rates, and are better adjusted to the changes involved in the transition to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Parents providing academic and motivational support for learning, monitoring their children’s activities, and having high but realistic expectations for school completion are associated with school completion.

**Early School Experiences**

We can predict, with a high degree of accuracy, which students will drop out of school on the basis of their performance in early elementary school (Alexander et al., 1997). Although dropping out of high school is often referred to as a progressive accumulation of school experiences, in some cases, high school failure can be predicted as early as first grade. Studies report that early school experiences such as poor academic performance and preparation, decreased school engagement and low connectivity are notable in predicting school failure (McGee, 2010; Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Schifter, 2011; Kortering & Braziel, 2002). Researchers have found that the earlier that children experience academic failure and find school uninviting and unrewarding, the less likely they are to become successful and academically engaged later in their academic experiences (Alexander et al., 1997; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Duchenese et al.,
The earlier that children experience academic failure and find school uninviting and unrewarding, the less likely they are to become successful and academically engaged later in their academic experiences (Alexander et al., 1997).

Researchers have identified several predictive factors that lead to dropping out. One major factor they agree on is that graduation is the product of a culmination of school events and experiences that begin in the elementary years (Alexander et. al., 1997; Archambault, Janoz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009; Bowers, 2010; Finn & Gerber, 2005; Suh et. al, 2007; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Dropping out of high school is theoretically understood to be a process rather than a discrete event (Hernandez & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008). Literature on students who stay in school suggest that the decision to drop out is not based on a single factor or moment, but rather is the cumulative effect of multiple factors or experiences that determine school success, or lack thereof, over a long period of time (Alexander et. al., 1997; Barry & Reschly, 2012; Cratty, 2012; Duchense et al., 2008; Bowers, 2010; Finn & Gerber, 2005; Suh et al., 2007). Therefore, scholars have good reason to estimate that early school experiences are related to dropping out and school completion (Alexander et al., 1997; Barry & Reschly, 2012; Cratty, 2012; Duchense et al., 2008; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992).

A student with learning disabilities is deeply impacted by early school experiences, and these experiences impact his or her likelihood of graduating (Alexander et. al., 1997). Researchers have sought to understand the underlying processes that lead up to early school leaving (Finn & Owings, 2006; Finn & Gerber, 2005). Much research exists studying the effects of early school experiences on high school graduation. But,
there is little research looking at the effects of early school experiences on students with learning disabilities who are vulnerable for dropping out. In one of the few leading studies of longitudinal factors related to school completion, the Beginning School Study, researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that students vulnerable for non-completion in high school demonstrate predictive dropout characteristics such as school failure, poor attendance rates and personal struggles outside of school as early as first grade. A similar study conducted by other researchers also at Johns Hopkins, found that students with disabilities demonstrate struggles early in their educational life (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992).

**Academic performance in elementary school.** A student’s decision to drop out of school is affected by a number of factors and is often the result of a long process of academic disengagement from school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Early academic achievement of youth with disabilities is related to a complex array of early school factors that characterize youth and their school experiences (National Longitudinal Transitional Study-2, 2010). In several studies, poor academic achievement is noted as a strong predictor of dropping out (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Experiencing a lack of academic success has contributed to some students disengaging from the educational environment. Factors related to school success throughout the elementary grade levels are influences that impact high school completion (Alexander et al., 1997; Pyle & Wexler, 2012). Multiple unexcused absences from school, minimal involvement in extracurricular activities, and involvement in negative social interactions with both peers and school personnel are reported to exemplify the disengagement process (Finn, 1993).
Although educational outcomes at the high school level matter, academic performance and engagement at the elementary level makes a significant impact on the likelihood of graduating (Ensminger & Susarcick, 1992). Rumberger (2012) suggests, “The pathway to graduation starts when students enroll in school. But once enrolled, students must attend school. They also have to progress in school, which means they have to pass their classes and earn enough credits to get promoted from one grade to the next (p. 52).” High school graduation predictive factors from the primary grades to dropout have been documented by measuring school experiences. Ensminger and Slusarcick’s (1992) study concluded that poor academic school performance as early as first grade identified students who were at risk for dropping out. Furthermore, Murray and Naranjo’s (2008) study found two early school predictors among disabled students susceptible for dropping out: (a) low academic and cognitive skills along with poor reading skills; and (b) disengagement resulting in personal struggles such as trust issues with teachers.

Leading studies from the US Department of Education (2012; Wagner et al., 2006) and from the National Research Council (2001) identify a history of poor academic performance, a lack of engagement and connectedness, and school failure during transitions as leading characteristics associated with students who drop out. The beginning school transition, when children are just settling into the academic routine, is a critical period for academic development (Alexander et al., 1997). On average, students with learning disabilities begin school with lower math and reading ability when compared to their peers, and their test scores show low growth and high grade volatility (Cratty, 2012). Dropout policies and trends for students with disabilities illustrate that
academic failure in the early years is one of the primary factors that lead to students with disabilities dropping out of school (Kemp, 2006; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). The achievement gap between disabled and non-disabled students in elementary school demonstrates seemingly obvious predictors of a future achievement gap in high school. Preventing students from dropping out should begin as early as students show signs of withdrawal and disengagement from school, which may be the first years of schooling (Balfanz et al., 2010).

Early school grades are a consistent variable identified by researchers as a predictor of high school completion (Bowers, 2010; Duschesne & Vitaro, 2008; Alexander et al., 1997). Grades make a large impact on a students’ perceived notion that he or she cannot graduate from high school. Students with Learning Disabilities experience higher levels of academic failure when compared to their peers. The use of grades to predict if a student becomes at risk for dropping out indicates that 86% of Learning Disabled students who received grades in the lowest category did not graduate on time (Bowers, 2010). Students who received grades in the lowest category - particularly students who are disabled - also experienced a drastically increased risk of dropping out (Bowers, 2010). Poor grades have multiple negative impacts on a child resulting in school-based issues. One resulting outcome of poor academic performance of students with learning disabilities is excessive worries about academic failure. Anxious children are likely to anticipate failure, to perceive themselves negatively as learners, and to believe that they have little control over everything related to their learning (Bowers, 2010; Duchesne & Vitaro, 2008).
**School engagement.** Although the concept of school engagement factors in many theories on why students drop out, there has been little empirical data analyzing its relation to school completion of students with learning disabilities. Disengagement, exhibited by increased rates of behavioral infractions, low performance or failure of academics, absenteeism and retention issues are significant predictive risk factors of dropping out of school (Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver, 2007). Disabled students often lack the connectedness necessary to encourage success after high school. Scholars suggest a direct correlation between school engagement and completion (Schultz & Rubel, 2011; Patrick et. al, 2007). Additional studies show that a student’s school engagement is directly impacted by the nature of the relationships he or she has with the school adults (Schultz & Rubel, 2011; Patrick et al., 2007; Pyle & Wexler, 2012).

**Student-to-teacher relationships.** One of the most common factors studied in the field of school completion is related to teacher-to-student relationships and how they relate to connectedness in school. Student-to-teacher relationships have proven to be a significant factor in predicting success in high school (Finn, 1993). Pyle and Wexler identified three common interpersonal themes among students with learning disabilities: (a) the need to build relationships despite negative consequences, (b) although sometimes due to perceptions, students lose trust in school adults, and (c) students demonstrate a fear of school failure when relationships are not strong (Schultz & Rubel, 2011; Patrick et al., 2007; Pyle & Wexler, 1993). Consistent, caring adult-student relationships are consonant with drop-out prevention research, which suggests that the presence of a caring adult who
monitors student progress over time can reduce the likelihood that a student will drop out of high school (Patrick et al., 2007; Murray and Naranjo, 2008).

Students with learning disabilities report a higher need to be connected with adults at school along with a higher level of dependence on relationships (Pyle & Wexler, 2002). When students feel a sense of emotional support and encouragement from their teacher, they are more likely to use self-regulatory strategies and engage in task-related interaction (Patrick, Ryan & Kaplan, 2007). Students, particularly those with learning disabilities, can be successful if they build strong relationships with teachers.

**Peer relationships.** Studies show a link between student-to-student relationships and classroom performance (Patrick et al., 2007). Analyzing a student’s perception of the classroom social environment is a relevant factor to understanding how student engagement impacts his or her engagement connectedness (Daly et al., 2010). Daly et al. examined the effects of networks on student achievement and found that positive engagement patterns were associated with a greater focus on teaching and learning as well as increased collective action, grade level efficacy, and collective satisfaction. Studies of peer and student-teacher relationships (along with students’ own reports of why they dropped out of school) reveal much more than low achievement and reflect the consequences of social and interpersonal aspects of schooling (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Studies have proven that developing a strong sense of membership in a learning community can convince students that they can be successful, particularly in the classroom and at graduation (Pyle & Wexler, 2012; Smith, 2008). As students are exposed to the negative effects of their school experiences, they are less likely to
demonstrate increased and varied forms of participation in the middle school environment (Reschly & Christenson, 2006).

**Attendance.** One of the most prevalent risk factors in determining high school failure is absenteeism in the early school years. Data on absences may be the most practical indicator for identifying students in need of early interventions. Absences can be monitored very early in the first year of school, showing predictive factors for later years (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Attendance, all the way up to the first few weeks of the freshman year, is related to whether students will eventually graduate (Neild & Belfanz, 2007).

Students with learning disabilities have higher rates of absenteeism during the early and middle years when compared to their non-disabled peers. Students with learning disabilities not present for instruction will predictably under-perform, while experiencing anxiety stemming from their perceived lack of ability, eventually leading to the decision to drop out of school (Neild & Belfanz, 2007). This is evident in later years, as they also face a higher likelihood of failure in high school (Pyle & Wexler, 2012). This conclusion suggests that disengagement and absenteeism in the early years may be a reliable predictor of success later school success. Students who disengage tend to establish patterns of chronic absenteeism as early as first grade, and they demonstrate increasing rates of absenteeism in to middle school and throughout the remainder of their academic experience, potentially leading to school failure (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997). Although early school experiences may predispose some students to drop out of school, subsequent events in middle school interact with previous dispositions to
increase or decrease the probability of dropping out (Nield, & Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008).

**Secondary School Experiences**

The middle-to-high school transition is significant in most adolescents’ lives (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009) and the link between early school experiences and dropping out is well documented (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). For some students, the singular and unsettling act of changing from one school in eighth grade to a new school in high school may be a precipitating factor in dropping out (Letrello & Miles, 2003; Roderick, 1993). Risk factors vary in response to the different developmental stages of adolescence between 8th and 9th grade (Smith, 1997), and the middle-to-high school transition has differing effects on different students (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Although a majority of students react in some manner to the middle to high school transition, the degree of effect can depend on demographics such as gender, socioeconomic status, or disability (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

**Academic performance in middle and high school.** One of the most powerful predictors of whether a student will complete high school is course performance during the first year of high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). High school dropouts significantly perform lower on all freshman course performance grades and standardized tests and demonstrate significantly heightened levels of grade retention, absenteeism, and behavior problems compared to graduates (Hickman, Barth & Mathwig, 2008). Academic troubles, coupled with a history of rejection or failure and a lack of confidence,
are often a cumulative result of negative academic and social experiences throughout school. An alarming pattern emerges, underscoring the likelihood that students with learning disabilities will not complete four years of high school (Kortering & Braziel, 2002). Ninth-grade course failure has a substantial impact on the probability of dropping out, suggesting that a key focus areas of dropout prevention programs be on the transition to high school itself (Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008).

The difficulty with academic and structural or programmatic changes is one that many students with learning disabilities also struggle to overcome. In Alspaugh’s (1998) study on the association between achievement loss and transition, he found that students attending middle schools experienced a greater achievement loss in the transition to high school than did the students making the transition from an elementary school. Findings concluded that increased dropout rates of the middle school students are associated with the achievement losses during grades 6 through 8. Instability and adjustments required of students in school transitions were associated with graduation outcomes. The findings also implied that students placed in relatively small cohort groups for long spans of time tend to experience more desirable educational and graduation outcomes. Especially for students with learning disabilities, a sequence of negative school experiences during the early years, a significant predictor of non-completion, often results in ninth grade failure (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

**Attitudes and beliefs during transitions.** The institutional shift for adolescents in transition is not merely perceptual; there are real structural and organizational differences between middle and high schools that likely contribute to their difficulties in
transitioning from one institution to another (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The effect of the middle-to-high school transition is widespread and affects students’ social and emotional identities in varied and seemingly predictable ways (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). The middle-to-high school transition has varying effects on students depending on their level of emotional stability and depending on the programs their middle and high schools provided to ease the transition (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). A poor transition from setting to setting impacts a child’s perceived ability to adapt to a new environment. The transition from middle to high school proves to be a trying experience for students with and without disabilities. During this transition, typical non-disabled students begin to struggle with low self-esteem and fears about new social situations that involve older students and coping with increased academic stress (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Students with learning disabilities, comparatively, are less socially prepared for high school when compared to their general education peers (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Barriers such as student attitudes, beliefs about his or her disability, and lack of information about resources further limit the post-high school outcomes of students with learning disabilities (Kortering & Briziel, 2002, Kramer et al., 2011). Students with disabilities face social and emotional challenges, less motivation to engage in learning, and high stress levels during the transition. Emotional stability and connectedness in middle and high school have become prominent factors in determining a student’s likelihood of graduating. Students who are intrinsically motivated at the end of middle school are the least vulnerable to long-term effects of the senior high school transition (Otis et al., 2005).
Peer relationships. Variations of personalized learning environments may exist within each classroom and across a school site. However, establishing learning communities that develop a sense of self-efficacy and social membership in the learning environment are significantly associated with lower drop-out rates (Pyle & Wexler, 2012). For students with learning disabilities, engagement and connectedness, particularly in eighth and ninth grade, are common factors identified by scholars as a primary reason for difficulty during the middle to high school transition. Student engagement variables in the eighth grade were significant predictors of which students dropped out and which of them stayed in school, particularly for those at the highest risk of dropping out like students with learning disabilities (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Letrello and Miles’ (2003) study concluded two reoccurring themes of students with learning disabilities transitioning to the high school: social interaction and activity involvement. This demonstrates that social interaction, particularly with peers, was as important as the activities in which they were involved. Strained peer relationships are significant in a student’s perceived academic success during and after high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Hickman, Barth & Mathwig, 2008). Moreover, even though students with learning disabilities engaged in fewer activities, social participation was important for students during the transition to high school.

Transition and career planning. In McGee’s (2011) study, transition and career planning was identified as a critical need for disabled youth who are entering high school (Cobb & Alwell, 2009; McGee, 2011; Hogan, Bullock & Fritsch, 2010). The most frequently used means to provide transition and career training is through Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. Although historically designed as a separate, less-
rigorous track to serve disadvantaged and disabled students, CTE is a regularly integrated academic program in high schools around the nation (Rumberger, 2011). Student-focused transition programs based on student voice and autonomy, like those in programs similar to CTE, appear to hold great promise for the outcomes and increased independence for disabled students who participate (Cobb & Alwell, 2009). Many states, local school districts and schools are addressing transition issues through various processes. The methods are often different and develop slowly, but initial research suggests that the processes that involve students have the greatest effect (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

Dropout Prevention Programs

While early school experiences have a powerful impact on a student’s likelihood of graduating, participation in early intervention programs demonstrates an equal impact (Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Zablicki & Kreszmien, 2012). Focusing on designing specific intervention programs based on the available research on learning disabled students is critical. Foundational studies on students who drop out, including those funded by the United States Department of Education and the United States Department of Labor, provide research-driven evidence that interventions are one of the single most predictive factors for high school success (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Longitudinal studies focusing on the mid-school years (Cratty, 2012; Bowers, 2010; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009) report that disabled students with tremendous challenges such as poor academic skills, difficulties during transitions, or high absenteeism have the potential to
achieve greater outcomes through programs that generate growth through targeted interventions addressing school completion.

Participation in intervention programs during early school years are proven to be a powerful positive predictive factor in determining high school graduation (Zablocki & Kreszmien, 2012; Thurlow et al., 1995). In the early 1990’s, the Office of Special Education Programs funded several projects that successfully implemented interventions to prevent students from dropping out. Among the students in the projects were those who were students with learning disabilities, students who were at greatest risk (Thurlow et al., 1995). These projects carefully tracked students throughout their K-12 experience to capture data on students who stayed in school and on those who dropped out. Several interventions were provided to the students and those students who actively continued with the intervention throughout middle school and in to high school found significant evidence of treatment affects. Nine % dropped out of school compared to 30% of students who only received the interventions that ended in eighth grade.

Research on evidence-based components to drop-out prevention suggests that schools can prevent students from dropping out by using data to identify which students are most at risk for dropping out, and then providing these students with academic and behavioral supports within a school climate that promotes personalized and relevant instruction (Pyle & Wexler, 2012; Zablocki & Kreszmien, 2012). To better inform dropout prevention programs, the individual student factors, experiences, and transitions that target disabled youth must be addressed (Zablocki & Krezmien, 2012).
The availability of dropout prevention programs. Providing students who have learning disabilities with adequate, research-based intervention is costly. But not providing them with preventative dropout interventions has greater societal costs. The cost of dropping out of high school fosters continued concern and prompts us to research and implement various approaches that improve graduation outcomes of disabled students (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). The availability of effective intervention programs as early as elementary school, and understanding their impact, is key in preventing at-risk and disabled students from dropping out of high school.

After implementation of IDEA, now ESSA, stakeholders noticed a considerable heterogeneity in how states estimated high school graduation rates (National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities, NDPC-SD, 2008). Researchers have found difficulty in defining and calculating factors related to dropout students (Kemp, 2006). Disparities continue to exist between school districts because each defines high school dropouts differently and, consequently, uses the data inconsistently (Sinclair, 1994). Additionally, the different uses of curriculum-based measurement became widespread for screening to identify academic at-risk students vulnerable for dropping out (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). The obvious differences in tracking graduates from state to state highlighted a serious problem with regards to students with learning disabilities.

Although states continue to struggle with identifying and tracking graduation rates of students with learning disabilities, policies requiring more accessible, intervention programs have provided an additional layer of support to students with learning disabilities. Within IDEA and ESSA, special education research exerts a major influence on general education and the policies that define the policies that support Special
Education students in the general education environment. We see this in the multilevel prevention systems championed by special education policy makers, administrators and researchers to address Response to Intervention (RTI) policies, which restructured service delivery toward the prevention of reading difficulties (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). We also see it in the changes identified in IDEA which directed attention to the need for high school programs to better prepare youth for the transition from school to work (Kortering & Braziel, 2002).

Even the strongest of interventions are not successful without the proper individualized student data that facilitates direct and meaningful application of the approach (Pyle & Wexler, 2012; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002; Zablocki & Kreszmien, 2002). The last decade has brought policies which have redefined the landscape of special education in the United States. Schools today face high-stakes accountability measures that cannot compare to that of years past. With the passage of ESSA (formerly NCLB), high schools, districts and states became accountable for measuring and reporting their high school graduation rates. Although the intention of these policies was to improve the outcomes of all students, the graduation gap continues to exist between Special Education students and general education students, indicating a need for stronger school-wide intervention programs.

**The effectiveness of dropout prevention programs.** The U.S. Department of Education (2008) identified several components to successful dropout programs. Of those, it identified the need to create more personalized and connected learning environments for young students, and it suggested that schools provide extra enrichment and support for struggling students at the elementary level. The projects concluded that
the expansion of elementary intervention programs geared toward students identified with learning disabilities is where intervention needs to start. They also concluded that high school students who were involved in systematic intervention programs since elementary school are much more likely to stay in school.

Regardless of the research supporting the need for early intervention programs, longitudinal studies on predictive factors related to dropout indicate that few early year programs directed at intervening with youth who have disabilities actually helped to prepare them for employment outcomes (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Unfortunately, while enrollment in specialized programs increases the probability of school completion for many general education students, these programs do not produce the same results for students with disabilities if interventions are not systematic and early (Zablocki & Kreszmien, 2012; Kortering & Braziel, 2002). Even the strongest of academic intervention programs do not always guarantee high school completion. Infrequent attendance, behavioral infractions and course failure can predict who will drop out more than socioeconomic or familial factors (Balfanz et al., 2010). Although designing programs entirely based on the predictive factors would be inappropriate without proper individualized student data. Interventions based on these predictors during the elementary and middle years would serve many students, particularly those with learning disabilities, who would not need dropout prevention programs later in high school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Dynarski & Gleason, 1998).

Transition and intervention programs should not only address academic aspects of the transition, but they should equally focus on the social aspects (Letrello & Miles, 2003). In 2010, 31 states had expanded alternative education possibilities for disabled
students at-risk for dropping out (Balfanz et al., 2010). States have made their own individual efforts at designing dropout intervention programs for disabled youth. Typical activities range from state to state, but often include registration activities and peer panels or mentors. They have designed programs such as early warning systems, and early college high school and career academies to address the discrepancy between disabled youth and general education youth who dropout (Balfanz et al.). But these programs are not wide-spread; the design is autonomous depending on the state, county or school district. Data are gathered inconsistently and programs are, therefore, not properly monitored for effectiveness from state to state. Ineffectual outcomes from school intervention programs and poorly organized job training programs have made discrepancies apparent when comparing post-school outcomes of learning disabled youth to their general education peers (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Similar results were found when assessing the effectiveness of middle school intervention programs (Bowers, 2010).

Programmatic intervention must be provided if students will meet educational and employment outcomes in today’s society (Hogan, Bullock & Fritsch, 2010). Student-focused academic interventions at the early, middle and high school levels appear to hold great promise in helping students reach their post-high school outcomes in later years (Cobb & Alwell, 2009). Researchers found the importance of intervention programs that focus on high academic standards through structured learning, school achievement and job skills, can help with lowering the recidivism rates among students with disabilities (Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008).
The literature in this review suggests that students with disabilities do not fare as well as students without disabilities on almost any quality of life metric. It also suggests that students who drop out of high school demonstrate several predictive factors that result in early school departure. The research, or lack thereof, suggests that there is ample work ahead. By increasing awareness of why students with disabilities drop out, students who feel disenfranchised or hopeless may find themselves with connections that lead to success well beyond high school.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study employed student voice theory to explore the possible impact of elementary and middle school experiences on students with learning disabilities with regards to their graduation outcomes. It also employed the self-determination theory to explore the unique differences and needs of students with learning disabilities who are identified as “at-risk” for school failure. Secondarily, this study illustrated the value of qualitative research that adds to the existing quantitative research. The findings provide greater influence to address the problem in the present.

Purpose of Study

Research on the negative outcomes of dropping out of school date back to 1949 (Kortering & Braziel, 2002; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). Yet, the research on the factors related to school completion for students with learning disabilities is a newly-growing field of research (Kortering & Braziel, 2002). The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2006), now ESSA, play a salient role in the implementation of programs that lower the dropout rate of students with and without disabilities (Schifter, 2011). However, regardless of the intentions behind these policies, the graduation rates of students with learning disabilities continue to lag behind their general education peers. Much research is still needed to better understand how early school experiences impact the likelihood of graduating in four years, as well as to explore the decision to leave school early.
The results of this study may provide schools, districts, states and policy makers with a better understanding of how early school experiences are related to school dropout. As well, an understanding of how interventions at the primary and at the secondary level support students vulnerable for dropping out may be gained from this study.

**Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research question:

What elementary and middle school experiences (academic and relational) do 10th grade students with learning disabilities report as influential with regards to intended high school completion?

It also addressed the following sub-questions:

To what extent do early school experiences impact students identified as at risk for dropping out compared to those who are not at-risk for dropping out? What experiences are reported as significant in relation to a student’s likelihood of graduating?

**Design of the Study**

A case study research design provided the methodological framework of this study. A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (i.e. an activity, event, process or individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2012). A
case study design model is appropriate when gathering information that identifies “rules” relating to trends within the population (Creswell, 2012). Yin describes a case study as, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident” (2009, p. 18). Creswell (2012) extends his definition, adding that a case study is an in-depth investigation of a “bounded system” based on extensive research. A bounded system refers to the case study being separated by time, place, or physical boundaries. Three types of case study research include:

- **Intrinsic** (a study that is unusual or has merit in and of itself)
- **Instrumental** (the focus of the study illuminates a particular issue)
- **Collective** (multiple cases are described and compared)

For this study, the collective method was the most effective inquiry approach. Eight students identified with a learning disability from within a population of students with special needs were studied. The researcher explored the lived experiences of students with special needs in an effort to better understand why students from this population, students with learning disabilities, drop out of high school.

The U.S. Department of Education published two leading quantitative studies, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (2010) and Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (2006), to provide states, districts, and schools with quantitative evidence on the outcomes of students with learning disabilities. The research illustrates that there is still much needed work telling student stories of the lived experiences that affected poor graduation outcomes. Additional research may assist teachers,
administrators and policy makers to better understand student needs. To accomplish this purpose, Figure 3.1 further identifies the methodological design of this study.

Figure 3.2. Diagram of methodology design.
Justification of Methods Design

Conducting a collective case study was most appropriate for this topic because it provided understanding of the dropout phenomenon through the study of high school students with learning disabilities. In the limited available research addressing students with learning disabilities and their decision to drop out, interviews and observations have been typically conducted. Interviews were the primary source of data gathered in this study. A review of student records, such as school records and IEPs, provided an additional data source. The data gathered from the student records review supplemented the data obtained during the interviews. The data gathered were used to critically define the factors related to dropping out and to identify “next steps” to address the factors.

Theoretical Framework

Student voice theory (SVT). Student Voice Theory provides the framework to understanding the outcomes of this study. Recognizing the power imbalance between administrators, researchers, and teachers to the student participants, SVT seeks equality of student voice in public education by challenging the structures and processes that exist within the system (Ruddock, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2007). As educational research began to value qualitative student perspectives in the early 1990’s, studying student voice became an integral focus to modern educational research. Educational research began to place a greater emphasis on the use of dialogue to gather data, and studies began to be conducted with students rather than to students (Cook-Sather, 2007). Ruddock (2007) and Lodge (2005) define dialogue as a meaning-making conversation that requires active
participation and listening from the researcher and the participant. SVT requires that researchers do more than just ask students what they think. Instead, it requires the researcher to think critically about student perceptions and then to act purposefully according to the students’ thoughts (Cook-Sather, 2007).

**Self-determination theory (SDT).** As discussed in SVT, the need for autonomy and control are feelings that often drive students, and these feelings are often catalysts for school success. The link between these concepts and how school experiences impact school completion is well coordinated with the self-determination theory that framed this study. Self-determination is assuming a more prominent role in the education of transition-age youth with disabilities. The need for autonomy, competency, and relatedness are cornerstone concepts of the self-determination theory framework. Mason et al. (2004) found that self-determination skills typically are taught somewhat informally. Students with disabilities, it is noted, commonly need much more explicit, systematic, and applied support to acquire necessary self-determination skills (Carter, Lane, Pierson & Stang, 2008). Various articles, books, and curricula have been published over the past decade, elevating self-determination to an integral part of discussions surrounding graduation outcomes (Carter, Lane, Pierson & Stang, 2008). SDT provided this study with the mechanism for better understanding if a student’s determination, regardless of the at-risk barriers or impeding circumstances, impacts his or her decision to drop out.
The central research question and the sub-question of this study were informed by results from collective case studies with interview questions framed from the student voice and the self-determination theories. Figure 3.2 illustrates the intersection of the research questions with the theoretical frameworks used in this study.

**Student Voice Theory**
Collective Case Study Research

**Central Research Question:**
What elementary and middle school experiences (academic and relational) do 10th grade students with learning disabilities report as influential with regards to intended high school completion?

**Self-Determination Theory**
Investigation of Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction (competence, autonomy and relatedness)

**Sub-Questions:**
To what extent do early school experiences impact students identified as at-risk for dropping out compared to those who are not at-risk for dropping out? What experiences are reported as significant with relation to a student’s likelihood of graduating?

*Figure 3.2.* Intersection of research questions and theoretical frameworks.
Context

Raymond High School (RHS) is the only comprehensive high school in California’s Raymond Unified School District. In 2014-15, Raymond High School had seven Special Education/Specialized Academic Instruction teachers. It served students within the full spectrum of Special Education services identified by the California Department of Education. In 2013, 11% of the general population at RHS was reported as receiving Special Education services. In 2014-15, the Special Education population was near 12% of students receiving Specialized Academic Instruction services. Students identified with a learning disability received Special Education services identified in Individualized Education Plans written by teams lead by a Specialized Academic Instructor (SAI) teacher who was the student’s case manager.

Demographics. Since 2011, as reported in their California Department of Education’s Academic Performance Index (API) report, enrollment at RHS has progressively declined. API performance is relevant to this study, as it provides clarity on academic performance levels of general education and special education students with relation to dropout statistics. In 2013-14, the two major ethnicities served at RHS are White and Hispanic retrospectively RHS served 63% white students and 32% Hispanic students. It serves students from the African America, Asian and “Other” (ie: two or more races, Native American, Pacific Islander) subgroups. Ethnic populations of students with disabilities mirror the ethnic populations of the students in the general education population. The data gathered in this study only compares to identify if at-risk and non-at-risk student populations demonstrate differing results. See figure 3.3.
Figure 3.3. Ethnicity of Ramona High School

**Student Achievement.** Other than during the 2009-10 school year, the Students with Disabilities subgroup made steady academic progress according to API data. But the general population at RHS has not demonstrated the same steady growth. There is no correlation to the irregular general education trends with regards to API student academic improvement. However, since 2011, RHS has demonstrated steadily increasing API scores of their Students with Disabilities subgroup. From 2011 to 2013, students with learning disabilities demonstrated a 26-point growth at RHS. See figure 3.4. Graduation
rates, on the other hand, do not show as promising results. The static, non-changing graduation rates of students from the general education population compared to those in the Students with Disabilities subgroup indicates that further research is needed to better understand if and how demographics affect student achievement.

Figure 3.4. RHS student achievement according to API score by school year.
**Procedures**

Several phases provided the roadmap to conducting this research. The first phase, to identify the type of design, has been outlined in this chapter. The researcher used the results of case studies to better understand the dropout phenomenon as it relates to students with learning disabilities. The second phase was to obtain IRB approval to conduct the research. Before doing so, the research sites were identified and contact persons at each site were selected. Provisions were guaranteed to the sites ensuring protection and reciprocation for their participation.

The majority of this study occurred during phases three, four, and five. In phase three, the researcher collected interview data from eight student participants. The focus was to study the lived experiences, particularly those during the early school years, of students with disabilities through stories of events, activities, or processes. It provides additional data to add to the existing research and provides a better understanding of the similarities and differences among the experiences of students with learning disabilities. Phase four analyzed and interpreted the data by developing a description by analyzing the data for themes and providing interpretation of the descriptions and meanings. The fifth and last phase reported the findings in a written narrative. The data were coded, and common themes emerged which were explained in the written narrative.
Participant Selection

Participants were intentionally selected through the process of purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling, researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon. (Creswell, 2011). In this study, 12 tenth grade high school students who met the criteria identified below were purposefully selected to participate. After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a parental and participant consent was signed and obtained by eight of the twelve students who were then identified as the participants of the study. Data from school records gathered on the students selected for the study indicated evidence of the following criteria in order to participate:

- The student must have an Individualized Education Plan with a diagnosis of Learning Disability or Specific Learning Disability
- The student must speak English as his/her first language

School records and transcripts of the eight participants were reviewed. Participants were identified as “at-risk” if they met the following criterion:

- Credit deficiency and failure in at least one course

Participant Profiles

The profile of each participant is described in appendix D. The participants were all 10th grade students at Raymond High School. Each student receives Special Education services and is identified with a primary handicapping condition of a Specific
Learning Disability. Some of the students have secondary handicapping conditions in addition to their primary condition. The researcher identified each participant as “at-risk” because of being credit deficient, or “non-at-risk,” because he/she had the appropriate number of proper credits and courses. This occurred for the purpose of identifying whether and how school experiences affect students in the sub-populations differently. Four students were identified in each group. Every participant profile includes the requirement to meet the following graduation criteria:

- 225 total credits. This includes:
  - 4 years of English (40 credits)
  - 3 years of math (30 credits)
  - 3 years of social sciences (30 credits)
  - 2 years of science (20 credits)
  - 2 years of PE (20 credits)
  - 1 year of a fine art (10 credits)
- Pass Physical Education Exam
- Pass California High School Exit Exam (waived per CA Assembly Bill 120)

An analysis of the interviews and school records showed that the eight participants shared common characteristics. First, each student identified two similar post-secondary goals on their Individual Transition Plans: (a) attend a university or community college, and (b) obtain a part- or full-time job. Second, other than one participant, all had failed or earned a D in at least one course. Third, all but one have a primary disability of Specific Learning Disabled and no secondary disabilities identified. One student’s IEP indicated a primary disability of Other Health Impaired, due to medical issues, and a secondary disability of Specific Learning Disabled. Gross and fine motor development needs, vocational needs, and adaptive/daily living skills needs are not
identified as needs on any of the students’ IEPs. All of the students plan to graduate on time although four are credit deficient.

Although the students shared several common characteristics, there were several notable differences. The students had differing family circumstances: marital status, siblings, and other family members in the home were not comparable. Each student qualified for Special Education services with the same disabling condition, but for different reasons, as identified in each student’s IEP. The students have differing hobbies, interests and learning strengths. Each student had different academic goals written on their IEPs, although all of the students have a goal written in reading comprehension, identified by delayed reading abilities in need of intervention. Two of the participants have a documented record of behavioral difficulties while six of the participants did not display notable behavioral difficulties in school.

**Participant Profiles: At-Risk Cohort**

The four participants in the at-risk cohort have several common traits and profile descriptors (see appendix D). They were all born and raised in Raymond, and they attended elementary, middle and high school in Raymond. All four participants are credit deficient and have failed at least two courses. All four participants demonstrate learning weaknesses in reading comprehension and have IEP goals to address the need. None of the four participants have noted speech and language concerns and, therefore, do not receive services in this area. As identified on their Individual Transition Plans (ITP), all
four students noted the following post-graduation goals: (a) attend a community college or university, and (b) work part-time.

While there are several common characteristics shared amongst the participants of the at-risk cohort, there are still characteristics that they do not share. Other than one, Macy, all of the participants are credit deficient, indicating that they do not have enough credits to graduate. While Macy had enough credits at the time of the interview, her credits earned were in classes that did not count toward graduation. Her earned credits were, therefore, insufficient for graduation credit, therefore deeming her credit deficient. Second, their entrance years into Special Education differed. Third, attendance records are not consistent. Two of the participants attend school regularly, while the other two have inconsistent attendance records. Three of the four participants demonstrate weaknesses in math and have an IEP goal to address the need. Three of the four students reported familial barriers such as loss of a parent, custody issues or parent illness as significant in their school experiences (see appendix D for a detailed description of each student).

Data Collection

Data were collected over a two month period between May 2015 and June 2015. All data gathered from the participants were collected with explicit permission from the participants and the participants’ parent/guardian, and in full compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Interview data were used to construct each participant’s story. Student voice theory guided the data collection and analysis to
answer the primary research question. Self-Determination Theory guided the data collection and analysis to answer the sub-questions.

**Interviews.** The researcher conducted individual interviews using a standard interview protocol (see Appendix A). The researcher used a semi-structured, in-depth set of interview questions to gather data. Student voices were captured through an analysis of interviews. During the interviews, the researcher closely examined the shared patterns of behaviors, beliefs, and language that developed over time by engaging in fieldwork interviews and by asking additional questions, as necessary, to obtain data that aids in answering the central research question and the sub-questions. Answers to interview questions were analyzed in order to explore the depths of each individual story.

**Records Review.** A review of individual student cumulative records (i.e. attendance, grades, behavioral, cumulative, health records and interventions) was conducted throughout the data collection phase to determine trends in the student data. These documents also provided insight to information gathered during the interviews. Additionally, pertinent data sources provided the researcher with individual student legal documents (i.e. Individualized Education Plan and Individual Transition Plan documents) to triangulate the sources with interview data. Additional documents such as school and district policies, communication data, and standardized test scores were beneficial during this phase.
Data Analysis

In a case study design, data are gathered and deeply analyzed for common themes to provide a meaning of the summation of all the gathered data (Creswell, 2012). The analysis follows the description and interpretation, but the analysis procedures varies depending on whether you are studying a single case or multiple cases. The research in this study followed the “typical” case study analysis by first analyzing each case separately, then by conducting a cross-case analysis to identify common and different themes among all of the cases. During the data collection process, the researcher looked for major ideas that will give a deeper interpretation to the analysis.

Data were organized according to interviews which were transcribed and coded. The coding allowed the researcher to segment and label the text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data (Creswell, 2011). In Vivo coding was the method used to code the interviews. In Vivo coding is the practice of assigning a label to a section of data, such as an interview transcript, using a word or short phrase taken from that section of the data (King, 2008). The researcher ensured that concepts stayed as close as possible to research participants’ own words or terms in order to capture key elements of what was being described. In Vivo was particularly applicable to this study, as it prioritized and honored the participant’s voices, a tenant of Student Voice Theory. In research not guided by SVT, child and adolescent voices are often marginalized; coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult’s understanding of their cultures and worldviews (Saldana, 2009).
Analysis of the data were simultaneous with collecting the data, and it was iterative, cycling back and forth between gathering and analyzing the data. Coding segmented the data into reoccurring themes. During the coding process, the researcher considered several “next steps”, such as how to organize the data, if interviews need to be clarified, or if more data was needed. The coding process yielded segmented themes, therefore the researcher did not need to identify what data still needed to be collected to narrow the results.

Detail and descriptions were important in this study, so data were carefully analyzed from interview data. The researcher was able to use the themed data to answer the research questions once the proper data was collected. The primary mode of data representation was a narrative discussion. A narrative discussion is a written passage in qualitative writing in which the author summarizes, in detail, the findings of the analysis (Creswell, 2011). Tables, diagrams and figures supplemented the narrative. Transcribed dialogue and direct quotes from participant interviews were included in the narrative discussion. The overall intention of including transcribed dialogue was to relay precise information that gives students’ voice, and to provide the reader with detailed results that prove, or disprove, the overview of findings.

As it did in determining the participants for this study, the conditions of student voice theory guided the statistical analysis in order to answer the research questions. Implementation of the theoretical frameworks helped inform the researcher if the information gave enough data to answer the research questions. The study concludes
with proposed “next steps” to address the phenomenon, including an analysis providing information on areas of further needed research in the field.

**Interpretation of Results**

Interpretation of qualitative data involves making sense of the data, or the “lessons learned” (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, the term “interpretation” is the process of finding a larger meaning about the phenomenon based on personal views, comparisons with past studies, or both. The interpretation began with describing and analyzing the individual stories of the participants, then by interpreting their shared patterns and experiences. The researcher compared results from individual interviews, specifically reviewing and comparing the early school experiences of students with learning disabilities, to determine commonalities or themes in the results classified within the report. To do this, statements were coded and organized into themes before further analyzing the statements for positive or negative sentiment. Figure 3.5 provides researcher samples from the coded data.
The researcher also analyzed relevant student records to further enhance the analysis of each case. The interpretation included a comparison of data to existing literature. It concluded with limitations of the study and suggestions for future research to further strengthen investigation in the field.

**Ethical Considerations**

Because qualitative research is rather interpretive by nature, the researcher was careful to provide results that validated the findings that truly represented what the
participants were attempting to communicate. This was done by considering differing perspectives and interpretations of the data during the analysis process. This was also done by clarifying the interview questions or asking for elaboration when the participants demonstrated confusion or a different interpretation of the question. For example, in Kole’s explanation of the support he receives from his parents, the researcher asked for elaboration on his thoughts:

    Researcher: Do you feel like your parents back you up a lot?
    Kole: They used to.
    Researcher: Not anymore? What happened?
    Kole: Sometimes they do, but now I’m getting older. Now, I used to make really good decisions now? I’m trying not to get in to trouble any more.

This provided a clearer perspective on Kole’s story, which allowed for a more accurate analysis of his thoughts. Additionally, the study involved vulnerable student populations. Therefore, the researcher took all precautions as required for the protection of human subjects to reduce the risk to the participants.

Limitations

Positionality. Bias plays a large role in determining the validity of a study. The researcher’s position as the Principal of a feeder elementary school brings a level of leadership that many students, and some staff and parents, are intimidated by, therefore possibly skewing the participant responses. Positionality, therefore, was considered prior to the research being conducted.
**Generalizability.** The purpose of qualitative research is not to apply its findings to an entire population. Generalizability is not the aim. Instead, qualitative research seeks to study the experiences of people through stories. In a study like this, generalizing student responses as normative is inappropriate because the deep analysis during the second phase was done with eight selected candidates who meet the study criteria. As the purpose is to deeply explore the lived experiences of human subjects, rich and lengthy data was extracted from the participants, therefore, this study was suited for qualitative research.

Other limitations are considered:

- The acceptance of participant responses are considered as a limitation, as the students may be intimidated, nervous or disinterested in the interview topics.
- This design is labor intensive, as it required extensive in-depth studies on individual participants within the population (Creswell, 2012).
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study identified, documented, and analyzed the lived early school experiences of 10th grade students identified with learning disabilities with the purpose of studying how these experiences impact the likelihood of graduation. This section contains a discussion of the categories that arose from all eight interviews and describes the three major themes that arose from the interviews of all the participants. It also contains a discussion of the data as they arose from the participant interviews in the at-risk cohort and describes the two major themes reported by the participants.

Abbreviated excerpts from each student’s interview are reported in this chapter to provide the reader with an authentic account of the students’ experiences as they relate to the research questions guiding this study. Interview excerpts included in this section are relevant to the study, yet not all excerpts are included. Excerpts that are included in the narrative were selected due to their relevance to this study’s research question and illustrate the major themes through the lens of student voice and self-determination theories. Participant profiles (see Appendix D) are written in narrative format to provide context to the students’ lives and experiences. They include descriptive biographical information with a summarized description of the student’s academic and behavioral history according to school records.

Because the purpose of this study was to understand the lived school experiences of students with learning disabilities with regards to their graduation outcomes, data analysis focused on finding themes and patterns that would create a picture of their experiences. To answer the study’s research question, student voice theory provided the
framework. Student voice theory most appropriately suits the data analysis because the data were gathered directly from the students in narratives and stories based on their perspectives of their own school experiences. School-based youth-adult partnerships tend to be discussed in educational research literature as “student voice” initiatives, which are defined as ways in which youth can have the opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Mitra, 2014). Additionally, the lack of research gathered from students’ point of view illustrates the need for research that is authentic according to student voices.

Interview transcripts were reviewed and analyzed multiple times before coding and categorizing the participant statements and stories into common categories of themes. As the data in each category were explored, the researcher made connections to positive and negative outcomes resulting from the categories, and the data were organized accordingly. The categorized positive and negative statements, and the subcategories, were identified within each category before writing the narrative analysis.

Student voice theory provided the structure to analyze the data that arose from the entire group of participants, but the self-determination theory guided the analysis of the data gathered from the at-risk cohort. Student voice research has resulted in youth development outcomes such as increases in agency, belonging and competence (Mitra, 2014; Zeldin et al., 2002). Outcomes such as these are closely related to the concepts identified in the self-determination theory. Therefore, close attention was given to connecting the research to the concepts of autonomy, relatedness and competency as identified in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
To answer the sub-question, the data were disaggregated into two cohorts and analyzed to determine if the students in the at-risk cohort provided information that differed from those students in the non-at-risk cohort. The analysis of this portion of the study was grounded in the concepts that define self-determination theory. As the researcher analyzed the data from this cohort, the concepts of autonomy, relatedness and competency were considered as the categories and subcategories were born from the data. Categories of themes were identified, then the data were identified as having positive and negative outcomes. Then, considering the differentiated data within the themes, subcategories within the categories were identified.

**Data Presentation**

Using student voice theory and self-determination theory as the theoretical frameworks, the researcher employed a qualitative design to accomplish the study’s purpose. A narrative inquiry grounded in student voice presents an analysis of data to answer the central research question: What elementary and middle school experiences (academic and relational) do students with learning disabilities report as influential with regards to high school completion?

**Context**

Eight tenth grade students identified with a learning disability were interviewed for this study. Students were selected to participate through the process of purposeful
sampling. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2012). The participants in this study were purposefully selected because they meet the study criteria: (a) enrolled in 10th grade, and (b) identified with a Specific Learning Disability on an Individualized Education Plan. The participants were finishing their Sophomore year of high school when the study began. The age and year in which the students were enrolled was critical to the outcome of this study because students who are identified as at-risk are identified as so as early as the end of their Sophomore year. It is during the Sophomore year that transcripts are analyzed for credit deficiency and graduation plans are written. After the full complement of participants was selected, students in the at-risk cohort were identified due to their credit deficiency, which meant that they were behind in terms of their progress toward graduation. Students in the non-at-risk cohort were not credit deficient. Although the students were not informed of their placement in each group, four students were considered as “at-risk”, and four were considered as “non-at-risk”.

Six of the eight students were male, and all were Caucasian. The gender representation in this study mirrors the typical demographics of the students who receive Special Education services at Raymond High School (RHS). The racial make-up of the participants in this study, however, does not mirror the typical racial and gender demographics of students at RHS. The racial demographics of the students in this study also did not represent the typical demographics of students who received Special Education services at RHS. In both the typical population and the population of students who receive Special Education services at Raymond High school, Hispanic students
populate a larger group than represented in this study. The similar racial demographic of
the students who participated in the study was not purposeful, although all students in the
study were expected to speak English. The demographics in this study are also not
representative of the school, state or nation as a whole. Nevertheless, the goal of
qualitative research is not to generalize the findings to the larger population, but rather to
explore the lived experiences of a specific set of participants. All eight students
participated willingly.

Procedure

The researcher identified twelve students who met the study eligibility criteria: (a)
enrolled in tenth grade, and (b) identified with a handicapping condition of Specific
Learning Disability on an Individualized Education Plan. Participants were also expected
to speak English as their first language because the study’s primary research question
does not ask for outcomes related to English Language learners. Prior to selecting the
participants for the study, the researcher met with the twelve students in three small
groups with the purpose of introducing the study and establishing rapport. After
describing the purpose of the study, the researcher sent home a parent/guardian Consent
to Participate in Research form (see appendix A) and an Assent to Participate in Research
form (see appendix B) with each student. The researcher obtained the permission forms
from eight of the twelve invited students who were all selected as the participants in this
study. Six of the students were male, and two were female.
The objective of this research was to gather information from the participants through stories told in their own words in order to explore the possible impact of elementary and middle school experiences on students with learning disabilities who are at-risk for school high school failure. Individual interviews were scheduled and conducted in May and June 2015, and all but one were held at Raymond High School. Every interview consisted of questions within four focus areas: (a) the Special Education services received, (b) elementary school experiences, (c) middle school experiences, and (d) high school experiences (see appendix C). Every student was encouraged to tell their stories as they had authentically experienced them. Participants shared their experiences, including those that were positive and those that were negative. They also shared their thoughts on the services they are provided, as well as obstacles that prevented them from being successful. At the end of each interview, the participants provided their concluding remarks on their school experiences and thoughts and predictions on future post-high school experiences.

The interviews were audio taped, and downloaded to revrecorder.com, an online service, for transcription. In Vivo coding was used to ensure that the labels arose from the participants’ own words. This was done with the assistance of DeDoose.com, an online coding program. The initial analysis produced 744 unique codes of unrefined qualitative data identified in words, phrases or statements from the participants. The content of each code was analyzed according to the type of school experience the statement is referring and categorized in to 12 types of school experiences. The data were later grouped in to six common reoccurring areas, or themes. The data from the six themes were categorized to identify the participant perspectives on each theme where the
students discussed their early school experiences as positively influencing, or inversely, as negatively influencing, their success in high school in relation to possible graduation outcomes.

A secondary measure of gathering information was a records review of student, legal and school data. One measure studied was that of student attendance. Considered as a potential factor in the graduation outcomes in this study, attendance was reviewed prior to the analysis of data. Poor attendance factors did not emerge as an outstanding characteristic in need of further study. Therefore, this was not a factor addressed or studied throughout the process.

Students were interviewed without knowledge of either distinction between the cohorts or of their placement within them. Two cohorts of four participants each –“at-risk” and “non-at-risk” - were identified according to their credit status toward meeting the required graduation outcomes. Participant data within the two cohorts were analyzed and compared to identify if there is consistency of findings, and to determine what findings across both categories are unique to each cohort. All names and demographic data were changed or deleted.

Data Results & Analysis

The student voice theory framework provided the structure for which this portion of the study was organized. The participants’ experiences and stories were gathered, coded and analyzed according to this framework. The framework to this study is a
critical piece to the analysis for two reasons. First, the lack in qualitative research on this topic illustrates the need for authentic student stories and narratives told, and reported, from the students’ point of view. Second, because the primary research question asks for data on student school experiences, it is important that the interviews directly reflect the experiences as told by participants. The study did not gather information from the adults who support the participants because the research questions grounding this exploration focused on the students’ perceptions of their own experiences as told from their own perspective.

The participants engaged in interviews with open descriptions of their school experiences. Interview questions were organized, then executed, according to the following categories: (a) special education services received, (b) elementary school experiences, (c) middle school experiences, and (d) high school experiences. Participants described the special education services they received and of their experiences while receiving the services. The participants also described their elementary, middle and high school experiences and their reflections on those experiences, along with their thoughts and predictions on post-high school experiences.

The responses provided the researcher with rich and ample data that lead to the five themes identified in Table 4.1 which presents the number of codes related to five common categories the participants spoke to during the interviews. Responses were coded, and 744 codes were organized according to common words and common themed statements from the stories and responses provided by the participants in the study. Participant stories and quotes from the interview data are provided throughout the rest of
this chapter to illustrate the five identified thematic areas that emerged from the data. After the data were organized in five themes, data were again coded to identify which statements had positive reference and negative reference. A sixth category represents participants’ general reflections on experiences and on the future. A seventh category came to be as a result of not applicable or unrelated data gathered during the interviews.
Table 4.1. Significant experiences that impact graduation outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of experience</th>
<th>Number of codes related</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Difficulties</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with Adults</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships with Friends</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Success</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Transitions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflections on Future Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Applicable Statements</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1 shows that participants identified more positive or supportive relational experiences than negative or unsupportive experiences, or barriers, in all three thematic areas. The data presented indicates that: (a) the researcher identified 77% more codes related to supportive or positive experiences than unsupportive or negative experiences in the category of relationships with adults, (b) the researcher identified 38% more codes related to positive experiences than negative experiences in the category of school transitions, and (c) the researcher identified 9% more positive experiences than unsupportive experiences in the category of relationships with friends.

Figure 4.1. Themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.
Interview data were further analyzed by reviewing transcript codes, and the three most significant themes emerged, and became the focus of the results discussed in the narrative in this chapter. Further analysis resulted in subthemes within the major themes, which are identified in Figure 4.1. Three subthemes were identified in the first theme, Relationships with Teachers/Staff and Adults. The second theme, School Transitions, is described by four subthemes that describe the transitions students face while in school. The third theme, Relationships with Friends, represents data in three subthemes that outline how peer relationships impact student perceptions of graduation outcomes.

Data were extracted and analyzed to determine if the experience described had a positive or negative, or supportive or unsupportive, impact on the students’ school experiences. To determine if the response was positive or negative, or supportive or unsupportive, or a barrier, each response was analyzed to determine the emotion in which it was presented. This was further accomplished by examining the tone according to the amount of optimism, hope or nostalgia in how the answers were presented during the interviews. For example, Elias’s description of his relationship with one of his teachers was referenced with a negative perspective. He said, “It was very up and down. Either you were all good one day or you didn’t do anything and you still got in trouble.” When describing his case manager, on the other hand, he had a positive reference to the experience. He said, “My case manager, he does, he wants to see me succeed. He just wants to see me better myself.”

Figure 4.3 illustrates the themes that address each question. The bubbles present the most significant factors related to graduation outcomes, as reported by the research
question and sub-question. The first bubble addresses the research question by presenting the three themes, or factors, reported by the eight participants. The second bubble addresses the sub-question by presenting the two themes, or factors, that emerged from the interviews conducted with the four participants in the at-risk cohort.

Figure 4.3. Themes related to the research questions.

Central Research Question

Coding data from the interviews of the eight participants led to identification of three significant themes in which students discussed their school experiences as they related to the following central research question:

What elementary and middle school experiences (academic and relational) do 10th grade students with learning disabilities report as influential with regards to intended high school completion?
The data presented in Table 4.1 identifies the three most commonly-referenced themes that emerged from this study: (1) relationships with adults, (2) school transitions, and (3) relationships with friends.

Theme 1: Relationships with Adults

There were 744 total codes in this study. The most referenced theme was relationships with school staff and family adults. In fact, this theme was referred to almost twice as much as the other two most common themes. Participants made 220 statements or phrases about relationships with adults. Participants reported 190 of the 220 statements within this theme, or 86% of the responses, as being positive, supportive or optimistic relationships with adults. Participants provided many anecdotal accounts of their positive and supportive experiences with adults. As identified in Table 4.1, the participants referred to most of their experiences with adults as positive, supportive or optimistic. For example, Zande positively said, “Mrs. Harrison, that was my favorite teacher. I don’t know, she helped me out a lot. She knew where I was coming from, so she saw a whole other view of me, which helped me out a lot.”

The codes related to relationships with adults (teachers/staff, case manager/counselor, and family) comprised the most referred to category in this study. The participants identified many ways in which relationships with adults were supportive and positive. For example, Macy indicated feeling a deeper level of positive support in high school. She said, “I feel like I have more support here in high school than I ever did in elementary school.” Only few, on the other hand, identified ways that relationships
with adults were unsupportive or positive. Of the 220 statements, 20 of them, or 9%, were relayed as negative or unsupportive experiences. These negative and unsupportive experiences are considered as barriers to their school experience. Participants provided some anecdotal accounts of their negative and unsupportive experiences with adults. For example, Elias reported feeling that teachers are judgmental toward students. He said, “It’s how the teachers look at you, how you carry yourself is how they’re going to judge you.” Three subthemes within this theme emerged: (a) relationships with teachers/staff and adults, (b) relationships with their Special Education case manager and counselor, and (c) relationships with parents and family members.

Subtheme 1A: Relationships with teachers/staff

Participants discussed their relationships with teachers and other school staff twice as often as the other four themes that emerged in the study. All of the students referred to their relationships with adults as significant when remembering their school experiences. All of the participants spoke to their supportive relationships with teachers and staff at the elementary level, and this subtheme emerged as the most talked about category of adult relationships. All of the students indicated that they have had, or currently have, positive relationships with at least one teacher. While participants spoke about their feelings on the specific relationships with teachers and staff, others spoke to general characteristics they find important in building relationships with teachers and staff. Macy talked about the acts teacher demonstrate to make her feel supported:
When a teacher normally comes up to you and says, “You’re missing this”, or “Do you have this?”, it kind of makes me feel like they care. And it’s kind of nice, and reminds me, because sometimes I forget things.

Student-to-teacher relationships in elementary school were frequently referenced during the interviews. Twice during his interview, Elias described the supportive nature of his sixth grade teacher:

My sixth grade teacher probably was one of the best besides my kindergarten. He was probably one of the teachers that I’ve had. He was really down to earth. He’d help you. If he saw you were down, he’d go over to, “Hey, what are you doing?” Cheer you up. He was just a down to earth guy.

Just that one teacher – my sixth grade teacher – he would just push you and help you. He’d just push you to go out of your boundaries a little bit and make you to where you don’t know you could do things that you could do. He was just always there for people. He is pretty funny, silly, down to earth kind of guy.

Brady spoke about his continuing relationship with one of his teachers in elementary school:

My second grade teacher. I really liked her, I think one of my favorite teachers. Even now, she’ll see me in the grocery store or something, and be like, “Brady!” She knows me. It’s cool getting teachers when you were young, and they remember you.

Students reported the importance of being able to rely on teachers and staff, making this common theme within this subcategory. Brady’s memory of a teacher from elementary school stood out:

Then, at the elementary school, Mrs. Beams. I don’t know if she’s still there, but she helped me. She was the teacher I went to for help. Yah.
They helped me. If I had projects in class, we’d all work out our projects and she’d help me get stuff done.

All of the participants spoke of their relationships with teachers and staff at the middle school level. Referring to his experiences with teachers at staff in middle school, Brady said:

The teachers made it [middle school] fun. Middle school is better than elementary school. The interactions with different teachers, it was a big change and I liked it. The interactions with different teachers, it was a big change, and I liked it.

Kole often referenced relationships with teachers and staff as an important factor that determined his success in school because he mentioned his respect for his teachers and their respect for him multiple times. To describe his feeling on this, Kole spoke about Miss Moler, his middle school teacher:

There’s one teacher that, Miss Moler, I had her as a teacher. She really helped me and we got along really good.

Researcher: What was it about Miss Moler that you got along with?
I never talked back to her. I had to be really respectful to her and she really enjoyed having me in her class.

Tawny spoke about her reflections on respecting her teachers and the benefit to developing strong relationships with them:

Seventh grade is when I actually started realizing, hey you should probably respect your teachers so you could be friends with them and stuff. Because then things are kind of cool, you know? So with teachers, I felt like I had a good relationship with all of them.
Macy was less enthusiastic about her relationships with teachers in middle school. Three students, including Macy, spoke about relationships with middle school teachers as being less of a factor that determined their success in high school. She said:

A little bit, ‘ya [I felt supported in middle school]. Not as much as I do now [in high school].

Experiences with high school teachers were highly regarded as significant in retaining their motivation to succeed in school. Most of the participants’ sentiments were positive and referenced teachers who were “supportive” in and out of the class setting. Few statements about unsupportive teachers were made. It should be noted that the reference of positive experiences was most common when the participants spoke about their relationships with teachers and staff compared to any other category or subcategory in this study. Some participants, like Tawny, referenced specific staff members.

I believe the teachers believe in me.

There is Ms. Sayer in the front office. Me and her are like besties. Ms. Sayer is the principal’s secretary. Yah, she’s awesome. She would like do anything for me.

Ms. Conley is pretty legit. Yah, she’s an English teacher.

Zander spoke about his teacher relationships in high school with a positive outlook:

Mrs. Harrison, that was my favorite teacher. I don’t know, she helped me out a lot. She knew where I was coming from, so she saw a whole other view of me, which helped me out a lot.
All of the participants referred to positive, strong relationships with teachers and staff as motivators to be successful in the classroom. Kole, Brady, and Micah detailed their feelings about supportive teachers and staff at the high school level:

Mr. Johnson really likes me. Mr. Mauer, he was my support help. We got along really good. My Science teacher, Miss Entine, and she’s also my track coach, and we get along really good. –Kole

At the high school, Mr. Mauer, supports me. –Brady

Who cares about me? The teachers and staff and faculty of the school and the principals of the school they’re here to watch everyone. They’re here to help us get through. They’re here to teach us a message basically. I just have to open my heart to listen to what they have to say. They care for me that way. –Micah

Zander indicated there were no high school teachers or staff members who were a barrier to his success in school. He was confident that his high school experience was positively impacted by the stable relationships he had built with his teachers.

Researcher: Is there anybody who’s made a negative impact on you? Anybody who’s stopped you from getting as far as you’d like?
No, no.

Although participants like Zander indicated that he did not have unsupportive or negative relationships with teachers and staff, references to unsupportive relationships, primarily in elementary school, were referenced by a few. References to unsupportive teacher and staff relationships were noted primarily at the elementary level. Ely spoke about difficulties with his 6th grade teacher:
It took us a while to figure out the assignments that she gave us. You have two days to complete a hundred and two questions, and you had to get it all right or else you’d have to redo it.

Kieran summarized his elementary experiences as negative.

I think, it was too negative. For some things, I think really negative.

Tawny talked about her struggles with teachers in elementary school:

You try your hardest, and it’s still not good enough for them.

Macky described her elementary experience as, “embarrassing”, “self-conscious” and “lonely”. She was direct about her depression in elementary school and how she did not feel supported.

Researcher: Let’s talk about your elementary school experience. Did you feel successful in elementary?

Macy: No. No, not at all.

Researcher: How did, or did you not, feel supported in elementary school?

No. I even feel like I have more support here in high school than I ever did in elementary school.

Although Macy’s relational experiences with teachers in elementary school were not strong, other participants spoke about the unsupportive teacher-to-student relationships they had in high school. Elias said:

She [my general education teacher] made a point to move my seat over by the door in the corner where I was far away from everyone. I couldn’t really…it’s not that I couldn’t hear her, nut she was just kind of…she isolated me over in my little thing.

He also stated:
I ended up in the office probably six, seven times this last year or only probably four or five this year. It was back to I couldn’t voice my opinion. It wasn’t that they wouldn’t give me a chance to explain it, they would give be a chance to explain, they just wouldn’t listen about it.

An overwhelming amount of evidence shows that relationships with adults are the single most salient factor in determining a students’ success. Furthermore, the little research that does exist studying what deems success for students with learning disabilities indicates even stronger outcomes for students with learning disabilities who make positive connections with teachers and staff (Barile et al., 2012; McGrath & Bergen, 2015; Tennant et al., 2015). The data from this study supports the existing literature, particularly which identifies positive relationships ass having the most productive outcomes, and provides qualitative supports to the existing findings in the quantitative literature.

Subtheme 1B: Relationships with Special Education Case Manager and/or School Counselor

When describing their teacher-to-student relationships, many of the students referenced experiences with their Special Education case managers, or the teachers assigned to overlook their programming needs, throughout their four years in high school. They also referenced their general education counselors who oversee their high school experience. This subcategory emerged as the second most talked about category within this theme. Case manager-to-student connections were often referenced as being a motivating factor in striving for success in the classroom. Every student who spoke
about their relationship with at least one of their case managers showed with a positive, supportive outlook. When participants talked about their relationships with their case managers, they did so with gratitude toward the case manager for listening to them, believing in their success, and helping them when learning was hard. Collaboration with their case managers to design their learning path, along with having the knowledge that their case manager will be supportive, were common themes reported in this research.

Brady spoke about his relationship with his case manager at RHS. In this statement, he spoke about his feelings on why he regularly sought out his case managers for assistance:

They [my case manager in middle school and my case manager in high school] gave me a lot of chances if I got in trouble or something. I just had a connection with them. I don’t know. It’s just something about them I really liked, and they liked me. It was really good.

Those [Special Education] teachers and my case manager are really the only teachers that stood out, that I had a good connection with.

Kole had similar thoughts:

She [my case manager] really helped me doing really positive things in my life. Like, going through, I don’t know…she really helped me.

Students relayed their admiration for staff members who they felt helped them during their high school experience. Tawny’s relationship with her case manager, Mrs. Wilson, motivated her to emulate what she saw and see her case manager as a role model. Tawny indicated that she would like to be a school counselor, similar to the role of her case manager, due to her personal experiences with Mrs. Wilson. Tawny’s relational
experiences with her counselor, as indicated during her interview, were indicated as strong factors in her decision to stay the course and graduate. She said:

Her and my step-mom are the two people. I mean, “Jesus, are you serious?! You’re freaking awesome. I want to be just like you.”

Several participants spoke to their positive relationships with their counselors, indicating this relationship of importance. Individual counseling, self-advocacy groups and collaboration efforts organized by counselors are approaches that studies report as effective in developing strong high school outcomes for learning disabled students (Richards, 2000). The students in this study, however, did not refer to the participation in activities or groups organized by counselors. Instead, they focused primarily on the relationships built with the counselor. Supportive high school counselors were referred to often during several participant interviews. Macy spoke about her counselor, Mr. Paulson, when she talked of his care of her and her family.

Mr. Paulson already helps with our family already, so I’m kind of grateful. Paulson feels like family because he supports us kids and he helps out with everything. He came over and brought with a bunch of people and helped us around our house because needed help. He’s helped a lot.

Subtheme 1C: Relationships with Parents and Family

Both supportive and unsupportive relationships with parents and family members were referenced often during the interviews. Micah’s deep connection with his parents was a theme in his interview. His obvious admiration for his father, and his respect for his mother, seemed to be significant factors to Micah. He said:
My dad stood up for what he believed in. That really taught me that I should stand up for what I believe.

Micah continued, speaking about his father who was diagnosed with cancer during Micah’s 9th grade year. He said:

When I was in middle school, within the past few days, my dad got cancer. That had an effect on my academics. He is still alive today.

His admiration extended to his older sister who Micah spoke about several times during his interview:

When I was in second grade, she was a few grades above me and she was in the same elementary school as I was. That motivated me and it brought me joy. [When I entered high school as a Freshman] It brought me happiness to be in the same school again and just being in high school because I knew that it’s the beginning part of my adulthood. Because I was 14 when I began high school and now, I’m 16 going into my Junior year. I felt like I was motivated by my sister.

I was in the marching band as a saxophonist my Freshman year. That really motivated me because I have a sibling who’s there with me in the same band in the same school again because we went to the same school for elementary school.

Although less frequent, participants referenced unsupportive relationships with parents and family members having a negative influence on their school experiences. Macy spoke about her challenging family dynamic:

I had support from my father up until Freshman year. My mom was with us, we were having problems in eighth and ninth grade. She got into some difficult spots for her and she’s dealing with them now in court and prison and stuff.

My sister is just, she’s a whole ‘nother problem. She’s been part of the problem since middle school as well.
Kole felt that he did not need Special Education services, and described them as being “stupid”. He described how his parents encouraged him to accept Special Education services although he was unwilling to do so. He said:

It [Special Education services] helped me in school, but, in elementary school, I was like, ‘oh, I don’t need this. It’s stupid. I felt that I didn’t really need it, but my parents were like, “You need it. It will help you in the future.” I wasn’t really comfortable with them. I was just…I didn’t really like it.

Kole conceded to services and later indicated the feeling of support from his parents when he realized the services were beneficial. He was clear that his mother and father were supportive when it came to being successful in school:

Kole: I needed help on math, English…because I have a hard time doing my work and other situations in schoolwork.

Researcher: When you started receiving the services, did you feel like it helped you?

Kole: Yes, it did.

Kole: Yeah, my mom really wants me to be really successful in school. She helps me with homework. My sister helps me, my dad helps me. Pretty much the whole family helps.

Macy and Kole explained the emotional impact that their family members had on them. For them, and for other participants in the study, although they felt supported by family, negative family experiences were often seen as unsupportive. Hughes’s (2011) study of relational support between children and adults found that children’s perceptions of relational support are less dependent on their perceptions of relational conflict. That is, children who perceive high levels of conflict in their relationships with teachers may
also perceive the teacher as emotionally supportive and as liking the student. This finding correlates with the findings in this study with regards to the students’ dynamic relationships with adults. Students in this study, regardless of the negative conflict they face, reported supportive relationships with adults with whom they perceive high levels of conflict.

Theme 2: School Transitions

Transitioning between settings was reported as being the second most significant factor affecting graduation outcomes in this study. Although the transition from general education to special education, elementary to middle school, middle to high school or high school to adulthood differed in significance with regards to graduation outcomes, each experience was mentioned by the participants. However, of the transition stories, positive experiences were discussed more than twice as frequently as negative experiences.

Subtheme 2A: The General Education to Special Education Transition

While all the participants expressed concern about the general education to special education transition, the concerns differed depending on their perspectives. The participants had differing experiences during this transition. On several occasions during his interview, Elias reflected on the timing of his qualification in Special Education:
With the IEP, I’ve asked, “Why didn’t I have this earlier?” Then I would probably understand a little better. Maybe it would have furthered me.

Now that I’m a Sophomore, I don’t think we can go back and change that [my initial qualification in Special Education]. But I am just kind of wondering why I didn’t have this a little bit earlier after finding out.

I wish I had this a little bit earlier. It would have helped probably.

Micah explained his feelings when he described that he felt as if he did not receive Special Education services soon enough.

What gave me the impression that I didn’t get it [Special Education services] early enough is in elementary school, I had quite a few problems before I got it. That’s what gave me the impression that I didn’t get it early enough.

Brady had similar thoughts:

Why I didn’t feel successful in elementary school is because I felt like I maybe didn’t get the Special Education services soon enough in elementary school.

While some of the participants indicated concern that they had not received Special Education services early enough, other participants spoke about their frustration in receiving services when they felt that they did not want or need the services. Although he later demonstrated appreciation for the services he received in the primary years of elementary school, Kieran felt that Special Education services were not necessary when he qualified. He spoke about his hesitation to attend the Special Education class after he was identified in elementary school:
I was used to this one class. I was...how do I say it? Connected to that one class. I didn’t want to just change it all of a sudden. I didn’t know what was going on. The first day, they told me to go to Special Ed. I had no clue what’s going on, so I was reacting...I was crying like, “I don’t want to go to another class.” Then I realized what was going on. It took me, like a minute to walk there, so I was crying the whole time. So a little embarrassing there.

At the beginning, yeah, they [Special Education services] helped. But, as time progressed, by like fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, now, all that stuff, it is no longer useful.

When asked to describe their early school experiences, the transition to special education was confusing to many of the students. Kole talked about his hesitation to receive Special Education services and described how he felt conflicted:

I didn’t feel more successful after receiving them [Special Education services] than before I received them. I wasn’t really comfortable with them. I was just...I didn’t really like it.

Kole explained his mixed feelings when he first qualified for services in elementary school. Although his sentiments were disjointed, and he even confused himself, Kole expressed conflicting points of view when speaking about his transition experiences. Kole’s interview, as illustrated in the example provided here, provides insight in to the differing perspectives of one student.

Kole: It [Special Education services] really helped me in school, but, I just...when in elementary school it was like, “Oh I don’t need this. It’s stupid.”

Researcher: When you felt like that, tell me more. What is because you didn’t want the services?

Kole: I knew that I needed support?

Researcher: Okay.
Kole: I didn’t really feel I wanted any support. It just felt like I needed the support. Make sense?

Researcher: No, tell me more. You said you felt like you didn’t need it, but you did need it?

Kole: I don’t know.

Students referred to how Special Education affected their social experiences in the classroom. At a later point in his interview, Kole elaborated, explaining his interactions with other students who are not disabled.

It didn’t bother me that…if they [my peers] say, “Oh, you’re in a support class.”, it didn’t bother me. I just knew I’m getting extra help instead. They’re not getting extra help. I am getting extra help, but it’s because I can’t really do a lot stuff about homework and other reading or math.

Macy also spoke of her peer experiences when she began attending Special Education classes:

When I started, I would go [to the Special Education class], and I would be put down and I didn’t have the tools that I do now to deal with that.

The results reported in this theme support findings from Martinez et al.’s (2010) study on perceived social school supports and socioeconomical adjustment. Support from peers, teachers and parents are instrumental in shaping adolescents’ experiences and outcomes (Martinez et al., 2010). The findings support their research, demonstrating that various forms of social support are important when students are going through important life changes, such as the transitioning from elementary to middle school, or from middle school to high school.
Subtheme 2B: The Elementary to Middle School Transition

The participants who started receiving Special Education services in elementary school indicated a positive acknowledgment for the services they later received in middle school. The middle school experience was referred to as generally positive by the participants in this study, and they detailed their experiences throughout the interviews.

Tawny provided details of a more positive middle school experience:

That’s [middle school] when everything started to flip, you know? And of course, like, again my grades weren’t all that great in middle school. But things started to get easier because of all my help classes and stuff.

However, she did express caution when describing what she perceived as the heavy work load in middle school:

I was like, “Dude, if I have this much homework and I’m struggling this much, then it’s going to be even worse because they don’t take any crap at the middle school.”

Brady and Elias reflected on their academic success in middle school.

In elementary school, I didn’t really feel too successful but when I got to middle school, I felt a little more successful. -Brady

Overall, middle school was a fun experience, grade wise, and just overall it was fun. -Elias

Micah felt similarly:

In elementary school, I didn’t really feel too successful, but when I got to middle school, I felt more successful.
Although students felt more success in middle school, the actual transition from the elementary setting to the middle school setting, on the other hand, was referred to as a more stressful experience. Marissa felt that her transition from elementary to middle school was not successful:

I didn’t feel successful when I left elementary school.

Throughout his interview, Kieran reiterated that he felt coerced during the transition to middle school:

I feel like I was a little forced in to my Special Education classes there [in middle school].

The outcomes of this study point toward the middle school transition experience as more positive and supportive compared to the students’ transition experiences in elementary school.

One of the factors related to the positive and supportive transition, the participants in this study indicated, was the support they received (or that they didn’t receive) during the transition. Gutman and Midgley (2000) reported that students are most likely to experience a successful transition to middle school if they report having supportive adults who are invested in their education. Positive student-teacher relationships, marked by low levels of conflict, are related to increased student engagement, school liking and academic achievement (Wentzel, 1998). Such positive outcomes help smooth the transition from elementary school to middle school. Wentzel (1998) found that establishing and maintaining quality student-to-teacher relationships is essential for
guiding students through transition periods. The results from this study indicate similar outcomes. Regardless of the reported elementary and middle school transition experiences, participants did indicate positive adult relationships aided in making transition experiences more positive.

Subtheme 2C: The Middle to High School Transition

The transition from middle school to high school was mentioned by each student. Most expressed some anxiety entering high school and they reflected on how the middle school transition prepared them for the academic demands of high school. Kieran described his transition, “I was a little scared…a little nervous.” His sentiments were echoed by several of his peers, like Elias:

I was kind of nervous coming into this [from middle school to high school]. I knew it was a big setting and you have to adapt quick. I wanted to make sure I could be able to do my four years of high school, hopefully have four classes when I’m a Senior and walk with my class. I wanted to make sure I was academically successful and ready to go out in to the real world.

It was pretty stressful coming over from a place where of you didn’t necessarily pass a class, something in elementary school, they’d go okay, it’s going to be the next teacher’s problem and they’d pass you and they wouldn’t give you the help that you really needed.

Micah, on the other hand, had a more positive experience during the transition:

The reason why I felt it [transitioning from middle school to high school] was successful was because I had others there with me walking down the same path that I was.
Kole also felt that his transition from middle school to high school was a successful one.

I was actually happy. That I can finally go to high school, because I didn’t really like middle school or elementary school. I like high school better.

Tawny’s experience mirrors Michael and Kole’s positive transition experience from middle to high school:

At that point, I was excited to see where I was going to go. “My middle school experience was really good, then my high school experience is going to be pretty awesome!”

Results indicated that the transition experiences from middle to high school were more positive compared to the transition experiences from elementary to middle. The students’ perspectives on the middle to high school transition were detailed with sentiments of gratitude toward the teachers, case managers and counselors who have helped them to be successful. As the transition become more positive, participant references about their adult and peer relationships in high school became less negative. When students feel high levels of support, they report more positive school outcomes (Murray et al., 2008). Furthermore, with higher levels of student-to-adult conflict, students are more likely to perceive lower levels of support (Hughes, 2011). Findings in this study mirror the ideas from Murray et al. and Hughes, and may be conversely applied; when low student-to-teacher conflict was reported, participants in this study perceived higher levels of support.

Although it was not intended to be addressed in this study, on several occasions, students discussed their hopes and predictions for future transitions and they predicted
outcomes that would be related to these predictions. An example statement regarding future transitions include this from Kole:

I’m not really nervous about graduating. I’m pretty happy that I want to graduate, but I still have two more years, of course. In the future I still need to of, course, get a job..I’m going to college, get a job, of course.

Brady discussed his thoughts on how previous school experiences, including those related to previous transitions, will impact him in his future career path.

I want to prepare myself now, so it will be easier. That’s why I’m taking my EMT class this summer. I just want to get out there, I guess. I’m excited. I want to be a firefighter because all my uncles are.

Overall, the participants’ thoughts on how relationships with teachers and counselors affect future transitions were remarkably optimistic. In McNair’s (2002) study on post-high school transitions for learning disabled students, counselors reported that students who were successful made completion of post-secondary education and employment their primary goal. Furthermore, the students who were employed or successfully completing post-high school education actively accessed staff and support services while in high school. Further investigation on if the students in this study access the staff and resources throughout the remainder of their high school experience would be beneficial to assess if the students’ optimistic transition predictions are reflected in their actual outcomes.
Theme 3: Relationships with Friends

Research describes the role of social-emotional and interpersonal relationships as critical for academic success (Durlak et al., 2011; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl & Miller, 2006). Social factors proved to be a hot topic to several participants in this study who described their social relationships as being a significant factor in their high school experiences. Relationships with friends was referred to as a significant to graduation outcomes by all of the participants other than one, with positive peer experiences having as strong of an impact as negative experiences. Furthermore, for some of the participants, participation in extracurricular activities was a considerable force when they discussed their experiences in high school. Kieran indicated that he participates in NJROTC, Macy is a Varsity track athlete, Kole is on the Varsity Football team and Micah is in Boy Scouts. Whether positive or negative and regardless of the setting, for all of the participants, like Tawny, positive social relationships are cornerstone to their school experience.

Researcher: So, do you like school?
Tawny: Honestly, I only like going to school for the social part.

Zander, Micah and Brady also spoke about social experiences that made an impact.

I think that instead of having a lot of friends, maybe just having one friend could prove that you don’t need a lot of friends to be successful or popular. –Zander

Without friends here, then I probably wouldn’t have gone anywhere. I probably wouldn’t have made it here. –Micah

I made the right decision with some friends. Some friends were getting into bad things, and I moved away from that because I don’t want that to mess up my future. –Brady
Negative social experiences with friends made as strong of an impact in this study as positive experiences did. Macy referred to a negative experience in elementary school:

One of the most difficulties in elementary school was dealing with other people. I couldn’t fit in like other people could. If I didn’t interact with other people, I probably wouldn’t have any friends. But I was just a different child.

Seemingly defeated, Kieran talked about his friendship with another student identified with a learning disability:

Basically, one person I am friends with, we have this little joke of, “Yup. They have us wear yellow shirts for reason because we aren’t that smart. We’re a little retarded.”

Kieran made a similar statement about his social experiences in his Special Education class:

Some people in there that I know, I’ve seen them in Special Ed with me and like, “Dear God, this is not good”, but some of them are…how do I say it? Some of them just want to take this [enrolment in the JROTC class], use it to their advantage to join in to many things like the Army, Marines and other things. Where it’s like, “I don’t care. I just want to learn how to shoot a gun.” When they get older and stuff, it’s like, “Good for you, You go ahead, join the Army. They got no brains there. We’re perfect for them.”

Non-Conclusive Data Findings

Some participants provided inconclusive statements that, regardless of clarification or prompting by the researcher, could not be measured for this study. When describing
his learning experiences, for example, Kole made contradictory statements. The following conversation demonstrates this finding:

Kole: It [Special Education services] really helped me in school, but, when in elementary school it was like, “Oh, I don’t need this. It’s stupid.”

Researcher: Okay, when you felt like that, tell me more/

Kole: I knew that I needed the support. I didn’t really feel I wanted any support. I just felt like I needed the support. Make sense?

Researcher: No. Tell me more. You said you felt like you didn’t need it, but you did need it.

Kole: I don’t know.

Kieran made unclear statements that the researcher was unable to code after asking for clarification from the participant:

When I figured it out, that’s when I got the feeling in my body of, “Yup, another day. Yup, another day. Yup, another day.”

When I got that feeling like, “Okay, going to this class, this class, this class, this class, and the day is over. This class, this class, this class, day is over. This class, this class, this class.” When I got the feeling of I have it all memorized, and it was just learning new stuff in each class, getting it done, moved on to the next, and the next and the next.

Although she may have had specific intentions, Macy’s sentiments were also not understood by the researcher:

Researcher: Has Special Education made you more or less confident?

Macy: In the class I am in now, it’s really aggravating, because everybody talks and is loud and obnoxious and doesn’t sit still and is always trying to draw attention, trying to get the teacher’s attention while paying attention.
At times, participants gave responses not related to the interview questions, and therefore could not be measured as evidence in this study. Statements like these from Elias are examples of statements that need further clarification.

One of my [general education] friends, his emotions, he flat out told the person, he goes, “My emotions are taking over this.” He goes, “I didn’t do anything wrong, but my emotions are forcing me to have these…I’m expressing them this way because I am so angry of filled up because I am getting profiled.”

I don’t hold grudges against people, but it does kind of get to me and tick me off that it [a behavioral issue reported to administration] was me and we settled that on the last day of school. I’m here to apologize and I tried to figure out that way and she said, “fine”, because I told her I have a little sister and you might end up with her.

Statements needing further clarification indicate the need to consider the relevancy of their findings to the study’s outcome. The absence of conclusive information should be noted as relevant data identifying areas of further research need, and it should be analyzed as such.

**Research Sub-Question**

Data was gathered of the students identified as at-risk in order to answer the following research sub-question:

To what extent do early school experiences impact students identified as at-risk for dropping out compared to those who are not at-risk for dropping out? What experiences are reported as significant with relation to a student’s likelihood of graduating?
The study resulted in varied differences of what the students from the at-risk cohort perceived as being relevant to graduation outcomes compared to the results of the entire population of participants in the study. The results were disaggregated into two cohorts of students, non-at-risk and at-risk. Table 4.2 presents the number of codes reported by the participants in the two cohorts. Data gathered of the participants in the at-risk cohort led to identification of two significant themes: Learning Difficulties and School Transitions.
Table 4.2. Significant experiences that impact graduation outcomes by cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified school experience category</th>
<th>Number of codes related to category: Non-At-Risk Cohort</th>
<th>Number of codes related to category: At-Risk Cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>9 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>7 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>22 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships with Teachers/Staff &amp; Adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>132 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsupportive</td>
<td>6 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>145 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships with Friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>32 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>27 (87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>60 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>16 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>3 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>27 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School Transitions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>22 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>32 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections on Experiences &amp; the Future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>12 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>11 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>16 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>39 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Applicable/Unrelated Statements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 (28%)</td>
<td>13 (72%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The information provided by the four participants in the at-risk cohort were compared to those who were in the “non-at-risk cohort to identify differing themes that would provide further investigation to the outcomes of students with additional barriers. Results from the four participants identified the following two key themes as the most significant factors impacting graduation outcomes: (a) learning challenges resulting from school experiences, and (b) school transitions. Figure 4.5 analyzes the findings of the at-risk participants’ descriptions of their experiences. The second theme, School Transitions, was similarly referenced as a significant factor by the entire population in this study, but highlighted as significant for different reasons, with differences in perspective, by the at-risk cohort. Unlike the responses from the students in the non-at-risk cohort, their perspectives on transitions were reported as more negative, yet still significant, in comparison to the non-at-risk participants’ responses.
Theme 1: Learning Challenges Resulting from School Experiences

- Subtheme A: Difficulties with learning
- Subtheme B: Successes with learning

Theme 2: School Transitions

- Subtheme A: The General Education-to-Special Education Transition
- Subtheme B: The Elementary-to-Middle School Transition
- Subtheme C: The Middle School-to-High School Transition

Figure 4.5. Hierarchy of themes and subthemes for At-Risk cohort.

Theme 1: Learning Challenges Resulting from School Experiences

Participants in the at-risk cohort referenced academic difficulties with classroom learning, as the most frequently referred to theme in the study with 69% of the total responses from this cohort being from participants in the at-risk group. However, reflections and stories from the participants in the at-risk cohort indicated less hopeful responses, with 77% of the total responses from the at-risk cohort in this theme referencing their negative learning experiences.
Theme 1A: Negative School Experiences

In comparison to the other themes identified from this study, participant’s difficulties in the academic learning process was not significant for the entire population of participants in this study. However, a large percentage of statements about learning challenges were made by the participants in the at-risk cohort. Of the statements made, 77% were made by participants in the at-risk cohort, and most indicated a negative perspective toward the learning process. Macy spoke about her learning difficulties in the classroom:

If I don’t have it on my mind, if someone doesn’t remind me, it will be like, “I don’t remember.”

A common theme reiterated by the participants in the at-risk cohort referred to learning difficulties in elementary school compared to any other level. Tawny discussed difficulties with reading in elementary school before she was identified with a learning disability:

Like, every time I read something it was…I had no clue what I just read about. Like, I’m pretty sure that I was Dyslexic almost, so I think that’s why.

Tawny continued her thoughts on her feelings about success before she was identified with Special Education services:

At that time, I felt like I wasn’t really going anywhere.

And Macy expressed regret as she spoke about her elementary experiences:
Researcher: If you were to say that you were unsuccessful in elementary school, what would the reasons be?

Macy: Me not fulfilling homework, me not taking responsibility. And I take full responsibility for that. There’s a lot of regrets in my life, I do regret, that’s one of them.

Elias’s experience in elementary school was similar. He indicated that he was able to keep up with his general education peers, while acknowledging his success after receiving Special Education services. He clarified his perspective on the value of individualized learning via Special Education services:

Second grade…I kind of struggled. I was put in a class where there was more people than needed. They thought I was behind when I actually wasn’t. Then I was transferred into another class.

Elias and Zander reflected on their elementary experience with regret on how they did not focus on learning.

Researcher: If you could have changed something from elementary school, what would it have been?

Elias: It would have been academics.

Zander said something similar:

Researcher: If you had it to do all over again what would you have done differently in middle school to prepare for high school?

Zander: Took my math class a little more seriously.

Tawny had similar reflections, speaking about her difficulty learning to read:

I have a really bad memory so I have to pull hard to remember things. Like, every time I read something it was, I had no clue what I just read
about. Like, I’m pretty sure that I was dyslexic almost, so I think that’s why.

At several points during her interview, Tawny referred to her reading difficulties. She relayed stories of defeat:

Yah. I would read it and I’m just like, “No, it’s not happening.” I didn’t have any power to do it.

Three of the four cohort participants discussed struggles in math and they spoke of math struggles throughout their schooling. The participants indicated that they did not prefer math. Zander indicated, “I don’t enjoy math. I never really enjoyed math.”

Similarly, Elias referred to his difficulties:

I’ve never been good at math. That’s been my struggle overall, was math. I’ve never really been good at math, even though I use it on a day to day basis on the work that I do out of school and before school.

I think the unsuccessful would be math wise, I wasn’t the best.

Particularly recently, due to the implementation of the Common Core standards and strategies, students have reported difficulties with successfully completing mathematical tasks. The new math standards require habits of mind such as collaboration and discussion that students, particularly those who are learning disabled, have not acquired during traditional teaching methods of the past. Many of the habits students have learned and developed don’t support these important new mathematical connections (Faulkner, 2013).
When he spoke of his successes in the classroom, many of Zander’s statements were not hopeful. It seemed that Zander was distressed about the difficulty that learning presented to him. Yet, optimistically, he talked about strategies that helped him to be successful in the classroom:

Zander: She [my teacher] saw that I didn’t get my work done as quick as other people and that, not so much that I couldn’t do it, it was just I couldn’t do it in a quick manner.

Researcher: What did she do to help you with that?

Zander: She used to give me packets of homework before it’d even be passed out, so maybe a week before. I’d grab onto it, get the hang of it, and then once I’d be done and the whole class would be done then I could turn it in when the whole class was done with it.

Subtheme 1B: Positive School Experiences

Although difficulties with learning comprised a majority of the statements given by the participants, hopeful post-high school outcomes were mentioned when they spoke of their future. The benefit of individualized Special Education instruction became apparent when he realized the services gave him opportunities to be successful in school.

Researcher: Did Special Education make you more confident?

Elias: Yeah, to a degree. I did see a big change from sitting in the classroom, taking a test, some people are throwing stuff, they were just messing around, from being in the back room or a room like this and just taking the test where it’s all quiet and I could focus and concentrate.

Regardless of their perceived or relational failures during school, the at-risk participants were remarkably optimistic about the future while still expressing some anxiety about their upcoming experiences. Every participant had a post-high school goal, and three of
the four expressed interest in furthering education after high school. For example, Macy said:

At least a junior college, at least, and then get into a good 4-year university, and go to college for at least a good hour years, maybe six years. I was thinking about maybe business financing and being an FBI agent or a Marine Biologist, by Marine Biologists don’t get paid that much, but it’s my dream job.

Elias said:

Researcher: What makes you nervous?
Elias: Not being able to graduate in four years. I want to be able to go through, pass all my classes, make sure I’m good and be able to walk with my class after four areas and not walk with a different class. Growing up with half these kids from kindergarten all the way up to high school, you kind of want to do that. You don’t want to graduate with people you don’t really know. It kind of sticks with you. I want to further and better myself.

Seemingly not phased by the previous her previous school difficulties, Tawny spoke about how to approach future goals:

If you want something, you can’t just sit here and wait for it and come to you. You have to take that first step. If you don’t put up that effort when you won’t ever reach your goal.

Theme 2: School Transitions

School transitions were identified as a significant factor for all of the participants in this study. References to transition experiences were referenced by all eight participants in the study. Similar to the outcomes gathered from the entire group, the students in the at-risk group also identified school transitions as being significant school
experiences. The study results indicate school transitions as being significant to both the at-risk cohort and the non-at-risk cohort. However, their perceptions on the experiences with transition were reported very differently. Of the total responses coded in this category, 69% were from the participants in the at-risk cohort. No statements indicating negative transition experiences were reported by the four students in the non-at-risk cohort. Of the total responses, 100% of the negative responses were from participants in the at-risk cohort. Furthermore, only a small percentage of positive transition experiences were mentioned by members in the at-risk cohort.

The significance of this factor on graduation outcomes is just as great for the at-risk population, but for different reasons when compared to the reasons identified by the participants in the non-at-risk cohort. Commonalities amongst the participants in the at-risk cohort exist. First, the participants reported similar positive or supportive experiences during the general education to Special Education transition. Second, the participants reported similar negative or unsupportive experiences during the elementary to middle transition and during the middle to high school transition. Lastly, similar to the participants in the non-at-risk cohort, the members in the at-risk cohort demonstrated an optimistic outlook on future transitions.

Subtheme 2A: The General Education to Special Education Transition

The transition from the general education to the Special Education environment was uniquely different for the participants in the at-risk population compared to those from the non-at-risk population. Unlike the stories told by the participants in the non-at-
risk population, the at-risk cohort stories about the general education to Special Education transition were largely positive. Elias’s experience transitioning from general education to Special Education was a positive one:

Researcher: When you first qualified, what kind of feeling did you have about it?
Elias: I just liked it a lot better because I could get out of the classroom and I could go into a different setting where I was more comfortable and I could focus easier. It helped a lot that way.

Tawny had a similar experience:

It’s just…in elementary school and stuff, like, you didn’t get any help. You know they were just like, “Do this, oh you can’t do it, oh well.” And then once I actually started going to the [Special Education] classes, like, we would start reading things and we could read them more than once so that everyone got a chance to understand what was going on.

Of the participants in the at-risk cohort, Zander was alone in his discontent for receiving services, at the prompting of his parents, which started early in elementary school. But, he developed an appreciation for the services he received and later expressed his gratitude for the services:

Once it stated, in like the 3rd or 4th grade after that, I stopped noticing it, and kind of went with it. It’s been like that pretty much ever since.

Subtheme 2B: The Elementary to Middle School Transition

Of the all the transition experiences this study addressed (ie: general education to Special Education, Elementary to Middle, Middle to High), the transition from elementary to middle had the most negative references. When talking about their
experiences during the elementary to middle school transition, those who initially qualified for services in elementary school had similar reactions.

Three of the participants referenced their perceptions on the level of rigor in elementary school, describing the difficulty they faced in the general population before they were identified with needing special education services. Elias wondered if he would have been more successful had he received services earlier:

With the IEP, I’ve asked, “Why didn’t I have this earlier?” Then I could probably understand a little better. Maybe it would have furthered me. I wish I had this a little bit earlier. It would have helped me probably.

Tawny expressed challenging feelings when she explained her experiences transitioning from elementary school to middle school. She said:

Like, 6th grade was probably the worst year. I had all D’s and F’s. Like, it was really bad. Math was done, English was not even close to being okay.

Prompted to further explain her thoughts, Tawny continued:

It was pretty much every time I would do any type of work. Any time I would take a test…it was always, “Oh, you got a D. Awesome. I studied for that crap.”

Subtheme 2C: The Middle to High School Transition

For most of the participants in the at-risk cohort, the transition from middle to high school was reported as being a more positive experience when compared to the transition experience from elementary to middle school. These sample statements from
Elias and Tawny posed a confident stance about the transition from middle school to high school:

It [eighth grade] prepared me more than seventh grade. They didn’t really cover it [transition skills] it in seventh grade. Eighth grade did prepare me.

At that point [the transition from middle school to high school], I was excited to see where I was going to go. My middle school experience was really good, then my high school experience is going to be pretty awesome.

Although Zander indicated that his transition to high school was more successful than his transition to middle school, he still had this to say about his transition from middle school to high school:

I had the same feeling I had as if I was going in to seventh grade. Just really scared because it was 3 times as much kids, and getting up earlier…just a whole different level.

However, he was more confident in his preparation for high school:

Zander: It [high school] was probably going to be hard, very hard.
Researcher: Do you feel prepared?
Zander: No, I think I’m prepared. I’m just not prepared for everything that’s about to come.

Negative experiences in high school were less frequent, but still a factor for the students in the at-risk cohort. Elias referred to negative experiences as he continued to describe his transition from middle school to high school:
It was pretty stressful coming over from a place where if you didn’t necessarily pass a class – same thing in elementary school – they’d go, “Okay, it’s going to be the next teacher’s problem”, and they’d pass you and they wouldn’t give you the help you really needed.

Tawny’s negative perspective, however, continued in her transition from middle school to high school:

Of course, I had it in the back of my mind that high school could be really hard and I could fall back into a pit of darkness and stuff. But I knew I had the strength to go where I had to go. So it was up to me what I did.

Elaborating on her transition from middle to high school, Tawny’s negative point of view was reinforced:

Researcher: Do you feel like eighth grade prepared you for high school?
Tawny: Not really.
Researcher: No?
Tawny: No. Middle school was kind of like elementary school for me.

Although the students in the at-risk cohort spoke about school transition experiences that were less positive than those experiences described by the students in the non-at-risk cohort, they were all optimistic when it came to their transition to adulthood. Acknowledging that he is credit deficient, Elias talked about his motivation to graduate with his peers when he spoke about this future transition to adulthood. He said:

I want to focus on passing all my classes. If that means doing a little bit of time at the continuation school for a credit recovery option, I will do that.

Tawny expressed similar optimism:
Last year, I didn’t pass all my classes but now I am just going to try really hard this summer to make up for all that. I know that my reading stuff is not going to hold me back. I am going to work on it.

The findings that concluded this portion of the study indicate that, while their needs are accurately reflected as participants of the whole group, the participants in the at-risk cohort have additional and differing needs when compared to the participants in the non-at-risk cohort. Results gathered from the participants in the whole group revealed the most significant factor impacting their school experiences as relationships while the results of the data gathered from the at-risk cohort illustrates a stronger focus on the actual school experiences, and on how the experiences impact learning.

**Summary of Data Analysis**

The findings in this qualitative study address the primary research question and the sub-questions. This study was grounded in student voice theory, which is the vehicle to better understand student perceptions by seeking equality of student voice (Cook-Sather, 2007; Ruddock, 2007). A portion of this study was also grounded in self-determination theory, which provides the mechanism to better understand how innate psychological nutriments (competence, relatedness and autonomy) are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Findings addressing the primary research question conclude in three themes, or factors, significant to the participants’ graduation outcomes: (a) relationships with adults (staff and family), (b) school transitions, and (c) relationships with friends. Relationships
with adults (staff and family) is the most significant factor identified in this study. Participants reported 95% of the 220 responses as positive experiences affecting their performance in school. These findings indicate that students, regardless of their cohort, are highly affected by the positive relationships built with staff and family members. Findings indicate that 69% of the 92 statements made on transitions were from students in the at-risk cohort. Of the 18 negative statements regarding school transitions, 100% were from participants in the at-risk group. These statements were not hopeful, represented something sad from their past, or anxiety about future transitions. Findings from this theme, unlike the findings from the other themes, shows heavy favor toward negative experiences that affect graduation outcomes. Finally, findings indicate that the participants found relationships with their friends to be a significant factor affecting school outcomes. Of the 85 responses in this category, 54% of the responses were noted as positive experiences significant to graduation outcomes.

Findings addressing the research sub-question conclude in two themes, or factors, significant to the participants’ graduation outcomes: (a) learning challenges resulting from school experiences, and (b) school transitions. Findings indicate classroom learning as the most significant factor impacting students in the at-risk cohort. 69% of the codes in this category were referenced by students in the at-risk cohort. Of these experiences, 77% spoke of negative classroom learning experiences. Findings revealed that their authentic and perceived negative, unsupportive experiences with adults as the most significant factor determining their transition success. Finally, findings indicate school transitions as an equally influential factor for students in the at-risk cohort when compared to their peers in the non-at-risk cohort. However, 100% of the negative
experiences were reported by students in the at-risk cohort, while 57% of the responses identifying positive, supportive experiences were reported by students in the at-risk cohort. This indicates that students in the at-risk cohort are highly impacted by negative experiences occurring during past and future transitions.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the study, and discusses the conclusions drawn from the data presented in chapter 4. The chapter begins with an overview of the problem, a description of the theoretical framework grounding the study, a review of the methodology and a summary of the major findings. It also contains a discussion of the study’s limitations and implications for practice and future research. These discussions are supporting by the existing literature, which is woven throughout. The chapter concludes with a summary identifying how the study answers the research questions by providing teachers, administrators and policymakers with a better understanding of how school experiences of students with learning disabilities impact their graduation outcomes.

Overview of the Problem

High school completion rates for the general population have steadily grown since 1947. In 1947, 51% of students completed high school compared to 81% of the population in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; US Department of Education, 2012). Although the high school completion gap of general education students has steadily been closing over the years, the completion gap of students identified with learning disabilities has not shown the same rate (U.S. DOE, OSEP, 2010; Zablocki, M. & Krezmien, M.P., 2012; Kortering, L. & Braziel, P., 2002). In 1984, the rate of school completion for students with learning disabilities was 58% compared to 70% of his or her general

For many students with learning disabilities, graduating from high school prepared for the job market feels rather bleak (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Students with learning disabilities have higher rates of unemployment, and they are more likely to be on public assistance when compared to their general education peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011; Zablocki & Krezman, 2012). In 2009, only 46% of students with learning disabilities had regular employment within 2 years of leaving school (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009). Additionally, students with learning disabilities who are incarcerated outnumber their general education peers 3:1 and students with disabilities who drop out are 10 percent more likely to be been arrested compared to youth with disabilities who finished high school (Wagner et al., 2006).

Young people with learning disabilities who drop out of high school are not as prepared as their peers to face the demands in today’s workforce. More and more jobs in today’s market require some postsecondary education, therefore a deeper analysis on the dropout rate is appropriate. For students with learning disabilities, the impact of leaving school without a diploma impacts more than his or her own personal pursuits. The economic and societal consequences resonate across society. A loss of tax revenue, higher spending on public assistance and higher crime rates of disabled dropouts puts significant financial strain on society, as funds earmarked for domestic programs are used by those who drop out (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
Policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) were designed to support the performance needs of students with disabilities. Despite safeguards provided by IDEA and the performance expectations outlined by NCLB, dropout rates for students with learning disabilities have not decreased when compared to their general education peers. The discrepancy between general education and special education students has remained consistent over time regardless of the available research and interventions supporting students with disabilities.

**Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the possible impact of elementary and middle school experiences on students with learning disabilities who are at risk for school high school failure. The central research question was:

What elementary and middle school experiences (academic and relational) do 10th grade students with learning disabilities report as influential with regards to intended high school completion?

The research sub-questions were:

To what extent do early school experiences impact students identified as at-risk for dropping out compared to those who are not at-risk for dropping out? What experiences are reported as significant with relation to a student’s likelihood of graduating?
The results found in this qualitative study were analyzed through both student voice theory (SVT) and the self-determination theory (SDT), which were the foundation to the development of the interviews and the coding methods. Figure 5.1 illustrates how each theme addresses the central research question and the sub-question. It also addresses the theoretical frameworks in which the study is organized:

**Figure 5.1.** Themes and theories to address research questions.

The primary goal of this study was to examine the possible impact of elementary and middle school experiences on students with learning disabilities who are at-risk for school high school failure. The researcher employed interview questions with a purposeful sample of eight 10th grade students identified with learning disabilities. SVT
provided the framework to formulating the interview questions that allowed the researcher to answer the study’s central question (appendix C). The participants were all asked the same questions, and the researcher analyzed their stories and presented the information in a narrative analysis. The researcher analyzed the participant interviews, and data gathered from the eight participants was analyzed as a whole group. The narratives were presented and guided by the two theoretical frameworks presented in chapters 2 and 3.

A secondary goal of this study was to examine the experiences of at-risk students with learning disabilities and to analyze and compare their responses relying on the self-determination theory to guide the approach. The interview responses from the four students identified as at-risk were analyzed and reported as an individual cohort, then compared to the responses from the entire group to identify differing needs. The self-determination theory (SDT) provided the foundation to this portion of the study and the findings. SDT explores the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence decision making. It acknowledges three basic psychological needs critical to the positive well-being of people (Deci and Ryan, 2002). These three needs are: (a) competence (gaining mastery of tasks and learning), (b) relatedness (experiencing a sense of belonging and connectedness to others), and (c) autonomy (feeling in control).

The information gathered from the students in the at-risk cohort became critical to this study, as it was necessary to better understand how the participant experiences compare to those students who were not identified as at-risk. The data gathered from the at-risk cohort also gave the researcher a better understanding of the at-risk participant
reflections on the importance of competence, relatedness and autonomy. Participants
reflected on their school experiences and on what influencing factors shaped their
potential graduation outcomes. This information was important to gather as it was
necessary to understand if these experiences impacted their sense of belonging, or
relatedness, and their sense of feeling in control of their education and future, or
autonomy.

**Review of the Findings: Central Research Question**

This study set out to understand the lived early school experiences of Sophomore
students with learning disabilities to determine the possible impact on graduation
outcomes. After analyzing many hours of interview data, and after a thorough review of
student records, this study identified factors that students report as being significant to
their attitudes toward and achievement in school. Reliable findings, for both the whole
group of participants and for the participants in the at-risk cohort, reoccurred throughout
several themes. Among the findings, three significant themes arose for the entire
population and two additional themes arose for the participants in the at-risk cohort. Data
analysis produced three significant themes that addressed the central research question
which were: (a) relationships with adults, (b) school transitions, and (c) relationships with
friends. Each of the themes can be conceptualized through the lens of student voice
theory and self-determination theory, which leads to suggestions for educators and policy
makers
Theme 1: Relationships with Adults

Findings from this study support the notion that positive relationships with adults play a significant role in the way the participants perceived their school experience. Strong positive and supportive student-to-teacher relationships were mentioned more than twice as much as any code, leading the researcher to identify it as a primary theme. Three subthemes arose from the data: relationships with teachers and staff, relationships with the participant’s Special Education case manager, and relationships with parents and family members. All reflect the undeniable impact that student-to-adult relationships have on the student’s ultimate desire and ability to succeed academically, resulting in more positive graduation outcomes.

An extensive body of research documents student developmental benefits of relationships with teachers that are characterized by high levels of support and low levels of conflict (Hughes, 2011). Moreover, Mitra’s (2009) research on student voice indicates a strong correlation between teacher-to-student relationships and the student voice theory. “Although limited opportunities exist, school-based youth-adult partnerships can positively affect youth development outcomes and educational change.” Highlighting student voice initiatives through adult-to-student relationships have demonstrated positive outcomes, including increased in agency, belonging and competence (Mitra, 2009; Zeldin et al., 2004). Youth and adults must be able to experience the positive “building blocks of development”—including positive relationships, meaningful participation, expectations and skill building (Mitra, 2009; Perkins et al., 2003). Positive relationships with teachers
and staff are critical in determining potential graduation outcomes for students with learning disabilities. The data gathered from this study supports Mitra’s findings.

Relationships with adults was the single most significant factor of relevance to the participants of this study. Although the participants reported both supportive and unsupportive experiences with teachers and staff, most of the stories reported were of positive and supportive experiences. Students described the nature of their relationships with teachers and staff with descriptors such as, “cool” and “helpful”. Participants like Micah and Tawny spoke about teacher empathy, with a focus on teachers who made concerted efforts to create a connection with them. Elias and Macy talked about teacher dedication, referring to additional supports, inside and outside their contracted work hours, teachers give outside of the required instructional minutes. Teachers who went over and beyond were reported several times. When speaking about teacher empathy, to describe specific teachers who demonstrated qualities of this nature, participants used descriptors such as “understanding”, “connecting” and “relating”.

Unsupportive teachers, although not commonly referenced by participants in this study, were described as being “judgmental” and “not connected”. The student-teacher relationship is often examined as a mediator of how students perform in school and the various academic and social-emotional outcomes related with that performance (Tennant et al., 2014). Two participants in particular, Elias and Tawny, spoke about negative relationships with adults more frequently than the other six participants. Elias and Tawny, both participants in the at-risk cohort, experienced negative or unsupportive experiences with teachers, their academic achievement was lower than when compared to
moments when they felt supported by teachers. The relevance of the students’ academic performance related to their participation in the at-risk cohort will be discussed toward the end of this chapter.

Participants referred to their relationships with Special Education case managers, or the person who provides the Special Education services and manages the student’s academic program. Seven of the eight participants expressed gratitude for the Special Education supports they received once identified with a Learning Disability. Students expressed a sense of relief about receiving Special Education services, describing the academic load as difficult when asked to complete tasks or activities alone. Three of the participants remembered feeling frustration at the late date in which they were first identified with a Learning Disability, expressing that they would have benefitted from receiving Special Education services in the years prior to the identification.

When describing the strength of their relationships with their case managers, participants correlated their relationships to school success, even if their grade point average did not indicate academic strength. They claimed to successfully complete more academic tasks, remain focused longer and enjoy school when the “connection” to their case managers was strong. Elias, for example, indicated that his case manager wanted him to succeed and better himself, which was inspired to Elias to persevere when learning is hard. Their perception of the importance of case management was a very strong theme that resonated amongst all of the participants. None of the participants spoke about a negative or unsupportive case manager. In fact, all of the participants, at one point in the interview, expressed gratitude toward the current or previous case
managers, which supported Tennant et al.’s (2014) conclusions that, regarding academic outcomes, teacher support was significantly and positively related to academic grade point averages. Research from their study only partially supports the findings from this study. All of the participants in this study, regardless of academic success, were significantly and positively impacted by a strong connection to their case managers.

The participants’ amount and depth of parental and familial support differed. However, the students’ perception of the importance of these relationships was similarly strong. Some of the participants, like Micah, have educated and informed parents who take a frequent and active role in ensuring that they receive the proper Special Education services to be successful. Students like Micah, Elias, Zander and Tawny - three of four participants from the at-risk cohort - talked about their strong and supportive relationships with their fathers. Their admiration for their fathers was apparent, and all three expressed desire to make their fathers happy. For some, though, their family dynamics were not as strong. Three of the eight participants (including both female participants), indicated that they do not have a mother who is in the home on a regular basis. A sobering reality, the three participants each expressed some sadness, in different levels of intensity, about their family circumstances. Whether due to incarceration or other personal issues, the three participants reported heavily relying on their fathers for support.

Although relationships with family members (other than parents) were reported, these experiences were less frequent. Sisters, brothers and community members were identified as annoyances, but not as significant experiences impacting a students’
perception of potential graduation outcomes. Furthermore, for the relationships that were mentioned, the relational experiences were reported as less positive and perceived as unsupportive in nature.

Theme 2: School Transitions

The data provided strong evidence that autonomy was very important to all eight students, as the need for control over their education was often discussed by the participants when they referred to their school transition experiences. The results resulted in highlighted differing experiences when comparing the different transition experiences. The general education to Special Education transition was the transition that was most seen by the participants with a negative perspective. For some, they expressed anxiety, confusion and a lack of desire to receive Special Education services. Others expressed concern that they qualified for services too late, citing academic troubles that could have been addressed with an earlier qualification for services. Whether the experience was reported as an anxious experience due to a lack of desire, or because they did not receive services early enough, this particular transition was reported as most negative transition experience within the study.

Elementary school was described as “not helpful”, “not fun to be at” and academic performance was reported as “not enough” even when putting forth the most effort. Although not as pervasive as the negative experiences reported during the general education to Special Education transition, the transition from elementary to middle school
was still reported as a stressful experience. Participants reported a lack of support as a primary factor when detailing their transition experience.

Participants described middle school as having “some challenge”, “all doable” and “exciting”. They indicated feelings of success in middle school, but did not equate their success to a successful elementary to middle school transition. Participant experiences were mixed. Some of the participants felt as if the transition was not relevant to their perceived success. For others, they reported a stressful and confusing transition experience as negatively impacting their feelings of success in middle school.

Unlike the responses referencing the transition from elementary to middle school, participants reported that they felt as if middle school prepared them for the high school transition. The transition was described as a “big step” and several participants spoke of their comfort and preparation for high school with positive regard. Many participants referred to adult support as a significant factor that determined their feelings of comfort during the transition. Social experiences with friends during this transition were noted as a factor that was not indicated during the previous two transitions. Maintaining friendships during the transition from middle to high school was identified as important, and social relationships with peers in high school emerged as a significant finding in the study.

Considering the significant findings related to the importance of social relationships during the transition from middle to high school, the same findings should be related to the elementary to middle school transition which was reported as a less successful experience by the participants in this study. A stronger emphasis on early
school transitions, with a focus on adult and peer relationships, should be considered by schools that address efforts to improve graduation outcomes of students with learning disabilities. Research on the effect of relationships with regards to student success overwhelmingly indicates a strong correlation between strong relationships and academic success (Barile et al., 2012; McGrath & Bergen, 2014). The same strong correlation should be made with transition success. The findings resulting from this study indicate a strong need to address how relationships at the elementary level affect how a student perceives his or her transition to the middle school.

Theme 3: Relationships with Friends

Social relationships with friends was a salient finding in this study, and was reported as the third most important factor determining high school graduation outcomes. Beaumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that the need to belong is a “pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). Their notion speaks to the findings in this study. Every participant discussed the significance of friends in their school experience, with each detailing peer relationship experiences where they felt cared for and supported. Several discussed peer relationship experiences that provided additional anxiety, confusion or pain that distracted them from successful graduation outcomes. Regardless of the type of experience, relationships with peers were referred to with significance, some more than others, in determining their high school outcomes.
Several participants referred to social experiences in extracurricular activities such as Varsity Football, Boy Scouts or ROTC, as a considerable force that impacted motivation, desire and drive to be successful in the classroom. One of the three basic psychological needs highlighted in the self-determination theory (SDT), competence, nicely frames the participant perspectives. SDT describes this need typically related to the classroom, where students report feelings of competence when they feel able to meet the challenges of their schoolwork (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). The same can be said about how students feel when they are able to meet the challenges of their extracurricular activities. Extracurricular experiences were imperative as the participants described their future goals and graduation outcomes. The more positive the experience, the more positive his or her thoughts on post-high school outcomes. There was a high correlation between success in extracurricular activities and optimistic post-high school predictions. As participants described their desires for the future, they referred to their success in activities in which they excel. Students who found success in school, whether it be academically or extracurricularly, relayed similar confidence in future outcomes.

Negative social experiences with friends made as strong of an impact as positive experiences did. Negative classroom experiences with non-disabled peers such as teasing or judging, were reported as negatively impacting some of the study participants while similar experiences were non-impactful to other study participants. While most of the negative social experiences with peers occurred at the high school level, the experiences did not make an impactful determination on the participants’ overall high school experience which was reported as more positive than their elementary and middle school experiences. One consistent theme reported by all of the participants, supportive and
positive adult relationships at the high school level, may provide justification for why the negative social experiences did not make a strong negative impact on the students’ perspective of post-high school success. Meaning, because the participants saw strong student-to-teacher relationships as the most significant factor in this study, the level of teacher support they felt may have been a stronger factor than the negative peer relationships they faced at the same grade level.

Review of Findings: Research Sub-Question

A secondary purpose of this study was to understand the lived school experiences of Sophomore students with learning disabilities identified as at-risk to compare the possible impact on graduation outcomes compared to non-at-risk participants. To answer the research sub-question, this portion of the study was guided by the self-determination theory, with the questions and results framed by the theory’s exploration of intrinsic and external factors that influence decision making. SDT outlines three basic psychological needs that explain human behavior: (a) competence, (b) relatedness, and (c) autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The interview questions were closely related to the competence, relatedness and autonomy of the research participants. Conclusive findings resulted from the research gathered from all of the participants in the study, but the findings from the students in the at-risk cohort provided differences, particularly those related to competence and autonomy, which set them apart from the other participants in the study. Findings from the data of the students in the at-risk cohort provided the researcher with
two significant additional themes that needed to be addressed: (1) the learning process inside the classroom, and (2) school transitions.

Theme 1: Learning Difficulties

Students in the at-risk cohort referenced their academic learning difficulties as being the most influential factor in determining high school graduation outcomes. Furthermore, a majority of the responses in this theme were relayed as negative and less hopeful compared to the themed responses relayed by members in the non-at-risk cohort. This finding was contrary to the findings of the entire group, as academic learning difficulties were not a large concern for the members of the non-at-risk cohort. This finding is significant for several reasons.

First, the nature of the students’ at-risk status correlates with their reports of academic difficulties with the learning process. Members of the at-risk cohort, as noted in the selection process to participate in this group, had academic troubles with a lack in coursework credits and an F in at least one class. Members of the non-at-risk cohort do not have recorded coursework difficulties, nor did they report the learning process as being significant in their graduation status.

Secondly, learning difficulties in elementary school were prevalent amongst the students in the at-risk cohort. As it relates to the other themes of this study, learning experiences were primarily negative at the elementary level and references to failure in elementary school were frequent. For most in this cohort, difficulties with learning,
particularly in elementary school, were also discussed with concern that Special Education services were not provided early enough, making success difficult. The participants felt that their negative academic learning experiences (prior to their transition from general education to special education) could have been addressed quicker and more efficiently, therefore resulting in consistent school success.

Third, math difficulties since elementary school were reported as a typical area of concern by students in the at-risk cohort, while it was not a significant issue reported by participants in the non-at-risk group. While students reported difficulty with mathematical content, they found as much difficulty acquiring the learning habits necessary to be mathematical problem solvers. When asked, students like Elias and Tawny identified their struggles to understand math according to the new standards. As Faulkner (2013) asserted, the new math standards require work habits of mind that were not considered important in the old state standards. Yet, the work habits identified in the new state standards are not aligned with the academic habits students in this study developed prior to conducting this study. Students with and without learning disabilities, including those in the non-at-risk cohort, find the new standards to be challenging yet they display the skills necessary to demonstrate success with the standards. Students in the at-risk cohort, on the other hand, repeatedly reported failure and defeat when discussing their performance in math. Their competence, as described in SDT, was a significant factor in defining their perspective.

Lastly, all of the participants in the at-risk cohort expressed optimism and hope regarding their future post-high school endeavors, regardless of their negative learning
experiences in elementary and middle school. Although the at-risk participants referred to high school as “challenging” or “sometimes stressful”, predicting future experiences did not come with the same descriptors of what they potentially predicted as their future experiences. Three of the four expressed the desire to go to college, and did not indicate any trepidation or anxiety about attending a college after high school.

Theme 2: School Transitions

Similar to the non-at-risk students, participants in the at-risk cohort pointed toward school transitions as being one of the most salient factors determining graduation outcomes. However, their responses were more negative in nature, identifying a unique perspective in comparison to the non-at-risk cohort. The participants in the at-risk cohort reported unusually negative feelings toward their elementary experiences. One of the four participants in the at-risk cohort expressed a positive elementary experience while the remaining three described elementary school as “tough”, “lonely” or “emotional”. Connectedness, a key tenant of SDT, provides clarification to the students’ perspectives. Feelings of loneliness and emotionality proved to be strong factors related to the participants’ perspective on success in and out of high school.

Even after transitioning from general education to Special Education, the at-risk participants’ particularly negative outlook on their experience did not change regardless of the services they were provided after qualifying. Tawny’s sentiments about her experiences were raw and reflective. Considering the impact of her elementary school experience, she indicated, “I don’t think I ever really gave up on myself like I did in
elementary school, you know?”. Tawny is not alone. Feelings of despair are common for students with learning disabilities who are at-risk for school failure and this perception of hopelessness occurs as early as elementary school. While the vast majority of thoughts are normative, driven by differences in temperament, attachment or environment, the influence of internalizing and externalizing disorders must be considered with students who have learning difficulties. Disorders such as anxiety, depression (internalizing disorders) or Attention Deficit Disorder (externalizing disorder) are characterized with behaviors that are destructive and otherwise demanding on students’ perception of their own success in the classroom (McGrath & Bergen, 2015).

It was not until middle school that some of the participants reported feelings of success. A commonality in the participant responses indicated positive feelings about the middle school experience after the transition from elementary school. Yet, they still expressed feelings of caution during the transition to middle school. The transition was described as stressful, and some indicated fear of the unknown. It became apparent that, based on their negative transition experiences, the students in the at-risk cohort needed extra care during their transitions, predominantly those that happened at an early age. Therefore, findings indicate the need for stronger transition programs and experiences particularly at the elementary level.

The at-risk participants expressed more optimism about transitions as they got older. All of the participants in the at-risk cohort explained their transition experiences moving to middle school, then to high school, as more positive in comparison to their previous transition experiences. These experiences were progressively described with
less fear and discontent compared to the previous transition experience. Their increasing hope can be described in the basic needs identified in SDT – autonomy, competence and relatedness. The participants reported higher levels of the three needs during the high school years in comparison to early school years. Their satisfaction and feelings of adult support with decision-making, academic competence and relatedness to peers were significant factors that determined their success. Participants related their feelings of hope, as demonstrated in higher confidence levels, to their hopeful predictions for future outcomes.

The acquisition of hope with age was a commonality that the students in this cohort shared. This was apparent in their hopeful and optimistic outlook on future transitions to college or the world of work. All four students expressed optimism and hope when describing their future goals and potential transition outcomes. They each felt confident that they would graduate from high school regardless of current credit deficiency. Additionally, although the participants had differing post-high school goals, they each expressed confidence in reaching their goals after graduation. These results illustrated resilience and steadfast faith in outcomes regardless of their circumstances.

Key findings were obtained during this theme. The two cohorts had similar commonalities, yet they also had drastic differences. This was apparent in several metrics addressed in this study. For example, participants identified as at-risk demonstrated a strong sense of hope and optimism for future transitions, with little regard to their past academic struggles. This, they reported, was primarily due to their connectedness to teachers and staff. Relatedness, one of the three tenants to the self-
determination theory, emerged as a primary factor to their development in comparison to competence or autonomy, which literature indicates as equal factors in school success. The results from this study demonstrate a strong relational awareness, and a less dynamic awareness of academic factors (or competence) and intrapersonal factors (autonomy). The results support the overwhelming evidence that relationships are the most significant factor in school performance, especially with students who are at-risk for school failure.

This study did not set out to identify the relevance of college/career transitions on high school graduation outcomes. However, relevant findings from this study provide future researchers with valuable data to address the need for further research on this topic. But, this is a field worthy of study, as the additional findings from this study provides an area of research in need of further study.

Review of Additional Findings

There was a significant additional finding from this study which is worth noting worthy for future research. Non-conclusive findings from participant interviews, including responses that did not adequately answer the interview questions, or those that were contradictory in nature, should be acknowledged as findings that should be considered for future research of similar studies. Non-conclusive data has particular relevance in this study, as the participant responses gave clarification on what research still needs to be conducted. For example, Macy expressed frustration with her classmates when asked about her confidence level:
Researcher: Has special education made you less confident?

Macy: Not really, like, it’s never put me down in a dumb way. In the class I am in now, it’s really aggravating, because everybody talks and is loud and obnoxious and doesn’t sit still and is always trying to draw attention to, trying to get the teacher’s attention while paying attention.

Macy’s answer did not adequately address the researcher’s question, but it represented what she perceived as important to share. Therefore, it is important to note that non-conclusive findings like this one, and with other non-conclusive responses, indicate the need for further investigation looking at possible expressive and receptive language issues that may exist.

Responses indicated that participants understood the syntax and language used in the questions differently from that which was intended during the interviews. The study’s purpose was not to analyze the participants’ linguistic perspectives, but this does not invalidate the reason for further study on their perceptions. An analysis of how students with learning disabilities respond to interview questions should include a study of receptive and expressive language, pragmatics and other relevant factors that may relate to acquiring proper responses from participants.

**Recommendations for Administrators**

Few studies provide a model of student support focused on student-teacher relationships as a factor to address the graduation outcomes of students with learning disabilities. But what we do know is that evidence-based models tracking high school dropouts do exist. One of these, the Civic Marhall Plan (Balfanz et. al, 2012), relied on four key factors to create their model: (1) Strategic Focus, (2) High Expectations, (3)
Accountability and Support, and (4) Thoughtful Collaboration. Findings from this study mirror their findings, with two of the four factors similar. Providing interventions at the elementary level, however, is not primary focus of the Balfanz et al. study as it was in this study. It should be further noted that, the findings from this study indicate a strong correlation to high school success when the three factors are addressed reciprocally versus in isolation.

Figure 5.2 describes a model of factors necessary to ensure successful graduation outcomes of students with learning disabilities. A model inclusive of two factors that positively contribute to graduation outcomes must be considered: (a) strong and positive
student to teacher relationships, particularly at the high school level, and (b) transition opportunities and experiences at the elementary level. These factors are illustrated in yellow. An additional factor, (c) creation of academic intervention programs, must be considered when establishing a model that addresses the graduation outcomes of students with learning disabilities who are at-risk. This factor is illustrated in light yellow in the figure below. Figure 5.2 illustrates the proposed model.

Four decades of research has concluded the need for these factors in isolation. This study, on the other hand, resulted in finding that the two components are reciprocal of each other and necessary within the same model. The two factors are both necessary, together, to ensure successful graduation outcomes. An additional component, (3) creation of academic intervention programs for students with learning disabilities, specifically addresses the needs of students who are at risk for graduating and should be considered if the student is at risk. While independently found in many studies researching graduation outcomes, this component of the model promotes successful graduation outcomes only when implemented successful alongside the two reciprocal factors listed above. The three factors can only be successfully implemented if done so reciprocally.

Supportive and positive student relationships with teachers as the single most salient factor related to successful graduation outcomes of students. Study after study have proven the powerful value of strong and positive student-teacher relationships (Barile et al., 2012; McGrath & Bergen, 2015; Tennant et al., 2015). This study offers valuable qualitative data supporting the implementation of a model that provides students
with hopeful graduation outcomes based on factors such as improvement of student-teacher relationships. Closely focusing on this need by creating teacher-student mentorship programs, structured advisory periods, or classroom co-teaching opportunities to promote thoughtful time spent together are possible ways to facilitate tight student-teacher relationships. Whatever the program, it must be framed with the intention of encouraging students to actively participate in the programs with strong voices. Research on the teacher-student relationships suggests that the greater the student-teacher relationship suggests that the greater the opportunity for students to have a voice, the greater the likelihood for positive relationships, which, in turn, may potentially lead to greater academic success (Barile et al., 2012).

School transition preparedness experiences, particularly opportunities and programs at the elementary level, is the second factor that must be considered when adequately addressing graduation outcomes of students with disabilities. Focusing on transition experiences at the elementary level is not common practice in U.S. public schools even though research proves the need. Historically, transition services have primarily focused on the needs of students with the most severe cognitive and physical disabilities; whereas, students with learning disabilities were thought to possess the cognitive skills necessary to make the transition into adulthood (Bassett & Smith, 1996). Times have changed and research from studies like this one indicate that the need is far more great than past research as indicated. Providing elementary and middle aged students with transition skills classes, career awareness workshops and work exposure mentor programs assist in successfully preparing students with learning disabilities for high school and beyond.
The creation of academic intervention programs for students with disabilities is a common need for students who are at risk for school failure, and should be considered as a factor in the implementation of a successful intervention model. Students enter the school setting with differing levels of previous knowledge due to their varying learning experiences (Barile et al., 2012). Furthermore, high school students experience differing academic motivations and aspirations based on their past school experiences (Barile et al., 2012; Davis-Kean, 2005). Results from this study indicate that the negative early learning experiences of students at risk for school failure have a deep and intrinsic impact on the likelihood of school success in high school. Therefore, early identification of students at risk for failure is as critical as identifying the intervention programs the students are selected receive. Targeted reading intervention programs throughout the grade levels, daily intervention from reading specialists and formalized, frequent assessments are all equally important components of this tier in the model.

Results addressing the research sub-question indicated a significant need to address learning difficulties, particularly for students who are at-risk for not graduating, throughout their educational career. All of the students in the at-risk cohort discussed negative learning experiences stemming all the way back to elementary school. These data differed from that which was gathered from the participants in the non-at-risk cohort, as they did not report negative learning experiences starting in elementary school. This finding points toward the necessity of creating a system that identifies elementary students as at-risk, and addressing their learning problems as early as possible, ideally in elementary school. Schools need to be systematic in developing elementary dropout intervention programs based on the data and research available. The findings from this
study gives reason to believe that students who are at risk for school failure are so partly
due to a accumulation of negative experiences beginning in elementary school.

School-based youth-adult partnerships tend to be discussed in educational
research literature as “student voice” initiatives, which are defined as ways in which
youth can have the opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their
lives (Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2009). The process of young people working with teachers
and case managers to co-create their educational paths enables youth to meet their own
developmental needs and strengthen ownership of the change process (Mitra, 2009). A
lack of autonomy, competence and relevance in elementary school are strong factors that
impede student success, particularly for those who are at-risk of failure. The importance
of focusing on interventions that give students’ voice is critical to address the dropout
phenomenon. This would be best done by creating intervention programs outside of the
typical Special Education service model that address the unique learning needs of
students who are at-risk for failure.

The factors identified as salient for successful graduation outcomes, as reported in
figure 5.2, should be considered when making programmatic decisions as teachers,
administrators and policy makers implement reform measures to address the outcomes of
this population. Still, the absence of research and effective programs to address youth
with disabilities and their likelihood of graduating still looms. Much more research is
needed to better understand what additional factors are still needed to provide students
with hopeful and positive post-high school outcomes.
Limitations

The findings of this study are limited by the possible factors outlined in chapter 3. They were:

- Qualitative data supporting existing studies in the field, but is not generalizable
- Participant bias and researcher bias may be a factor, as in all qualitative research.
- The acceptance of participant responses should be considered as a limitation, as the students may be intimidated, nervous or disinterested in the interview topics.
- This design is labor intensive, as it requires extensive in-depth studies on individual participants within the population (Creswell, 2012), resulting in a large amount of qualitative data to code, organize and analyze.

In addition to these limitations, the researcher found an additional limitation considerations during the implementation of the study. The ample amount of data, with over 700 codes, resulted in the necessity to use the most relevant data for the narrative analysis. All of these factors add to potential generalizability and positionality issues that could have occurred during the study. Despite the limitations, the findings serve to inform teachers, administrators, policy makers and the research community regarding the factors related to graduation outcomes of students with learning disabilities.
**Generalizability.** The purpose of this study was to study the lived school experiences of 10th grade students with learning disabilities through stories guided by the student voice theory. Generalizing the participant responses as normative would be an inaccurate representation of an entire population. Additionally, this study is limited in scope because of the small population of participants selected from one educational institution. What was reported by the participants as findings could be reported by other 10th grade students with learning disabilities as non-findings. Every story was uniquely told by each participant in their own voice, and provided a small, yet valuable, window of information to assist in further research. Yet, the scope and size was too small to be considered to be generalizable. Regardless, there is a tremendous need for research on students who fit the criteria outlined in this study. Therefore, it is noted that although not generalizable, the findings help to support future studies of similar nature.

Another argument not supporting the generalizability of this study was the typicality of the demographics. Although one of the participating requirements of the study was to speak English, the participants were demographically similar, with 100% of the participants being Caucasian. This demographic did not match the typical population of students at the high school, nor did it represent the typical population of students identified with a Learning Disability at RHS. The typicality of both populations includes a higher percentage of Hispanic students, which were not represented in this study. The researcher acknowledges that the sample may not be entirely representative of students identified with learning disabilities, but there is no reason for the findings to be limited only to the sample from which it was developed.
**Positionality.** As indicated in chapter 3, bias plays a large role in determining the validity of a qualitative study. Therefore, the researcher’s position as the Principal of a feeder elementary school must be considered when validating the results. The researcher facilitated the application of two research methods, or triangulation, to minimize positionality. Much attention was given to building rapport prior to the interviews, and confidentiality was ensured, both verbally and in writing, to each participant. Parents/guardians were also informed of the researchers’ position in the school district previous to the interviews.

**Implications for Policy & Leadership**

The results add to the existing literature, providing teachers, administrators and policy makers with qualitative evidence identifying three significant themes, relationships with adults, school transitions and relationships with friends that are most relevant to this population of students. Additionally, the results point toward one additional theme, learning difficulties, as a significant factor for students who are at-risk for not graduating.

**Supportive student-to-teacher relationships.** Overwhelming evidence demonstrates that student-to-teacher relationships have a direct correlation to student success (Barile et al., 2012; McGrath & Bergen, 2015; Tennant et al., 2015). The results from this study indicate the same; student to teacher relationships have the most significant impact on the likelihood that a student with learning disabilities will graduate
high school. This understanding provides administrators and policy makers with a framework with which to identify their graduation outcome priorities for schools. Data from this study should be used as qualitative evidence supporting the need for restructuring how we support students with learning disabilities in the public school system. The data from this study should also be considered when implementing pragmatic changes to address the needs of special needs students who are identified as being at-risk, according to credit deficiency and successful completion of coursework, for school failure.

**Effective transition experiences.** Research on the role of positive transition experiences in determining graduation outcomes indicate findings similar to those found in this study. School transitions are reported as transforming experiences in research studying high school outcomes (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Martinez et al., 2011). These studies documented self-reported increasing declines in adolescents’ school attitudes and related these declines to their graduation experience. However, the results from these studies do not mirror those found in this study, which focused on the lived experiences, including transitions, of students identified with learning disabilities. On the contrary, results from this study found increasing adolescent attitudes after they experienced the general education to special education transition; as they aged and faced new transitions from elementary to middle, then middle to high school, participants reported more positive transition experiences.

The participants in this study found the transition from general education to special education, typically occurring during elementary school, as an overwhelming and negative experience. While some found special education to be unnecessary while others
felt that the services were not provided early enough, most of the students in this study referenced their experience identifying for special education, and the services they were provided, as providing anxiety, confusion and discontent. The transitions from elementary to middle and middle to high school were progressively referred to as more positive as the students grew older. The perceived participant notion that transitions are “easier” as they grow older deserves further study to identify if this notion is relevant to actual graduation outcomes.

Although all of the students reported progressively more positive experiences as they aged, the at-risk participants described their transition experiences as negative due to a lack of support, an absence of Special Education services at an early age. This qualitative finding could be further explored to identify if it can further support studies that are generalized to the population. The data gathered on transition related experiences should be considered for future research and programmatic changes to the services provided to special education students. As described in the proposed model, one of the three key components to the model is to provide students with transition experience as early as elementary school.

Implementing systems that develop mentorship and guidance for learning disabled students, allocating money for additional teaching and support staff, or adding counselors or case managers to improve the teacher-to-student ratios will improve graduation outcomes, and consequently post-graduation outcomes, of our neediest students. This study did not seek to find information related to the psychological factors related to student-to-adult relationships and academic success, but this finding deserves
further consideration as policy makers determine the relevance of social relationships to learning.

**Positive relationships with friends.** It is reported that stability in peer relationships during transitions helps determine how successfully students adapt to new environments, and perceived social support from friends may be a key factor in predicting a successful high school experience (Martinez et al., 2011). Chapter 4 highlights the importance of peer relationships in this study. The participants reported positive experiences within this theme, and very few negative experiences, as being overwhelmingly significant in their school experience. Students told stories of positive experiences with their peers when asked to describe the important factors related to their success. They also described non-academic social experiences with peers with relation to their academic successes or non-successes. This factor remains one of the significant findings in this study. Peer relationships, regardless of the context in which they are experienced, were important to the participants. This indicates the need for further focus on the interpersonal effects of social relationships on school success.

**Academic interventions for At-Risk students.** A finding unique to the at-risk population was their description of experiences related to learning difficulties, an area that the at-risk cohort identified as being a significant factor when predicting high school outcomes. Although their academic experiences were not reported as equal and some are more credit deficient than others, all of the participants identified learning difficulties as a barrier to their success and all four expressed academic frustration in the classroom. Surprisingly, the at-risk students each also expressed confidence of graduating without
difficulty regardless of their credit deficient status. One may expect a student with learning challenges to be hindered by past experiences that once brought him or her down. However, the researcher’s interview experiences with the students in this study highlighted a level of confidence possibly due to a high level of resiliency based on the many challenging experiences at-risk students face at an early age. This unique perspective deserves attention and further study to determine if more needs to be done at the policy level to address the unique needs of this population.

**Implications for Social Justice**

The findings of this study demonstrated that the focus on closing the achievement gap between students who are general education and those who are identified with learning disabilities continues to be an area of concern. It is clear that the educational system is not preparing our disadvantaged youth who do not fall into the elite group of students bound for a four-year university (Alfed & Bhattacharya, 2012). The limited research on this population reinforces the need for ongoing research to provide answers and solutions that support this needy population. Teachers, administrators and policy makers are missing critical opportunities, based on a lack of research, to better equip Learning Disabled students with methods, strategies and services that will improve their graduation outcomes.

This study contributes to the growing body of student voice research. When students describe their early school experiences, they provide researchers in the field with information from the most valuable, accurate resource. Furthermore, empowering the
voices of subpopulations who are underrepresented in literature, such as students who are disabled, provides a layer of authenticity that is rarely spoken.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study concluded with a proposed model to assist teachers, administrators and policy makers to design services that properly address the needs of students with learning disabilities. However, as qualitative research cannot be generalized, evidence from this study can be used to address the research question and to provide research that supplements existing similar studies. The data also helps to identify “next steps” to continue addressing the problem. Further research is still needed to address why students with learning disabilities continue to demonstrate the need for the proposed model regardless of the boundless conclusive literature that this study supports. Research on the value of student-to-teacher relationships are overwhelmingly convincing, with four decades of studies concluding the value of strong student-to-teacher relationships. While the research is not quite as extensive when looking at the impact of transitions on student performance, findings from this study add to the research and prove the need for further research on how effective transitions, particularly at the elementary level, impact student performance in high school and beyond.

The opportunity gap between students identified with learning disabilities and those without is not closing regardless of the answers the research proves. This study provides qualitative data to add to the existing research concluding the need for elementary transition programs for disabled and at-risk youth. A great need for this
research will continue to exist until the findings from the studies are applied to the daily happenings in our schools. The findings from this study supports the current, yet limited, literature demonstrating that early school experiences have a profound impact on the outcomes of students with learning disabilities.
Appendix A: Parent/Guardian Consent to Participate in Research

Consent to Participate in Research

My name is Joy Harris. I am a graduate student enrolled in the joint doctoral program with California State University San Marcos and the University of California-San Diego. I am also the Principal of James Dukes Elementary School in Ramona, CA. I plan to better understand the elementary and middle school experiences of students identified with Learning Disabilities, and how their experiences impact the likelihood of graduating from high school. This information will be used to inform policy makers, district level employees and school administrators who make decisions for students with disabilities.

Requirements of Participation
Your son/daughter will have the opportunity to answer questions and tell his/her point of view on experiences they faced in school. This will be done in an individual interview setting. Each question will be voluntary, and students will not be forced to answer questions or prompts they do not wish to participate in. An audio recording device will be used to record the responses during the session. Each session will be approximately 45-60 minutes. Students will be asked to keep the conversations confidential.

Benefits/Risks/Safeguards
There are potential benefits to participating in this study. First, it will provide data to policy makers, researchers, school leaders and teachers of how the elementary and middle school experiences of students with learning disabilities impacts the likelihood of graduating from high school. This research can be used to make thoughtful decisions on the "next steps" to better serve students with learning disabilities. Additionally, this study will give a voice to students with learning disabilities. Their stories will help to create more authentic services and programs based on what students identify as necessary to perform better in high school and beyond.

There are minimal negative risks associated with this study. Risks and limitations are considered prior to conducting the research:
- Self-esteem and/or self-concept may be negatively impacted if they are perceived negatively if records are accessed by anyone other than the student researcher.
- Students will be released from class and will, therefore, miss instructional class time.
- Participants may have strong reactions to interview questions that ask them to recall stories from their past.

Safeguards will be taken to minimize possible risks. They are:
- The student researcher must uphold the integrity of confidentiality when handling the confidential documents.
- Students will be interviewed at a time best suited for the student's schedule, and will be coordinated with the counseling department. If a class-time interview is an academic hardship
to the student, the student researcher will offer to interview him or her during a more
convenient time such as during lunch or before/after school.
• The student researcher/interviewer will encourage honest, reflective responses from the
  participants. I will also provide ample opportunities to participants to take breaks, or to stop
  answering the question, if necessary.

Your child’s participation is entirely voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any time. There are no
consequences if he/she decides not to participate.

This study has been approved by the California State University San Marcos Institutional Review
Board (IRB). If you have questions about the study, you may direct those to the researcher, Joy
Harris, at joyharris@ramonausd.net or (760) 788-5060. Or you may contact the researcher’s
dissertation chair, Dr. Erika Daniels, at edaniels@csusm.edu. You will be given a copy of this form
for your records.

Thank you for being a part of this study!

Joy Harris
Student Researcher

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I agree for my child to participate in this research study.

I agree for my child to have the interview audiotaped.

Student Name

Parent Name

Parent Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

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This document has been approved by
the Institutional Review Board at
California State University San Marcos
Expiration Date: April 27, 2016
Appendix B: Assent to Participate in Research

Assent to Participate in Research

Dear 10th grade student,
My name is Joy Harris. I am a graduate student enrolled in the joint doctoral program with California State University San Marcos and the University of California-San Diego. I am also the Principal of James Dukes Elementary School in Ramona, CA. I plan to better understand the elementary and middle school experiences of students identified with Learning Disabilities, and how their experiences impact the likelihood of graduating from high school. This information will be used to inform policy makers, district level employees and school administrators who make decisions for students with disabilities.

In order to help me inform those who make decisions for schools, you will be asked to participate in a study during one of your class periods. I will be asking you some simple questions. They will require no planning on your part. I am simply looking to hear about your experiences in elementary and middle school. All of your response will be confidential (they will not be shared with your parents, teachers or school administrators). Your grades WILL NOT be affected in any way. I guarantee. I will be using a recording device to record your responses. This will be done only so I can thoroughly recall your statements, and it will not be played back for others to hear. You may leave the interview at any time, and you will not be required to answer questions that make you uncomfortable.

Contact Information
This study has been approved by the California State University San Marcos Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have questions about the study, you may direct those to the researcher, Joy Harris, at joyharris@ramonausd.net or (760) 788-5060. Or you may contact the researcher’s dissertation chair, Dr. Erika Daniels, at edaniels@csusm.edu. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Thank you for being a part of this study!

Joy Harris
Student Researcher

______________________________
I agree to participate in this research study.

______________________________
I agree to have the interview taped.

Participant’s Name

Signature

Date

Researcher’s Signature

This document has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at California State University San Marcos. Expiration Date: April 27, 2016
Appendix C: Student Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. *Let’s talk about the services you receive. Think back to the time you started receiving Special Education services. In your opinion, why did you originally qualify for Special Education services? Has Special Education helped you learn? Has Special Education made you more confident?*

Points to consider:

- Let the participant tell his or her full story.
- Ask for clarification afterward.

Follow up questions might include:

- *What feelings did you have when you first qualified?*
- *Did you understand what Special Education services provide you?*

2. *Tell me a little about your elementary school experience. Did you feel successful?*

Points to consider:

- To understand their experience it is important to get the story leading up to high school.

This question is not complete until I understand:

- What feelings the student has about early school experiences (ie: academic, social, relationships with staff, etc.)
- If the student felt supported
- How his or her voice was, or was not, heard

Follow up questions might include:

- *How do you feel about school now? Did you ever feel differently?*
- *Were you treated fairly?*
- *When did you first start (not liking school, doing drugs, skipping classes, not going to school, hanging out with your homies……..)? Why?*
- *Tell me about a story about a time you felt successful (or unsuccessful).*

3. *Tell me about your middle school experience. Did you enjoy it? Why or why not?*

Points to consider:

- Want to capture their experiences in depth here.
- Questions need to be guided by their response.

Follow up questions might include:

- *Did you participate in a transition class in 9th grade? Did it help you to prepare for 10th grade?*
- *What don’t you like? Why?*
Elaborate on the transition from 8th to 9th grade. Was it successful? Why or why not? Did you feel that 8th grade prepared you for high school?

4. Do your parents and family members have a big impact on your high school experience?

5. Do you like school?

Follow up questions might include:

- Who do you think cares about you? (If the student named someone) What does this person do to show you he or she cares?
- (If the student has a negative perspective) What would make school better?
- If you could’ve changed something from elementary or middle school, what would it have been?

6. What are your goals for the future?

Follow up questions might include:

- Do you plan to graduate in 4 years?
- Would you like to take “easy” or “challenging” classes before you graduate?
- What will you do when you finish high school (college, work, hang out)?
Appendix D: Participant Profiles

Non At-Risk Cohort

Brady. Brady is a 16 year old Caucasian male student. He attended elementary, middle and high school in Raymond Unified. He lives with his mother and father who are married. Brady would like to be a firefighter after high school. Brady has a quiet demeanor, and he is a respectful, compliant young man. Brady has no attendance issues.

Brady qualified to receive Special Education services in 5th grade, and has been receiving services since 2010. He became eligible with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability, and there were no secondary disabilities noted. Brady’s IEP indicates, “Brady exhibits deficits in basic reading skills and a processing deficit in auditory processing (phonemic rapid retrieval).” According to his most current IEP, Brady enjoys football and riding his bike. It also indicates that math is a strength and that he “prefers class projects and working in groups. A structured environment benefits Brady.” There were no communication development concerns, nor does he demonstrate any gross/fine motor development needs, vocational needs or adaptive/daily living skills needs. Other than being color blind, there are no health issues reported.

Brady has goals written in reading, written expression and transition. His Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school, I will enroll in a local community college and begin a Fire Science program, and 2.) Upon completion of school, I will work part time in the community while I am attending college. Brady is not credit deficient. He has earned 120 credits, with 105 credits needed. Although he earned a D- in Spanish 1, Brady has not failed any courses. His academic history also demonstrates strong progress report grades during his Sophomore year with all A’s, B’s and C’s. Brady’s anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017.

Kole. Kole is a 16 year old Caucasian male student. He was born in Russia, and moved to the United States with his mother and father when he was 3 years old. He attended a specialized preschool program, elementary, middle and high school in Raymond Unified. He lives with his mother and father who are married. Kole indicates that he has a strong relationship with his mother and father. At the suggestion of his father, Kole participates on the Varsity Football team and he enjoys the camaraderie of the team. He seemed reserved, yet focused, during his interview. Kole does not have attendance issues although there was one recorded incident where Kole was reported truant by school administration. Additional behavioral records indicate the following incidents:

- 10/28/10 Use of profanity
• 03/26/12 Fighting; Mutual combat
• 05/09/12 Profanity
• 01/31/14 Fighting; Mutual combat
• 02/04/15 Under influence of alcohol

Kole qualified for Special Education services when he was 3 years old. He started receiving services in 2001. He became eligible with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability, and there were no secondary disabilities noted. Kole’s IEP indicates, “There is a significant cognitive/achievement discrepancy in the areas of oral expression, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, math calculation, math reasoning and written expression. These discrepancies are due to processing deficits evident in the areas of auditory processing and cognitive ability of verbal conceptualization and expression.” According to his IEP, Kole is easily overwhelmed in the academic setting and he has a “safe” pass in the event that he needs short break from the setting. There were no communication development concerns, nor does he demonstrate any gross/fine motor development needs, vocational needs or adaptive/daily living skills needs. There are no health issues reported.

Kole has goals written in reading comprehension, math calculation, transition, behavior and reading vocabulary. His Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school I will attend college. 2.) Upon completion of school, I will obtain a part-time job to assist with school expenses. Kole has earned 120 credits, with 105 credits needed. He is not credit deficient. Other than a D- in Algebra I, Kole’s academic history is strong with A’s, B’s and C’s. His academic history also demonstrates Kole’s academic performance is consistent with grades that generally do not change throughout the term. Kole’s anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017.

**Kieran.** Kieran is a 16 year old Caucasian male student. Kieran was born in San Diego and raised in Raymond. He attended elementary, middle and high school in Raymond Unified. He lives with his mother and father who are married. Kieran was a polite young man, and his intensity and focus on the interview was apparent to the researcher. Kieran does not have attendance issues.

Kieran qualified for Special Education services when he was 7 years old. He started receiving services in 2008 when he was in 3rd grade. He became eligible with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability, and there were no secondary disabilities noted. Kieran’s IEP indicates that he tries his best in school and that he actively participates in the NJROTC program. According to his IEP, teachers report that Kieran is an “outstanding” student and that he cooperatively works well with adults and peers. There were no communication development concerns, nor does he demonstrate
any gross/fine motor development needs, vocational needs or adaptive/daily living skills needs. There are no health issues reported.

Kieran has goals written in reading comprehension, math calculation, transition, behavior and reading vocabulary. His Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school I will attend a college, university or technical school. 2.) Upon completion of school, I will work part time to earn money for living and school expenses. Kieran is not credit deficient. He has earned 115 credits, with 110 credits needed. Other Kieran’s academic history is strong with A’s, B’s and C’s only. He failed Spanish I in 10th grade, but is taking the class again in his Junior year. Kieran’s anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017.

Micah. Micah is a 16 year old Caucasian male student. He attended elementary, middle and high school in Raymond Unified. He lives with his mother and father who are married. Micah participated in the marching band and in NJROTC, and he is active in his church community. He participates in Workability, a school-to-work program for students with special needs that provides comprehensive pre-employment training and follow-up job-related services. Micah is a talkative young man who seems to connect well with adults. During this study, Micah enthusiastically shared his experiences and thoughts.

Micah qualified to receive Special Education services in 2002 during pre-school. He became eligible with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability, and there were no secondary disabilities noted. Micah’s IEP indicates, “A severe discrepancy exists between ability and achievement in the area of written expression. The discrepancy is due to a psychological disorder in the area of visual processing and auditory processing (phonological awareness).” It also indicates that math is an area of difficulty, and that he “does not usually initiate comments within the academic setting but answers the teacher when called upon and is an active participant while working in small groups.” There were no communication development concerns, nor does he demonstrate any gross/fine motor development needs, vocational needs or adaptive/daily living skills needs. Other than being color blind, there are no health issues reported.

Micah has goals written in written expression, math calculation and transition. His Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school, I will attend a college or university to continue my studies, and 2.) Upon completion of school, I will obtain a part-time to assist with college and living expenses. Micah is not credit deficient and his credit history is strong. He has earned 120 credits, with 105 credits needed. Although he has struggled with Algebra in the past, Micah has not failed any courses. Micah’s anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017.
At-Risk Cohort

**Elias.** Elias is a 15 year old Caucasian male student. He was born and raised in Raymond and he attended elementary, middle and high school in Raymond Unified. He lives with his mother and father who are married. Elias’s father is a self-employed farmer, and Elias works for his father’s business after school and during the summers. Elias presents himself as a confident young man and he is passionate about carrying out his father’s legacy. Other than sporadic excused absences, Elias attends school regularly.

Elias has been receiving Special Education services since 2013. He became eligible with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability, and there were no secondary disabilities noted. Elias’s IEP indicates he has “a severe discrepancy exists between ability and achievement in the areas of reading comprehension, math calculation and math reasoning. The discrepancy is due to psychological processing disorder in the area of cognitive ability and conceptualization.” According to his most current IEP, teachers report that Elias is “polite and respectful”. They also indicate, “He lacks organization and follow through. He will forget his assignments at home or loses them. He is easily distracted and will not work effectively without constant prompting by staff.” There were no communication development concerns, nor does he demonstrate any gross/fine motor development needs, vocational needs or adaptive/daily living skills needs. There are no health issues reported.

Elias has goals written in reading comprehension, writing, math and assignment completion/organization. His Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school I will attend a university that offers an agricultural degree. 2.) Upon completion of school, I will work part time to earn income to help defray the cost of transportation and living expenses. Elias is credit deficient. He has earned 85 credits, with 140 credits needed. Elias’s academic history shows varying grades ranging from A’s to F’s. Twice, he received an F in Algebra (9th and 10th grade), and he received an F in English I and World History, all classes Ely is required to pass to graduate. His academic history demonstrates that Ely typically starts classes with failing grades (according to progress report grades), but progressing through classes and finishing with passing grades. Elias’s anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017 although his credit deficiency may result in a later graduation date. In order to graduate on time, he will need to take again Algebra I, World History, English 1 and 10 credits of electives to recover lost credits.

**Macy.** Macy is a 15 year old Caucasian female student. She attended elementary, middle and high school in the same school district. She lives with her father. Her mother does not live with the family; she is incarcerated due to drug related issues. Macy is a confident young woman who excels in cross country and track on the school’s Varsity team. She expresses frustration with learning which she says impacts her self-esteem.
Macy has attendance issues, which are noted in her IEP and identified as a parent concern, due to avoiding classes she dislikes.

Macy has been receiving Special Education services since 2012. She became eligible with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability, and there were no secondary disabilities noted. Macy’s IEP indicates she has “a severe discrepancy exists between ability and achievement in the area of oral expression.” According to her most current IEP, teachers report that Macy “Does well with multimodality learning opportunities”. Also noted, “She struggles in decoding and understanding new, unknown academic vocabulary.” Although she does not receive Speech and Language services, her IEP indicates that “Oral expression is an area of difficulty; Macy will communicate effectively however, when she cannot find the words to express her thoughts or feelings, she will get frustrated.” Macy has vocational accommodations of using a computer for word processing if necessary. There were no motor needs, adaptive/daily living needs or health issues noted.

Macy has goals written in reading, written expression, following direction/oral expression, behavior and transition. Her Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school, I will attend community college. 2.) Upon completion of school, I will obtain a part time job. 3.) Upon completion of school, I will obtain a driver’s license. Macy is credit deficient with the incorrect classes needed to graduate. She has earned 120 credits, with 105 credits needed to graduate. Macy failed Global Science and English I, both required classes for graduation. She dropped out of summer credit recovery in which she was enrolled to make up the credits. Macy’s academic history demonstrates mid-term progress report grades ranging from A’s to F’s. Her anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017.

Tawny. Tawny is a 16 year old Caucasian female student. She was born and raised in Raymond and she attended elementary, middle and high school in Raymond Unified. She lives with her father and step-mother. Her mother has a history of incarceration, although her mother’s whereabouts are unknown at this time. Tawny’s support network, on the other hand, is very strong. Tawny is open about her family dynamic, and indicates that her step-mother has become her best friend. She has made sexual abuse allegations (against a male family member and two male students) to school staff members, which were reported to the authorities. Tawny opened up quickly, and was obviously comfortable during the interview process. Other than sporadic excused absences, Tawny attends school regularly.

Tawny has been receiving Special Education services since 2010. She became eligible with the primary disability of Specific Learning Disability, and there were no secondary disabilities noted. Her IEP indicates, “Tawny meets the eligibility criteria for Special Education services under the category of Specific Learning Disability, with a severe
discrepancy existing between her estimated ability and achievement in the area of reading comprehension due to a psychological processing disorder in the area of auditory processing.” During her interview, Tawny referred to difficulties with auditory processing, acknowledging it several times. According to her most current IEP, teachers report that Tawny is “bright and articulate”. Tawny is expressive about her desire to work with students who have disabilities after college. She actively participates in the Ready to Learn program, a counseling group covering topics such as anger management, Triune Brain Theory, resiliency and self-awareness. There were no communication development concerns, nor does she demonstrate any gross/fine motor development needs, vocational needs or adaptive/daily living skills needs. There are no health issues reported.

Tawny has goals written in reading comprehension, writing, math and transition. Her Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school I will attend a college or university and will enroll in courses that involve education. 2.) Upon completion of school, I will work part time to assist with college-university expenses. Tawny is credit deficient. She has earned 100 credits, with 125 credits needed. Tawny demonstrates an academic record with performance that is varied. During her Freshman year, Tawny failed English I and PE, both classes needed to graduate. She also failed Sculpture I, a class that may be replaced with another Fine Arts class. During her Sophomore year, Tawny failed Agricultural Science. Tawny’s anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017 but this will be dependent on successfully making up the credits she is missing.

**Zander.** Zander is a 17 year old Caucasian male student. He was born and raised in Raymond and he attended elementary, middle and high school in Raymond Unified. His parents are not together, and Zander lives with his father who is permanently disabled with a Traumatic Brain Injury and does not work. Zander is a reserved young man with an as-a-matter-of-a-fact persona. He is candid about his academic struggles, but he seems optimistic about his future. Zander has inconsistent attendance and several days of excused absences due to illness.

Zander has been receiving Special Education services since 2008. He became eligible with the primary disability of Other Health Impairment, with a secondary disability of Specific Learning Disability. Zander was held back in 2nd grade. Zander’s primary disabling condition was determined due to a chronic heart condition that limits his strength, vitality and alertness which adversely impacts his educational performance in all academic areas. His IEP also indicates, “There is a significant discrepancy between his cognitive ability and achievement in the area of math calculation. This discrepancy is due to a psychological processing deficit evident in the areas of attention and auditory processing (rapid automatic naming). Although not discrepant, Zander also exhibits relative and absolute achievement weaknesses in the areas of reading comprehension,
math reasoning and written expression.” According to his most current IEP, teachers report that Zander enjoys school. He makes consistent effort at school regardless of difficulty staying on task. Zander is a social young man and he is personable with his peers and with adults. He likes fishing and participates in ROTC. There were no communication development concerns, nor does he demonstrate any gross/fine motor development needs, vocational needs or adaptive/daily living skills needs. Zander had a heart transplant when he was 2 years old, and he takes daily medication to monitor his condition.

Zander has goals written in reading comprehension, writing, math, transition and behavior/work completion. His Individual Transition Plan indicates the following post-secondary goals: 1.) Upon completion of school I will attend college or technical school. 2.) Upon completion of school, I will work part time to earn money to help pay expenses. Zander is credit deficient. He has earned 75 credits, with 150 credits needed. Zander’s academic history shows varying grades ranging from B’s to F’s. In 9th grade, he failed English I and Global Science. In 10th grade, Zander failed World History, Algebra I and English II. All of these classes will need to be made up, as they are graduation requirements. Zander’s anticipated graduation completion date is 6/15/2017. In order to do this, he will need to take again English I, Global Science, World History and Algebra I, along with 10 credits of electives.
REFERENCES


Sinclair, M.F. (1994). *Are we pushing students in special education to drop out of school?* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Center on Residential Services and Community Living College of Education.


