

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO
PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF
SELF-DETERMINATION BY COMMUNITY
COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING
DISABILITIES

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Individuals with disabilities have not traditionally had the same freedom of choice and control over their own lives as non-disabled individuals have had. This is especially true in the realm of education, but in the past thirty years both educational leaders and advocates for individuals with disabilities have stressed the need for persons with disabilities to develop self-determination. This study describes the factors that effected the development of self-determination by three individuals who formerly received special education services for learning disabilities. The research question was: How do community college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in school describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining? Narrative methods of inquiry were used to explore the descriptions of three young adults who had been identified as having a learning disability, were currently enrolled in a community college, and had received special education services

in school. They described influences they perceived on their capacity to be self-determining. In addition, I followed the theoretical perspective of Bronfenbrenner on the ecology of the developing person, of the environment, and especially of the evolving interaction of the two. I also explored the concept introduced by Wehmeyer that self-determination is an educational outcome. The findings highlighted the importance of the role of families, friends, educational setting, and religion on the development of self-determination. The findings also emphasized the concept of the individual with self-determination as a causal agent of his/her life who displayed the essential elements of decision-making, self-advocacy, self-awareness, goal-setting, goal-attainment, problem-solving, locus of control, and never settling for less. Implications for policy and practice included establishing better communication between the home and educational setting and helping parents with questions regarding their child's disability. School personnel need to develop additional skills in helping students become self-determining and in working with students with learning disabilities. Further research needs to develop a better understanding of families with children who are not self-determining to learn what supports would be effective for them in encouraging their children to grow in this area.

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT
OF SELF-DETERMINATION BY COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS
WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

By

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Thank you. As soon as a child learns to talk they are taught to say thank you. This is because we want children to learn to be polite and to do the right thing. I can say thank you and mean it but the meaning is what is really important and I want to be able to say the meaning as well as the words.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The ability to exercise control over one's life is a highly regarded freedom in our society. Individuals without disabilities take that ability for granted, but up until the late 1980s that freedom was not always available to persons with disabilities. The topic of self-determination for individuals with disabilities has been discussed in the literature since then, and much has been written on this subject. In an effort to gain an overview of the subject, Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, and Wood (2001) conducted a meta-analysis to identify what self-determination methods were used and what populations were most often addressed. They found that most programs addressed choice making for individuals with differing levels of mental retardation or self-advocacy skills for individuals with learning disabilities. They concluded, "self-determination, the combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior, has become an important part of special education and related services for people with disabilities" (Algozzine et al. 2001, p. 219). Nevertheless, no state or federally mandated provisions compel the instruction of self-determination. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, 1997, and 2004 stresses the importance of transition planning and involvement in the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) process for students with disabilities, but it does not outline instruction in self-advocacy or any of the other identified elements of self-determination.

In this study, I explore the construct of self-determination through the conceptual lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical perspective on the ecology of human development. The perspective is new in its conception of the developing person, of the environment, and especially of the evolving interaction of the two.

Bronfenbrenner defined development as a lasting change in the way a person perceives and deals with his/her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). He conceived the ecological environment as a set of nested structures, each inside the next. At the innermost level, the environment was the immediate setting containing the developing person. For example, a student with learning disabilities may have received instruction on self-determination in school; however, Bronfenbrenner's nested structures suggest that we need to look beyond a single setting to the relationship between that setting and the child's home. So the natural ties between the school and the home may determine the development of self-determination for a student with learning disabilities.

I also explore the concept introduced by Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998) that self-determination is an educational outcome. Initially, much of their work centered on self-determination for individuals with some level of mental retardation. They expanded their concepts to include individuals with learning disabilities. They argued that the essential characteristics of self-determination are autonomous functioning, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization. They further argued that those elements could be taught (Wehmeyer, et al., 1998). Although they did explore the effect the home had on the individual in the development of self-determination, Wehmeyer's primary thesis was that self-determination was a skill that should be taught in the schools.

The concepts proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Wehmeyer are not mutually exclusive; but they approached self-determination from different perspectives.

There is now broad agreement that all students, regardless of whether they have an identified disability or not, need to be self-determining. By self-determining, I mean that an individual possesses and exercises the ability to make decisions for him or herself, or selects someone else to make those decisions if, for some reason, the individual is unable to do so (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Wehmeyer, 1996). However, I had a very salient reason for concentrating on self-determination for young adults with disabilities: Historically, individuals with disabilities have not been offered the same choices as their non-disabled peers (Wehmeyer, et al., 1998). Students excluded from the regular curriculum were unable to make choices about what courses they would pursue in school. Students in special education programs or paths in school often had no choice but to continue in those programs upon leaving school. In addition, they were not taught the self-advocacy or self-determination skills necessary to succeed in post-secondary and employment situations, nor were they given any support in planning for the future.

There is a growing concern that students with disabilities are not successful in college despite the special education services provided to them in high school. However, enrollment figures for students with disabilities have quadrupled from 2.3% in 1978 to 9% in 1998 (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Henderson (2001) reported that freshmen with learning disabilities are the fastest growing group of individuals with disabilities entering college. In 2000, 49% of all students with disabilities reported going to a community college, and 40% of students with a disability who attended college reported having a learning disability. This was up from 16% based on information collected 12 years ago (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

Stodden, Jones, and Chang (2002) found that many students with disabilities do not succeed on the college level. Their research suggested that the support given students with disabilities in high school was much greater than that provided for students with disabilities in college. It was often difficult for students to advocate for themselves in college when they had been unaccustomed to doing so in the past. In addition, students with disabilities were not always able to describe their own disabilities or identify the accommodations that would have helped them succeed in school.

According to Wolanin and Steele (2004), students with disabilities are more likely to leave college before earning a degree than their non-disabled peers. We need to know more about what helps young adults with disabilities become self-determining to help them be successful in adult situations such as post secondary education.

Wehmeyer (1992, 1996, 1998) considered education an educational outcome; however, there is a difference between training and educational instruction in self-determination. Training involves teaching a particular skill; however, educational instruction is broader and also involves helping students to develop reason and judgment and the ability to apply knowledge to other areas. Sometimes it is necessary to train someone how to make choices about what they want to eat or wear, and this is one aspect of self-determination. Teaching an individual what to do at an IEP meeting introduces another type of skill: understanding the types of decisions that could be made and how to implement them. This type of instruction may help the individual to eventually make life-altering decisions based on his or her self-knowledge and personal goals.

Self-determination is often addressed in the literature as a civil rights issue for individuals with disabilities to have the same rights as people without disabilities. Algozzine

et al. (2001) found in their meta-analysis that self-determination had been addressed as both an intervention and an outcome in much of the research. Self-determination incorporated the following processes: choice making, decision-making, problem solving, goal setting, goal-attainment, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-understanding, self-observation, and self-evaluation. Little research had examined the effect of training on self-determination in the long term. In addition, they found a need to understand the other factors that affected the development of self-determination.

Much of the research on self-determination has centered on various techniques for instructing students with disabilities to use self-determination in their lives. The studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have focused on how well training methods improved a student's ability to demonstrate mastery of a learned behavior immediately after training. In this dissertation, I focus on gaining an understanding of what happened to students after they left high school. Some students I studied had not received direct instruction in self-determination, but they demonstrated the principles of self-determination in their daily lives. I wanted to know what had led them to be self-determining.

Focus and Purpose

For this dissertation, I examined the role self-determination played in the lives of community college students with learning disabilities who received special education services when they were in high school. I studied the narratives of young adults with learning disabilities to gain their perspectives on what influenced their development of self-determination.

In the early stages of research into self-determination, researchers such as Wehmeyer and Kelchner(1995) and Sands and Wehmeyer (1996) set out some approaches to supporting

transitions for special education students. They emphasized “training” in self-determination, especially for students who identified as being mentally retarded.

Wehmeyer et al. (1998) and Field and Hoffman (1996) broadened the field to include students with learning disabilities, and as a result, this population has received more attention in the past few years. More has been written about the need for students with learning disabilities to develop skills in self-determination, and programs have been developed to help such students accomplish this goal. Nonetheless, we had little understanding of students with learning disabilities who demonstrated enough self-determination to enroll in college and be successful there.

The students I studied provide insights into how they learned to practice the skills of self-determination that Wehmeyer and his colleagues (1995, 1996) argued should be included as a focus in special education services. In this dissertation, I examine the role self-determination played in the lives of those students. My study will extend the current literature on self-determination by focusing on the life stories of the participants and the experiences they related in their development of self-determination.

General Research Question

This study used narrative inquiry to answer the following research question: How do community college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in high school describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining?

The following sub-questions supported the general research question: (1) What was the student's personal definition of self-determination? (2) Did the student receive any direct instruction to help him/her achieve self-determination? (3) If they did receive training, what type of instruction do the participants report as being most effective for them? (4) How did

participants who did not receive formal instruction in self-determination learn to be self-determining? (5) What aspects of home life and social experiences did participants consider to be most important in helping them become self-determining?

Methods

To understand how community college students with learning disabilities developed self-determination, I decided that I needed to hear directly from them about the influences on their ability to be self-determining. For this reason, I chose narrative inquiry as a way of interpreting the experiences that my subjects had in their development of self-determination. I interviewed three college students with learning disabilities at length. In addition to the research questions, I developed some specific questions that helped focus the interviews. In addition to answering the questions, the participants went on to talk informally about their experiences and provided more information than I had initially anticipated with the focus questions.

I transcribed the interviews and used the computer program, NVivo, to aid in the interpretation and analysis of the vast amount of information revealed in the interviews. I shared the information contained in the interviews with other educational professionals, and I also discussed my interpretations with these professionals and others. The feedback I received helped to guide me in further analysis and helped me to ensure that my conclusions reasonably reflected the information revealed to me in the interviews.

Significance of Research

Other qualitative studies have addressed transition and self-determination for individuals with other disabilities. For example, Garay (2003) studied the deaf and hard of

hearing in transition, and other qualitative research has been conducted to understand what helped individuals with learning disabilities in vocational training (Tomblin & Haring, 1999). However, there has been little research on how students with learning disabilities in community colleges had become self-determining. Students with learning disabilities are the largest category of students with disabilities entering college, (Henderson, 1999). It is important to hear their voices so we better understand what helped them develop self-determination.

This study contributes to our understanding of the influences on self-determination among college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in high school. Such understanding can be used to inform policy-making when self-determination is considered for inclusion in the curriculum for students with disabilities. Additionally, the study has provided a rich description of the effect of self-determination on the lives of former special-education students.

Teachers may be able to use this study to inform their practices in the education of students with learning disabilities. The participants related a great deal of information about their own experiences as students with learning disabilities. Some of these experiences are informative in that they reveal what worked for them, what did not work, and what additional support might have been helpful.

Researchers can use this information to confirm some of the findings already established in literature. In addition, researchers can use this information to help determine new directions for research. There is much we do not know about the parents of children with learning disabilities.

Personal Background

This next section provides some background information concerning the reason I became interested in the subject of self-determination. When I was doing the research for this dissertation, I began to think of my own experiences as a student with a learning disability, and I wrote the following poem. I believe it describes my own experience as a student with a learning disability in the area of reading.

See Spot.
See Spot run.
Easy to read now.
Easy to write.
But in my mind's eye
Impossible to decipher.
Others read effortlessly.
I struggled.
I could not understand
How those letters made
The words that others
Could read.
I felt less than the others.
Why couldn't I see
The words, too?

That sentiment is not unique to me, but is shared by many students with a learning disability. This perplexity can spread to all areas of the student's life and leave many unanswered questions.

I have participated in more than a hundred exit conferences in the past 10 years in my role as a Special Education Department Chairman in a local comprehensive high school. I have watched many young adults with disabilities leave school with absolutely no clue about what they would like to do after graduation. I have also seen a lucky few, however, who have graduated knowing what they want and how they intended to get it. I do not know why some young adults with disabilities seem to have goals and plans and others do not. Many of these

young adults with disabilities come back to visit, and their postgraduate experiences are varied as one might expect. Some had gone on to college or had enrolled in training programs. Others had obtained employment or entered the military, and some were sitting at home with nothing in particular to do. This description of student outcomes may be what is expected from any graduating high school class full of students without disabilities; however my interest has always centered on the students with disabilities and the futures that they face.

There was pain in my heart for these young adults with disabilities because they reminded me of my own angst in school when I was trying to decide on some type of career. I started out wanting to be a doctor. Unfortunately, I had a bad time in school because of my own learning disabilities, and I never felt that I was as smart or as capable as the other students in my class. I struggled with reading, spelling, and math and perplexed my parents, teachers, and myself with my inconsistent achievement. I could not read, but I knew everything that was covered in class orally. I could not spell, but I could express myself in writing (if you discounted the spelling problem). I could not work complicated math problems using the prescribed methods, but I could tell you the correct answer before others were finished doing the problem the “right” way.

My parents both worked in the psychiatric field and decided to have me tested. This was before schools regularly tested youth for learning disabilities, but my parents knew a psychiatrist who agreed to do the testing. The psychiatrist also found someone to do an educational assessment. My parents paid for this testing without any state or federal financial assistance.

The results were surprising. They discovered that I was, according to the psychiatrist, very smart, with the scores to prove it. The educational assessment revealed that I couldn't spell or read well because I did not see whole words, and I still do not. The educational assessor also said that I was not good with math, but not to worry about it because she was not good with math, either. They told my parents that I would eventually learn how to compensate for the reading difficulty, and in time I did.

In today's educational setting, I would have been classified as a student with learning disabilities and given services. But all of this happened to me before any programs or formal labels existed. I continued to feel that I was not as smart as my classmates, and I continued to struggle until I learned how to compensate for my disabilities. When I took chemistry in high school, I decided that being a doctor was not a good idea, and I determined that I would rather be a singer. I was a music major in college for 3 days before I was certain that I was not good enough to pursue that dream. After that, I was lost. I majored in history and political science because I decided that the best course of action was to become an historian.

I never wanted to teach because I hated school and could think of nothing more abhorrent than continuing in that environment in any capacity. That was, until I finished school and found I needed a job. I looked in what felt like a million places and even went through several employment agencies. Finally, in desperation, I became a substitute teacher. This was only temporary; at least that was my plan. A principal offered me a full-time position teaching world history and American government, and I took it until something better came along. Through a series of events, I ended up teaching in a school for young adults with mental and physical disabilities. On my first day there, at lunch, I was sitting across from a student who had cerebral palsy and was drooling as he ate his lunch. I took a

look around, not only at him, but also at the other young adults with disabilities and said to myself that I could do this. I had found where I belonged.

The reason I care so much about self-determination is that I do not believe in chance. I walked a lonely and difficult path to find what I believed to be my mission in life. Maybe I went through these events for a reason. I believe that we need to be doing more for young adults with disabilities to help them find their own paths, their own destinations. That was why I am interested in pursuing the subject of self-determination for young adults with disabilities. I want to learn what we could do to effectively help young adults with disabilities find the direction they truly want for themselves.

Perspective

Experience has purpose. As stated earlier, my experience included the fact that I had a hidden disability. Many students with learning disabilities do. Generally, it is not possible to simply look at a student and determine that a disability exists. However, once you have labeled a student, a change takes place. Some students are relieved to know there was a reason that he or she was having a difficult time. Others are grateful because they might now receive help that would make them successful. Some students are devastated by the knowledge. If I had been labeled, I would have been one of the devastated ones. It is one thing to know in your heart that something is wrong. It is quite another thing for the whole world to know.

I never received any special training in determining my future or learning to be a self-advocate. Few of us did, I think, from my generation. We were either in the college preparatory, business, or general education track. We were told that the best track was college preparatory, and most of the people I knew were in that one. I was in the college

track, but because of the trouble I had in school earlier, I never felt I had the same possibilities for a future as the other students.

It was not my intention to ever be a teacher, but I took education courses in college just in case nothing else materialized. I ended up as a teacher because I needed a job. I stayed in teaching because I loved it. Maybe that was the way it was for many of us. Our careers were determined not by what we planned, but by what life planned for us. Or more simply, by what was available when we finally hit the job market. However, self-determination for me amounted to the fact that if I had not loved teaching, I would have found something else. I was able to make a choice.

Sometimes a person who has been identified as having a disability does not believe he or she has the power or ability to choose; however, I would like for them to understand that they have choices and to believe that they could make good choices for themselves. I wanted my experience to be a means of helping others find their own way in the world. It was my belief that each of us had a unique contribution to make to life, and it was my goal to help as many students as possible to fulfill that purpose. That was the real value and principle behind the concept of self-determination, and that was why the shared experiences of those of us who have walked this path can be a powerful beacon for others who are still trying to find their way.

Definitions of Terms

Throughout this study, I use terms such as self-determination, disability, learning disabled, learning disabilities, and transitioning. Three definitions of self-determination referenced in this study are those of Algozzine, (2001), Grigal, Lane, and Lowman (2001) and Wehmeyer (1996, 1998). Algozzine et al. (2001) developed a composite definition

based on a wide sampling of the research on self-determination. Their definition incorporated the following processes: choice making, decision-making, problem solving, goal setting, goal-attainment, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-understanding, self-observation, and self-evaluation.

I also refer to the definition developed by the Maryland Division of Career Development and Transition. In its view, self-determination is the ability of an individual to do what is best for him or her. Individuals achieve self-determination through self-knowledge. The self-knowledge then enables individuals to make decisions, solve problems, and set goals (Grigal et al., 2001).

However, the definition that served as the principle guide for this research was the one developed by Wehmeyer et al. (1998), who identified the essential elements of self-determination as autonomous functioning, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization. They also argued that these elements could be taught (Wehmeyer, 1992, 1996, 1998). In addition, Wehmeyer further defined self-determination as “acting as the primary agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence” (1996, p. 24).

I use the term *disability* or *disabilities* to describe students who had been identified as having some type of condition that interfered with their ability to achieve academically and who required some form of special education service while in an academic setting. I use the term *disabled* to describe any individual with a physical or mental disability that required any type of specialized service for the person to be successful at school, home, or in the community.

I use the definition for *learning disability* from the U.S. Department of Education,

Rehabilitation Services Administration (2000).

A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the central nervous processes involved in perceiving, understanding, and/or using concepts through verbal (spoken or written) language or nonverbal means. This disorder manifests itself with a deficit in one or more of the following areas: attention, reasoning, processing, memory, communication, reading, writing, spelling, calculation, coordination, social competence, and emotional maturity. (United States Department of Education, 2000)

In addition, the definition that is found in IDEA also informed this research.

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

However, learning disabilities do *not* include, "...learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (§300.7(c)(10))

While both definitions address the term learning disabilities, each definition is used for different reasons. The first definition that was cited is often used to apply to a variety of individuals, both in school and out. The second definition from IDEA applies to students primarily in the K-12 setting. This dissertation focuses on the experiences of students with learning disabilities in community college and their experiences span both the K-12 setting as

well as the community college environment. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prevents discrimination toward persons with learning disabilities on the college level.

I use the term *special education service* to include a range of services found in the academic setting, and *special education students* receive the services offered in that setting. In some cases, special education students are simply monitored in regular classes. In other cases, a resource room is maintained where students may be sent to receive individual instruction in a variety of subjects. Some students are placed in inclusion classes that offered a mix of both regular students and students with IEPs in the same classroom with one or two instructors. A content specialist alone might provide instruction in this setting or might receive assistance from either a special education teacher or an instructional assistant.

A more intense level of service consists of one special education teacher who provides a small, structured setting for students with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances. There are also self-contained classes for students with mental retardation. Additionally, some students receive speech services, vision services, and hearing assistance. Special education services are also offered to traumatic brain-injured young people, students with attention deficit disorders, and students with other physical disabilities that interfere with academic progress. Students with learning disabilities can be found in all these settings because learning disabilities are not a single disorder, but can manifest in a variety of ways and in a wide range of intensity.

The terms *transition* and *transitioning* refer to services offered to students with disabilities to enable them to make a smooth and productive move into the world after high school. These services consist of assistance provided during their time in high school and include involving students in their IEP meetings, helping them understand their disabilities

and what supports they need to be successful (Roffman, Herzog, & Wershba-Gershon, 1994), and aiding students in contacting local community colleges and social service agencies with programs available to help them (Thompson, Falk, & Piersy, 2000). In some localities, students with disabilities who leave school are eligible to contact a Transition Facilitator for one year following graduation if they need further assistance getting in touch with any of the agencies or colleges that might offer them post high-school graduation training or assistance.

Organization of the Study

The organization of this study followed the traditional qualitative research design (Maxwell, 1996). In Chapter One the focus and purpose of the study is given, and the research question is stated. Additionally, the significance of the study, personal reflections and definitions of terms are all included. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature related to self-determination and includes a brief historical overview. Definitions of the essential elements of self-determination are discussed, and a figure of the Conceptual Framework that guided this research is also included.

Chapter Three discusses narrative inquiry and how it was used to further this research. The methods used and the trustworthiness of this research are also outlined. Chapter Four recounts the life stories of the participants in relation to their development of self-determination.

Chapter Five addresses the concepts of self-determination that the participants discussed in response to the specific questions asked during the course of our interviews. Chapter Six reviews the findings as they relate to the literature and includes a revised diagram of the Conceptual Framework developed as a result of this research. In addition, it includes discussion of the implications for practice and policy and areas in which more

research is needed.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Context

In this chapter I briefly discuss the political measures that led to self-determination for youth with disabilities. I explain the policy context, and then I move on to summarize the specific literature that deals with the varied aspects of self-determination for youth with disabilities. Finally, I conclude by presenting a concept map and a table outlining the research concepts.

A Brief Historical Background

In this next section, I give a succinct outline of the history of special education as it relates to the development of self-determination. This is important in the overall story regarding self-determination because I show that self-determination is a fairly recent development in the progression of services and opportunities that grew around the education of students with disabilities. Although self-determination is important for all individuals — with and without disabilities — students with disabilities need special instruction in self-determination to help them deal with the special circumstances their disabilities present.

In many cases, people with disabilities were not expected to participate in regular society. It was common practice many years ago to automatically institutionalize a child born with Down's syndrome or to keep persons with disabilities at home virtually hidden from the world. It was not until 1954 that schools became desegregated for a certain segment of our population. But this was just the beginning of inclusion for people with disabilities; it took many more years and additional legislation to allow youth with disabilities to participate in the mainstream at school. *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) began the process, but it was not until such landmark decisions as the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded*

Children v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1974) that education for the disabled was taken seriously. Even then, the rights of persons with disabilities to lead a normal life were limited (Ward, 1996).

Starting in 1958, Congress began to make legislative strides toward improving the education of children with disabilities. Congress first provided funding to train teachers for the mentally retarded under the Expansion of Teaching in the Education of Mentally Retarded Children Act of 1958. Additionally, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 increased the amount of federal funding for the public school education of children. More funding was provided for the education of children, including those with disabilities, in 1965 with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Grant funding for children with disabilities was passed in 1966 under Title VI (Guernsey, 1993).

In 1968, the Architectural Barriers Act made it public policy for youth with disabilities to be included in the mainstream of public life. In addition, many self-advocacy groups for individuals with disabilities began to appear. As a result of the mounting pressure, in 1970, the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) was passed, replacing Title VI. This piece of legislation was really the beginning of effective legislation for children with disabilities (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996).

The United States was not the only nation where the rights of people with disabilities were being expanded. In 1972, the idea of normalization for individuals with disabilities in Sweden began to gain momentum (Ward, 1996). This movement advocated the right of disabled people to have choices, lead lives that included such normal routines as getting up and retiring at fairly regular hours, working, and enjoying relationships with family and friends, which many of us take for granted (Nirje, 1972).

Many self-help and advocacy groups began to develop and actively seek rights for individuals with disabilities. Self-help groups such as Disabled People's International began to emerge and, by the end of the 1980s, as many as 500 different advocacy and self-help groups for persons diagnosed with mental retardation had been established (Driedger, 1989). As a result of the pressure exerted by these interest groups and others, federal legislation began to address some issues that had long been neglected.

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (PL 101-336) was passed, which protects persons with disabilities from discrimination in the areas of employment, transportation, government services, public accommodations, and telecommunications relay services (Wehmeyer et al., 1998). The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 (PL 101-392) and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (PL 103-239) both grew out of the initial ADA legislation (Goldberg, 1982). In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) was amended and renamed IDEA. This legislation was particularly significant because it required inclusion of youth with disabilities in the IEP process from the time they were 16. It also provided transition services to youth with disabilities leaving the school system. In 1997, IDEA was reauthorized, and this time the age at which youth with disabilities were required to participate in the IEP process was reduced to 14 (Wehmeyer, et al., 1998).

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) was part of the movement to help improve life for individuals with disabilities. Unlike some other initiatives, OSERS employed workers with disabilities to help formulate programs that would help develop more opportunities for self-determination among individuals with disabilities (Ward, 1996).

In 1989, OSERS sponsored a conference to bring together people with disabilities, parents, and representatives from various administrative agencies. The result of this conference was the formulation of a number of recommendations that were later implemented. The recommendations resulted in 26 model projects that were established over a 3-year period to enhance self-determination for youth with disabilities. The programs centered on three major areas. One area dealt with youth with disabilities developing plans for their own futures. Another area focused on developing curricula to foster better self-determination. A third area centered on the IEP process and self-evaluation (Ward, 1996).

The following curriculum topics emerged from the projects initiated by OSERS:

(a) Student evaluation of their own skills, (b) student recognition of personal limits, (c) personal goal setting by youth with disabilities, (d) student identification of available options, (e) student acceptance of personal responsibility, (f) communication by youth with disabilities about their priorities and requirements, (g) student assessment of their own progress. Youth with disabilities who participated in these programs appeared to gain greater skills in self-determination (Ward, 1996).

Three major findings arose out of the various projects developed by OSERS. The first was that youth with disabilities appeared to benefit when self-determination was taught in a systematic fashion and not simply left to chance. Youth with disabilities needed to be able to practice and develop these skills in settings that enhanced their learning. Another finding was that parents often did not believe that their child with disabilities was capable of self-determining behavior and did not encourage or try to help their child develop such behavior at home. The school was thus able to provide opportunities not always available at home. In addition, as the projects continued, it became clear that training for self-

determination needed to begin when students were very young. Waiting until a child was older simply meant that the youth with disabilities and his/her family had more time to learn dependency. In fact, it has been suggested that training for self-determination should really have begun in infancy (Ward, 1996).

Self-determination in Education

Lawmakers viewed education as a means of helping youth with disabilities to develop productive lives. For years, youth with disabilities had been viewed as incapable of lending any direction to their own lives. They were expected to be dependent and to contribute little to the world around them. That was their role in life. Society expected nothing, and often got what it expected (Ward, 1996). Now it was different. We recognized that people with disabilities could be educated, and that self-determination was just another subject that could be learned.

Society had changed and had recognized that there were no “throwaway” segments of our population. The introduction to the 1992 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act states:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the rights of individuals to live independently, enjoy self-determination, make choices, contribute to society, pursue meaningful careers and enjoy full inclusion and integration in the economic, political, social, cultural and educational mainstream of American Society. (Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992)

Students with disabilities were not as successful as their non-disabled peers in the areas of employment, postsecondary education, and other measures of adult success. For this reason, educators affirmed the value of self-determination as a desirable outcome of education (Browder, Wood, Test, Karovine, & Algozzine, 2001; Field, 1996; Field &

Hoffman, 2002; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Eisenman & Chamberlain, 2001; Sands and Wehmeyer, 1996; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997; Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005). Many researchers have written extensively concerning self-determination as an educational outcome. Field, (1996), Field and Hoffman, (2002), Pocock et al. (2002), Sands and Wehmeyer (1996) and Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998) found much in the literature that suggested that training for self-determination was an essential element in the education of youth with disabilities. Probably, all youth needed to develop skills in self-determination, but this was especially true for youth identified as having disabilities.

Teaching Self-determination

Several curricula specific to the instruction of self-determination have been developed (Durlack, Rose, Bursuck, 1994; Field & Hoffman, 1994, 1996, 2002; Pocock et al. 2002; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995). When instruction in self-determination does occur, it often centers on instruction for the IEP process to enable students to be effective advocates for themselves. This type of authentic instruction is more meaningful to students than simply telling them what to do because it provides them the opportunity to assert their own preferences, rather than having others making decisions for them (Martin, & Marshall, 1996; Zickel & Arnold 2001). Another area of concentration is in job-related assessments, such as skill, interest, or preference evaluations (Belcazar, Seekins, Fawcett, & Hopkins, 1990). In addition, such areas as choice making are frequently stressed for youth diagnosed with mental retardation (Guess, Benson, Seigal-Causey, 1985; Wehmeyer et al., 1998).

Introducing a curriculum that stresses instruction in self-determination is valuable; nevertheless, one question to be addressed when choosing a curriculum is sustainability,

given the changes in education that have taken place during the past few years. In addition, special educators and general educators need to work collaboratively to be effective in presenting instruction in this area (Eisenman and Chamberlain, 2001).

Abery and Stancliff (1996) recognized that often the difficulty in offering effective training programs in self-determination to youth with disabilities is the fact that there appears to be little time in the busy academic day to do such instruction. Graduation requirements, state-mandated requirements, curriculum requirements, and assessment schedules often make it difficult or impossible to provide adequate education for youth with disabilities. Nonetheless, skills in self-determination could make a tremendous difference in the quality of life for youth with disabilities.

It was already difficult to find time in the curriculum to incorporate direct instruction in self-determination, and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act shifted the focus of instruction even more toward core curriculum values, leaving little room for instruction in subjects such as self-determination. For that reason, diffusion of self-determination into a variety of subjects proved an effective way to include it in a crowded curriculum (Field & Hoffman, 2002). Diffusion of instruction for self-determination might allow students some choice in their reading selections or in the way the acquisition of information was documented. Teachers could foster student involvement in classroom decisions in many ways without teaching a direct lesson entitled *Self-determination* (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002; Deci & Chandler, 1986).

In a study conducted by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998), 800 surveys were given to teachers to determine if the teachers actually taught self-determination skills to students. Although the majority reported that they felt that self-determination was of either high or

medium importance, 55% of the respondents did not include goals addressing self-determination on the IEP, and more than half had never discussed the need for self-determination with their students. In addition, their analysis of the research regarding transition goals for students with mental retardation established that “Out of nearly 900 transition related goals, there were none that indicated students were being taught the skills they need to make choices, solve problems, make decisions, set and achieve goals, or understand themselves” (p. 82). This study was conducted for students with mental retardation and was the only reported data available regarding goals to develop self-determination. However, Eisenman, Chamberlin & Thoma, et al. (2002) found that the implementation of activities in the IEP process for all students with disabilities was limited.

Teachers reported that they had learned about self-determination through graduate-level courses, journals, workshops, books, and undergraduate level courses, in that order. Unfortunately, 67% stated that their training in this area was insufficient. However, teachers reported that preservice training and field experiences in teaching self-determination techniques to students with disabilities was effective teacher training. Teachers could benefit from a combination of course work and field experience in learning to teach self-determination (Nevin, Malian, & Williams, 2002).

Browder, et al. (2001) and Thoma, et al. (2002) suggested that teachers were aware that instruction in self-determination to students of all skill levels was desirable; however, they often did not know which conceptual resources to use or which curricula might have been best. They recommended Wehmeyer et al. (1998), Algozzine et al. (2000), Field et al. (1998a), Pocock et al. (2002), and Test et al. (2000) as good sources to use.

Teachers who were self-determining themselves were better able to train students to be self-determining (Browder et al, 2001; Field & Hoffman, 2002). In the course of reviewing materials and curricula to aid in the teaching of self-determination, teachers had the opportunity to learn skills for themselves that would enhance their own proficiency in this area. Students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, needed effective role models from which to learn. However, if administrators did not support the development of self-determination for teachers, it was difficult for teachers to impart those values to students. Self-determination needed to be supported at all levels of school administration (Field & Hoffman, 2002).

Cultural Diversity and the Instruction of Self-determination

Browder et al. (2001) also cautioned teachers to avoid the following pitfalls when developing programs to encourage self-determination for all students; (a) Do not assume that teachers and students share the same values; (b) Do not assume that teachers and students share the same cultural views; (c) Do not take sides between parent and child: Try to facilitate an understanding between the two; (d) Remember that learning self-determination has no prerequisite skills: Take students where you find them and teach them what they need; (e) Don't ignore the social environment: Students must be supported in their right to be self-determining in their environmental context.

Trainor (2002) stated that students with learning disabilities from culturally diverse backgrounds do not always share the same view of self-determination as those from the dominant culture. Wehmeyer (1998) emphasized the civil rights of persons with disabilities to make their own choices, but Field (1996) emphasized the skills and attitudes needed to make effective decisions. Therefore, not only do the skills for self-determination have to be

taught, but they also have to be understood in the context of the culture in which an individual lives (Trainor, 2002).

Because students with learning disabilities come from a broad variety of cultural backgrounds, educators of students with learning disabilities need to be sensitive to their cultural diversity. A positive adult outcome in the dominant culture is for an individual to leave home and get a place of his or her own. However, in some cultures, staying in the home is considered the proper thing to do. Those differences need to be considered in instructing youth with disabilities for self-determination (Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005; Trainor, 2002).

Assuming that instruction in self-determination is in place for students with disabilities, what is next? Students must have access to the information they need. Here is a double-edged sword. Students with disabilities often need accommodations to support them in their efforts to gain information and be able to report on what they have learned. If they are not self-determining, they may not be able to secure the accommodations they need, and without the accommodations, they may not be able to gain access to self-determination skills. In the next section, the topic of accommodations for students with disabilities is discussed.

Academic Accommodations

One of the major reasons an individual needs self-determination skills is to be able to secure the accommodations he or she needs to be academically successful. Research supports the need for students to be able to apply skills in self-determination to secure the accommodations they need (Field, et al., 2003). Educational accommodations are an important part of the instructional support for students with a disability. Sometimes the only way to succeed academically is to use a variety of educational supports and strategies, such

as extended time on tests, preferential seating, use of calculators or other assistive technology, or having test questions read aloud. Accommodations vary with the needs of each individual, and many students with disabilities require them.

Academic Self-determination after High School

The need for academic accommodations does not stop in high school. Remember, the reason self-determination is so important is that students who are self-determining have better adult outcomes. Post secondary education is a major outcome for some students with disabilities, was especially for students with learning disabilities because they seem to be the biggest sub-group among students with disabilities (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Success in college requires different skills than success in high school. In college, students have to request accommodations, whereas in high school, accommodations were automatically provided. Many students feel that instructors should offer the same accommodations to all students and that instruction should be geared toward the successful acquisition of knowledge and skills for all students and not just a few (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). However, that is not the way it usually happens. Students have to request accommodations, and they need to know how to do that effectively.

Wolanin and Steele (2004) best summarized the attitude of some college faculty toward students with learning disabilities in the following statement.

Students in higher education with learning disabilities [LD] are a special case because they are the largest group of students with disabilities, a group that has grown rapidly in recent years. In addition, as a group, students with LD have a number of characteristics that often lead higher education faculty and administrators to react to them with suspicion and to be reluctant to accommodate the students' needs. (p. 47)

College requires a higher level of skills in the area of self-determination because students have to advocate for themselves. According to Annette (personal communication, May 12, 2004), a counselor at a community college, accommodations are based on the needs of an individual as identified by cognitive and educational testing. Those accommodations may include all the accommodations allowed in high school, but they do not have to be that broad. In college, counselors usually decide which accommodations are allowed based on the policies of the college and on the documentation provided by the students. However, accommodations are designed to give all students with disabilities any reasonable accommodation they might need to succeed, and they are not designed to give them an unfair advantage.

Contrast between High School and College

The ability to request accommodations is not the only difference in expectations for students with disabilities after they get to college. Wolanin and Steele (2004) found a vast difference between the self-determination skills expected in college and those required in high school. In high schools, IDEA controls much of what is done for students, but in college, it is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA (Field et al., 2003). This is important because researchers believe the difference is detrimental to a successful transition from high school to college for youth with disabilities (Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

In high school, the school system is responsible for identifying the disability, which means the system must provide assessments to document the presence of a disability. Those assessments are given at the expense of the school system, and after a disability is identified, the school system is required to identify and provide accommodations, whether the students wants them or not. If a disability is identified, the student receives a label describing the

disability, and he or she is required to accept that label to receive special education services. In addition, after a student starts to receive services, it became common knowledge among his or her peers. In high school, students are frequently assigned case managers, who become advocates. A case manager could discuss a student's disability — without the student's consent — with the student's parents and any other school personnel who needed information to help the student.

In sharp contrast, in college an individual with a disability has to take the initiative to identify him or herself to the college. The burden of proof is on the individual. He or she must supply documentation at his or her own expense. The student with a disability has to ask for the accommodations needed, and each student must advocate for him or herself. On the other hand, students are not forced to accept any accommodation they do not want, nor are they ever publicly labeled to receive services. They have to give the college consent before college personnel may talk to anyone about their disability, and they enjoy a certain amount of anonymity regarding their disability because other students do not know about it (Wallace, 2005). College students with disabilities who were never given an opportunity to develop self-determination skills while they were in the fairly safe confines of high school had a greater chance of running into difficulty when they got to college than those who became self-determining before arriving at college. This is an important reason to provide instruction and support in developing self-determination skills while youth with disabilities are still in high school.

In the next section, I discuss the question of self-determination in a more practical context to illustrate why it is so important. Developing self-determination is a real challenge faced by everyone at one time or another. Youth with disabilities are not different in that

respect, but given the challenges many encountered in high school, and other additional background experiences, they may have had more difficulty developing those skills than their non-disabled peers.

Policy Context

Why is it so important that students with disabilities develop skills in self-determination? John's story is a graphic example in human terms of why these skills are so important. John is 23 years old. He was identified as having a learning disability and given an IEP when he was in the second grade. So John began receiving special education services to help him to progress academically. His parents participated in IEP conferences each year and made decisions for John along with the school staff. When John was 14, he began joining his parents in the conferences. He usually met with his case manager before the IEP conference to go over his goals for the next year — if the case manager had the time to meet with him. Often the IEP was already written and was presented to him to approve or disapprove. John almost always approved the goals because he did not know what else to do. John's parents were then sent a copy of the IEP to review before the annual meeting. His parents were given an opportunity to approve or disapprove the goals but they were often willing to defer to the educational professionals in making educational decisions for John's program. They felt somewhat intimidated by the whole process, and so they agreed to the proposed goals the school sent them. Both John and his parents had concerns about his future, but they were reassured that a Transitional Facilitator would meet with them in John's junior and senior years. Of course, neither John nor his parents knew exactly what a Transitional Facilitator did, but it was reassuring to know that some help was on the way.

In John's senior year in high school, he met with the Transitional Facilitator, who in

turn arranged for John to visit his local community college and the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS). John set up an appointment with the DRS representative, but he did not follow through with the scheduled meeting. Following his graduation from high school, he had a variety of odd jobs and became unemployed. He subsequently contacted DRS for help.

The policies that had been established through a variety of legislative initiatives, such as the ADA (1990) and IDEA (1990, 1997) had aimed at giving individuals with disabilities a choice in what happened to them. For some reason, youth with disabilities (such as John) did not always effectively exercise their choices or use the services available to them. Other individuals with disabilities appeared to have little trouble in making good decisions for themselves.

Although the law mandated the transition process, instruction in self-determination was not required, yet it was one of the most important byproducts of the transitioning process. To help students develop into self-determining individuals, we need to know more about what really helped youth with disabilities (and ultimately adults with disabilities) to develop into individuals able and willing to make effective choices. This is important because students who successfully develop skills in self-determination have more successful adult outcomes than students who do not have these skills. We need to set up effective programs that work efficiently for the people they are designed to help. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest by researchers and policy makers on what needs to be included in such programs. I now turn to discuss the broader literature.

The Literature of Self-determination

The literature on self-determination that emerged during the late 1980s and early to

mid-1990s was designed primarily to educate the reader about the need for self-determination and included various articles describing new training programs for self-determination (Martin, Marshall, & Maxwell, 1993; Sands & Wehmeyer, 1996; Wehmeyer, et al., 1998; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995). Definitions of self-determination were developed and various models were discussed (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Martin & Marshall, 1995; Wehmeyer, 1996; Wehmeyer, et al., 1998). Many of these programs dealt with transition training, choice making, and advocacy training. Even though all aspects of self-determination were addressed in the literature, the researchers seemed to reflect two very different directions. Instruction in choice making was emphasized for students with mental retardation, and self-advocacy skills were emphasized for students with learning disabilities (Algozzine, 2001).

In 1999, Wood, Test, Browder, Algozzine, and Karvonen conducted a meta-analysis of the research to that date. It revealed that more than 450 articles had been written about self-determination. Wood et al. (1999) found that the vast majority of the literature consisted of either position papers, arguing that it was important to teach self-determination to youth with disabilities or descriptions of newly developed programs for the instruction of self-determination.

In addition, Algozzine et al. (2001) found in their meta analysis that although much of the early literature concerning self-determination centered on transition-aged youth with disabilities (Martin & Marshall, 1995; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995), other studies focused on training students with mild to severe cognitive disabilities (Wehmeyer, 1992; Wehmeyer et al. 1996). Later, the self-determination instruction for people with other specific disabilities became the focus of researchers' attention, including students with learning disabilities (Field, 1996), children with more

severe disabilities (Brown, Gothelf, Guess, & Lahr, 1998), and children with autism (Field & Hoffman, 1999).

Given the political climate of the time, it is not surprising that much of the literature focused on self-determination as an educational outcome (Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Pocock, et al., 2002, Martin, et al., 1993; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995; Wehmeyer & Sands, 1996; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Many of these programs dealt with transition training, choice making, and advocacy training and were discussed in previous sections, relating the importance of education and self-determination skills.

In related research, Algozzine and his colleagues conducted a meta-study to evaluate the effect of interventions designed to teach self-determination. They examined 51 studies with a total of 992 participants. Most of the subjects were students with either mental retardation or learning disabilities, although other groups were also included. Of the studies, 31 involved individuals with mental retardation, 10 were directed toward students with learning disabilities, and 10 were nonspecific or looked at students with other health impairments. On the whole, choice making was the skill most often stressed for students with mental retardation, and self-advocacy was taught most often to students with mild retardation and learning disabilities.

Algozzine and his colleagues also found that there had been very little follow-up to test the effectiveness of intervention strategies. The studies reported only a moderate gain in outcomes after students were instructed in skills relating to self-determination. In addition, most, but not all, of the studies and research mentioned by Algozzine and his colleagues (2001) were quantitative. Most had follow-up evaluations that measured their long-term effectiveness through no more than a year. One of the recommendations made by Algozzine

et al. (2001) was that further studies be conducted to determine if long-term effects for training in self-determination were actually achieved.

In addition, another finding was compelling. Algozzine et al. 2001 found that in some cases a lack of reliable data left some of the outcomes in question.

Of the 51 studies reviewed in our research, only 10 (19.6%) collected data on how accurately the intervention was implemented. That lack of data on procedural reliability could call into question exactly what “intervention” was responsible for the changes in student performance noted in this review. (p. 268)

It would appear that one remedy for that problem might have been some qualitative research. Testing the success of a program without understanding all the variables that contributed to the final results is not helpful. We need to know much more about what contributes to the development of self-determination in youth with disabilities. However, there were a few noteworthy studies that have become very well known.

One of them was a program designed by Hoffman and Field (1995) entitled “Steps to Self-Determination,” which was published on its own in 1996 (Field & Hoffman, 1996). This program used as described in 1995 did report an increase in self-determination skills in the areas of participant knowledge regarding self-determination. The curriculum as published the next year stressed five components 1) Know yourself. (2) Value yourself, (3) Plan. (4) Act. (5) Experience outcomes and learn (Field & Hoffman, 1996).

This program was designed to be taught in 18 lessons and could be used in a variety of settings, e.g., after school, in self-contained classes or in general classrooms. It involved teachers as co-learners and included parents in an effort to help students (Field & Hoffman, 2002). The initial field test of this program was included in the meta study by Algozzine et

al. (2000), and participants did report an increase in self-determination skills for the time immediately following the instruction, but there was a question about the long-term effects.

Zhang (2001) evaluated this program during the same time that Algozzine et al. evaluated it, and his results confirmed the results of Algozzine and his colleagues. They both concluded that although it was effective in the short term, more follow-up needed to be done to judge its effectiveness over a longer period of time.

A second program for students with learning disabilities discussed by Algozzine was designed by Durlak, Rose, and Bursuck (1994). Eight high school students were given direct instruction in self-determination skills such as knowing about their disabilities and being able to communicate with faculty about it and the accommodations they needed to succeed. On pre- and post-tests, students showed an increase in skills two weeks after completion of the program. No long-term follow-up was conducted.

The LEAD Group (Pocock et al., 2002) was another curriculum begun in 1996, but it was not published until 2002, which was after the publication of the article by Algozzine et al. (2000). It was begun by a guidance counselor who worked with students with learning disabilities to help them learn better self-advocacy skills, and it expanded to two groups with a structured schedule established by the students themselves. This appeared to be an interesting program that stressed students' control of the content of the program, but there were no reported follow-up studies to measure its effectiveness.

Phillips developed a third well-researched program. (1990). It stressed developing self-advocacy skills for students with learning disabilities in high school. Students developed more self-awareness and were better able to act as advocates for themselves at the end of the training. By the time they were in the twelfth grade, they were able to request changes to

their IEPs and advocate for their own needs.

In addition, another program of interest was developed in 2000 by the Maryland Division of Career Development & Transition: *Self-determination: A Train-the-Trainer Mini Guide for Busy Educators* (Grigal, Lane, & Lownam, 2001). This program was designed to help educators train other educators in the principal of self-determination. Because it was not to be used directly with children, it probably did not meet the criteria of Algozzine's meta study. I mention it here because it has merit as a means of introducing the concepts of self-determination on a school wide basis with the possibility of providing instruction to a variety of students.

These studies provide an overview of some approaches that have been taken to developing self-determination. In the following section, I examine the characteristics of self-determination as they evolved in the literature, and then I develop my own definition based on the population of my study.

Characteristics of Self-determination for Youth with Learning Disabilities

The population I chose to work with in this study is youth with learning disabilities. Because Wolanin and Steele (2004) identified youth with learning disabilities as representing the largest number of students with disabilities who attended community college, I concluded that we need to know more about the process by which they developed self-determination. To know that youth with learning disabilities truly had developed self-determination, I had to find a way to define the term and develop some essential elements to use as signposts in the identification of self-determination in an individual.

The literature was replete with definitions for self-determination. However, the one developed by Wehmeyer (1996, 1998) is most often cited in the literature. He defined self-

determination as an educational outcome that enabled an individual in “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s life free from undue external influence or interference” (Wehmeyer, 1996, p. 24; see also Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Field, 1996; Nevin, Malian, & Williams, 2002; Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Wehmeyer added the assertion developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) that the individual does not need to make every decision but can decide to allow others to make decisions for him or her. The individual is still the causal agent because he or she decided who the decision-maker would be.

Algozzine, et al. (2001) added that “self-determination, the combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior, has become an important part of special education and related services for people with learning disabilities” (p. 219). In addition, Paul Wehman (1998) defined self-determination as control over one's life and choices. Many others added concepts to the definition, but the one by Wehmeyer is still the most widely used in the literature.

Certain components have also been identified as fundamentally important in the process of self-determination for a variety of youth with disabilities. Researchers listed the following components as the most distinctive qualities of self-determination: behaviorally autonomous, self-regulated, psychologically empowered, and self-realized. They further listed the following elements as integral parts of behavior guided by self-determination: (a) choice-making, (b) decision-making, (c) problem-solving, (d) goal-setting, (e) independence, (f) self-observation, (g) self-instruction, (h) self-advocacy, (i) internal locus of control, (j) self-awareness, (k) self-knowledge (Algozzine et al., 2001; Bashir, Goldhammer, & Bigaj, 2002; Browder; Eisenman, & Chamberlin, 2001; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman 1994, 2002;

Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Nevin, Malian, & Williams, 2002; Sands & Wehmeyer, 1996; Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002; Trainor, 2002; Ward, 1996; Wehmeyer et al., 1998; Zhang, Wehmeyer, & Chen, 2005).

Field et al. (2003) administered a survey to 88 students with learning disabilities enrolled in college. They later conducted a qualitative study in which four students enrolled in a major university were interviewed. From these two studies, they developed three personality markers to indicate the presence of self-determination. The three markers were autonomy, problem solving, and persistence (Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003). Autonomy included the characteristic of taking responsibility for ones' actions. Problem-solving included being able to adapt to a variety of learning situations to be successful academically. Finally, these studies revealed that persistence was the quality of not giving up.

In the following chart, I list the essential elements of self-determination. I include a definition of each term from the research or one developed as a composite containing multiple components identified as important. I then identify the researcher who mentioned it as important.

Table 1. Definition of Essential Elements of Self-determination

| Essential Elements | Definitions | Cited |
|--------------------|--|---|
| Causal Agent | A primary director who makes or causes things to happen in his or her own life (Wehmeyer et al. 1998), Deci and Ryan (1985) concluded that a person did not have to actually make all the decisions, but could turn the decision-making over to someone else. He or she still exercised control over who would make the decision | Bashir et al., 2002; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001;Field, 1996; Nevin et al., 2002; Thoma et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |
| Choice-Making | Guess et al. (1985) had three | Algozzine et al., 2001; |

| | | |
|-----------------|--|---|
| | <p>levels:</p> <p>(1) choice signifying inclination,</p> <p>(2) choice as decision-making,</p> <p>(3) choice as a demonstration of independence</p> | <p>Browder, Wood, Test, Karovan, & Algozzine, 2001; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Guess et al., 1985; Nevin et al., 2002; Thoma et al., 2002; Trainor, 2002; Ward, 1996; Wehmeyer et al., 1998;</p> |
| Decision-Making | <p>Closely related to choice-making but includes problem solving, weighing alternatives, and considering consequences (Wehmeyer et al., 1998)</p> | <p>Algozzine et al., 2001; Browder et al., 1996; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Field et al., 2003; Nevin et al., 2002; Martin & Marshall, 1996; Thoma et al., 2002; Trainor, 2002; Zhang et al., 2005; Wehmeyer et al., 1998</p> |
| Problem-Solving | <p>The process of identifying a solution to a situation or a question that was not necessarily readily apparent (Wehmeyer et al., 1998)</p> | <p>; Algozzine et al., 2001; Browder et al., 1996; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Nevin et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998</p> |
| Goal-Setting | <p>Identifying an object or a goal that one hopes to attain. Goals should be clear and detailed, well thought out, and include the intervening conditions that must be accomplished.</p> | <p>Agran, 1997; Algozzine et al., 2001; Browder et al., 1996; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Field, et al., 2003; Nevin, Milian, & Williams, 2002; Ward, 1996; Wehmeyer et al., 1998; Zhang & Wehmeyer, 2005</p> |
| Goal-Attainment | <p>Reaching or accomplishing the identified objective</p> | <p>Algozzine et al., 2001; Browder et al., 1996; Field, 1996; Nevin et al., 2002; Wehmeyer, et al., 1998; Zhang & Wehmeyer, 2005</p> |
| Self-Advocacy | <p>Activist for oneself, uses strategies to achieve a desired outcome for oneself</p> | <p>Algozzine et al., 2001; Browder et al., 1996; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Field, 1996; Field, et al., 2003; Goodley, 1997; Martin & Marshall, 1996; Nevin et al., 2002; Pocock et</p> |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| | | al., 2002; Thoma et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998; |
| Self-Efficacy | “The conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce a given outcome” (Bandura, 1977, p. 193) | Algozzine et al., 2001; Bandura, 1977; Browder et al., 1996; Field, 1996; Martin & Marshall, 1996; Thoma et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |
| Self-Awareness | Understanding oneself as an individual that includes but is not limited to strengths, abilities, weaknesses, and how those could be used to benefit oneself (Wehmeyer et al., 1998) | Algozzine et al., 2001; Browder et al., 1996; Field, 1996; Martin & Marshall, 1996; Nevin et al., 2002; Pocock et al., 2002; Thoma et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998; |
| Self-observation | Evaluation and examination of one’s own behavior (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998) | Algozzine et al., 2001; Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |
| Psychological-Empowerment | Belief that one (1) has control over circumstances important to him or her, internal locus of control (2) possesses the skills necessary to achieve desired outcomes, self-efficacy, (3) if one chooses to apply those skills, the identified outcomes would result, outcome expectation (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998) | Agran, 1997; Bashir et al., 2002; Field, 1996; Wehmeyer et al., 1998; |
| Behavioral-Autonomy | A behavior is autonomous if a person acts according to his or her own preferences, interests and/or abilities in an independent manner, free from undue external influence or interference (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998) | Bashir et al., 2002; Field 1996; Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |
| Locus of Control | One has control over outcomes important to his or her life. Youth with an internal locus of control appear to perform better in | Field, 1996; Field, et al., 2003; Nevin et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--|
| | social, educational, and other achievement-oriented outcomes than youth who do not display this trait. Youth who view their locus of control as externally directed tend to do poorly in many situations. Youth with severe disabilities are more likely to have an external locus of control than those who report having no disability. (Wehmeyer et al., 1998) | |
| Self-Realization | Full development of one's own talents (Agnes, 2000) | Bashir, Goldhammer, & Bigaj, 2000 |
| Self-Esteem | Developing one's talents and abilities to the fullest extent possible | Field, 1996 |
| Self-Reliance | Faith and confidence in one's own abilities | Field, et al., 2003 |
| Action | Combined with choice — denotes decision-making and attainment | Nevin et al., 2002 |
| Self-Knowledge | Understands one's own strengths, weaknesses, and resolve | Field & Hoffman, 1994; Trainor, 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998; |
| Self-Observation | The ability to monitor and assess one's own behavior (Wehmeyer et al., 1998) | Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |
| Self-Understanding | Knows one's strengths and weaknesses and uses this knowledge to his or her advantage (Wehmeyer et al., 1998) | Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |
| Self-Evaluation | The ability to assess one's own progress in various situations | Wehmeyer et al., 1998 |

When I began this research, I combined these 20 elements into 8 because many seemed to overlap. I chose these because I was particularly interested in the elements that should be present in a youth with learning disabilities who exhibits skills in self-determination. These elements were (a) goal setting, (b) goal attainment, (c) self-advocacy,

(d) self-understanding, (e) self-efficacy, (f) self-observation, (g) self-evaluation, and (h) choice-making.

Goal setting was the first element I examined, and I defined it as identifying an object or a goal that one hoped to attain. Goals should be clear and detailed, well thought out, and should include the intervening conditions that must be accomplished. Youth with learning disabilities need to be able to identify the goals they are interested in working toward, and an individual with self-determination will probably have this quality.

Reaching or accomplishing the identified objective characterizes goal attainment, the next logical element. No one attains every goal, but in attempting to reach a goal, whether attained or not, an individual gains much self-knowledge. That knowledge can be used to set further goals and is likely to be another hallmark of an individual with self-determination.

The third element is self-advocacy skills. This goal incorporates the ability to be an activist for oneself and includes the ability to use strategies to achieve desired outcomes for oneself. Self-advocacy could extend to being an advocate for others as well, but a person with self-determination must have the ability to effectively lobby for his or her own best interests.

The next element is self-understanding. This is defined as knowing one's strengths and weaknesses and using this knowledge to one's own advantage (Wehmeyer et al., 1998). Self-determining people demonstrate this characteristic by making good choices based on what they know they can accomplish.

Self-efficacy is another important element. Bandura (1977) defined it as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce a given outcome" (p. 193). Bandura was not an educator, but he wrote extensively about self-

efficacy. This is an important characteristic of a person with self-determination because without a belief in oneself, it is unlikely that an individual would make many attempts to set or attain goals.

The sixth element is self-observation, the ability of an individual to monitor and assess his or her own behavior (Wehmeyer et al., 1998). As an individual works toward a goal, it is important to be able to monitor his or her progress. It is also important to understand oneself in relation to others to be able to gauge the effect his or her behaviors provoke. This could be especially important in relationships with supervisors on the job, in school, and in social situations. Youth with self-determination should be able to exhibit this skill in their daily relationships and as they work to monitor their progress toward their goals.

The seventh characteristic of self determination is the ability to assess one's own progress in various situations, self-evaluation. Self-determining individuals exhibit this characteristic by checking their own progress and making adjustments in their activities if necessary (Agran, 1997). The information gained by this activity might also signal when a goal might need to be changed or even substituted with a new one. This is also important information for an individual to have to be able to effectively set and attain goals.

The final element is choice making. Instruction that enables an individual to make choices is a vital part of self-determination training. Wehmeyer stressed this concept in his work with students with mild to moderate mental retardation. He relied heavily on the definition by Guess, et al. (1995) in arguing that these students should possess the ability to make choices for themselves. The definition had three levels: (1) choice signifying inclination, (2) choice as decision-making, and (3) choice as a demonstration of

independence (Guess, et al., 1985). Even though my participants were students with learning disabilities, I felt this was an important skill for them to possess.

With the definition of self-determination established and the essential elements identified, the next step is to determine what helps to make an individual self-determining. In the following section I discuss the development of an individual in his or her ecological surroundings. My observations will address questions about what contributes to the development of self-determination in youth with learning disabilities.

Self-determination and the Ecology of Individual Growth

What makes an individual self-determining? Is it the individual's family, educational background, society as a whole, or personality? Some believe that self-determination is a result of the interaction among all the forces in a person's environment (Bandura, 1977, Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1982; Abbey & Stancliff, 1996, Wehmeyer, 1998). The work of Uri Bronfenbrenner in his book *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979) began to focus attention on the way children develop in the context of their total surroundings. Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of studying the total environment within which a child developed to understand the child himself (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). "I shall argue that such interconnections can be as decisive for development as events taking place within a given setting" (Bronfenbrenner, p.3).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) claimed that, for too long, researchers had used a "deficit model" in studying human development. He felt that if something appeared to be amiss with an individual, the assumption was almost always the same: there had to have been something wrong with the person. In some way, their deficits were their own fault. If, for some reason, it was not the person, then it was their parents' fault, and if it was not the fault of the parents,

then it was the fault of the ethnic group or culture to which the individual belonged.

Bronfenbrenner believed that the total ecology of an individual's surroundings must be taken into consideration when trying to understand that individual.

Family became a living institution of learning for infants, and they were changed and molded as their presence changed and molded their surroundings. Bronfenbrenner studied the ecological development of the individual as the infant interacted with the environment and quoted Thomas (1928) in describing the family structure.

A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to abstract study of its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence, which it has upon their lives. (Thomas, 1928, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 268)

The concepts of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Abbey and Stancliff (1996) offer another way of breaking down the ecology of individual development. The microsystem includes the family, community, school, and work environments. Bronfenbrenner (1979) further defined the microsystem as “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations” (p 22). Bronfenbrenner felt that the microsystem could have been any setting in which an individual was located and could refer to home, school, job, and so on.

Other researchers also recognized the power of the home on the individual. Research by Cook, Brotherson, Weigel-Gaffey, and Mize (1996) suggested that the environment in the home itself had a major impact on an individual's self-determination skills. Children with developmental disabilities often exercised less control over their lives than did their peers, but youth with disabilities whose families allowed them some measure of control over their

environment appeared to have higher levels of self-determining behaviors than those whose families did not (Abery, McGrew, & Smith, 1995).

The mesosystem encompasses all the settings in which an individual might function within a given period of time. The key to self-determination on this level of the ecosystem is the link of services available to the individual. Parent involvement in what happens for the child in the community, in school, or on the job could be helpful (Epstein, 1987).

Interagency involvement is also a valuable asset (Abery & Stancliff, 1996). When the home, the school, and some agencies, such as the Division of Rehabilitation Services or Social Services, work in conjunction with each other, students benefit.

Schools, as part of the mesosystem, do not appear to provide as much opportunity for self-determination as one might hope. Some youth with disabilities did appear to receive training for self-determination; however, school programs in general were often controlled by mandated curricula that did not include instruction for self-determination (Abery & Stancliff, 1996).

Epstein (1987) developed a system to help guide the delivery of services to youth with disabilities. This system began by providing support to their parents, which included training and counseling on the importance of self-determination for their offspring. The second stage was to provide effective communication between the families and the servicing agencies. The third and fourth steps involved family involvement in areas in which the student with disabilities might have had some involvement and to ensure some consistency of expectations for the student. Finally, advocacy for the student on the part of the family was strongly encouraged (Abery & Stancliff, 1996).

The exosystem is a setting that does not include the individual as an involved

participant, but it can still affect individuals either directly or indirectly (Abery & Stancliff, 1996). For example, a change in policy might cause a change in service delivery or program requirements; therefore, change needs to be viewed as a part of the process of life, and individuals with disabilities need to be aided in the adjustment to whatever changes are made.

The macrosystem is the total of all the beliefs and values of a society and encompasses the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. The self-determination movement has certainly undergone major changes in the past few years because of changes in the approach to the status of youth with disabilities in our society. In the past, persons with disabilities were often institutionalized without regard to the type of identified disability. In addition, learning disabilities can manifest in a variety of ways, and it has not been uncommon for individuals with learning disabilities to be placed in the same institution as persons with mental retardation or persons with various physical disabilities (Percy, 1989). The deinstitutionalization of persons with disabilities has been a major step in the process of self-determination. Individuals who do not live in residential communities appear to exercise a greater degree of self-determination than individuals who still reside in institutions (Baker, Seltzer, & Seltzer, 1977; Barlow & Kirby, 1991; Wehman, 1998).

Deinstitutionalization is based on the concept that it is difficult for individuals to exercise freedom of choice about what type of recreational activities they might like when they live 45 miles from the nearest town and do not have access to anything local. It is difficult to choose what they would have for dinner without control over the menu, the food, or how it is prepared. It is difficult to decide what to do during the day while living in an environment where everything is scheduled and structured (Wehmeyer, 1998). It is difficult

to make a choice if one is not aware that other choices are available. Instruction in self-determination skills became essential to helping persons who had been institutionalized be integrated back into general society.

Abery and Stancliffe (1996) explored the idea that, although society as a whole appears to have developed a tolerance for youth with disabilities, they are still not completely accepted by our society. They cited the work of Mercer (1973) to explain this perspective. Mercer stated that each of us has a prescribed role to play in our society. Each role encompasses certain characteristics established by the culture in which we live. Persons who do not or cannot fulfill those roles in the prescribed fashion are branded in such a way as to eventually lead to the loss of their basic rights (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996). Some common labels are mentally retarded, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, and physically disabled. For this reason, the concept of self-determination has become as compelling for youth with disabilities as for non-disabled individuals.

Such laws as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1977 (PL 94-142), which later became Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, and was subsequently reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004, have made a tremendous impact on the education of children with disabilities. In addition, the ADA in 1990 expanded the areas now opened to youth with disabilities. Public opinion regarding the status of youth with disabilities has changed over the years, but self-advocacy remains a powerful and valuable tool in the quest for continued self-determination (Abery & Stancliffe, 1996).

Self-determination in the Family

A child is born. This child is the pivotal point between all that has passed and all that will be in the future for his or her particular family. This new child brings with him or her

particular gifts and talents that need to be developed and particular challenges that need to be addressed. This is true for all humans, but some children seem to face more challenges than others, and some families have to change their perception of the future based on the challenges that confront them. This section discusses the impact the family has on the individual, and some factors that affect the ability of a person with disabilities to achieve self-determination.

Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the total ecological surroundings of an individual fostered the development of a growing awareness of the importance of the home environment provided by families for children with disabilities. The arrangement of the physical surroundings is an important element in the development of any child, but the importance for a child with disabilities is even more crucial (Cook et al., 1996).

The work done by Bronfenbrenner in 1979 began to influence researchers, but it was not until after 1987 that research began to focus on manipulating the physical environment for children with disabilities (Orford, 1992; Wachs, 1990). Wachs (1990) identified several factors that appeared to have a direct relationship on the development of all children, and may also have applied to children with disabilities. These included three positive influences: the availability and variety of stimulus materials, the ability of the environment to be responsive to the immediate needs of the individual, and the consistency of scheduling. Negative influences included surrounding background noise, overloading the available space, and an environment not conducive to exploration (Cook et al., 1996).

The world around us has a powerful impact on the way we understand who we are as people. Place identity helps children define their own identity (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987). Miller (1996) talked about children's manipulation of the environment as part of a

personalization process whereby a child creates his or her own space as a means of controlling the environment and carving out an area uniquely the child's own (Miller, 1986). As children grow, they learn what parts of their surroundings they can manipulate and what parts are off-limits. Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, and Palmer (1996) noted that children learn how to discriminate between themselves and others and between what is theirs and what is not as part of the growth process.

Bronfenbrenner argued that all parts of a child's surroundings affect the child's identity. Others modified his initial concepts. Some researchers identified six factors that helped evaluate the child's home environment that aided in developing his or her identity. These six factors, which applied to all children, were territory, nurturance, privacy, socialization, manipulation, and stimulation (Miller, 1986). The term *territory* referred to behavior in which children claimed an area as their own or under their control. An example of this was a bedroom or a part of a room that was the child's personal space (Miller, 1986). Often a child with disabilities was only able to claim a chair or a particular spot on the floor from which he or she could see or reach things important to him or her (Lewis, 1986).

Nurturance is a term that describes a place of warmth or comfort where a child feels safe and secure. Not only does this refer to tactile or sensory areas such as soft furry fabrics, comfortable chairs, or earthy textures, but it also includes spaces such as a child's place at the table or in front of the television. In addition, it describes measures taken to make the world more accessible to the child, such as work areas in the kitchen designed to accommodate the child's height (Cook et al., 1996).

Privacy is one of the most important elements in the development of a child's concept of self (Laufer & Wolfe, 1977). Children need to be able to go somewhere and be alone for a

while, or they may need a locked and secure place where they can keep their drawings or favorite books. Unfortunately, many children with and without disabilities are not always allowed that privilege, and sometimes children with disabilities are so closely watched that they never have a chance to be on their own.

Sociability is another important factor in a child's development of his or her self-concepts. Some research examines the sociability of all children in school, but little has described the home's contribution to the development of sociability in a child with disabilities (Staub, Salisbury, Gallucci, & Peck, 1994). Creating an inviting environment in which neighborhood children feel comfortable coming over to play with the child with a disability appears to be an important contribution the home could make to produce a self-determining child.

All children need an opportunity to have positive stimulation and manipulation of materials to learn and grow. This is no less true for children with disabilities than for children without handicaps. Toys and the space to use them are important elements of the development of positive self-concepts. Children with disabilities are often not provided with the materials necessary to help them grow in specific areas (Cook et al., 1996).

Some things can be done to help children become more independent and therefore more self-determining. To facilitate independent clothes selection, closet doors could be taken off and the clothes bar racks and shelves lowered within reach of children. Clothes could also be removed from drawers too heavy for children to pull out and placed in stacks on the floor. Mirrors could be lowered so children can see themselves, and toys could be stored in open shelving that allow easy access. These suggestions could facilitate the development of independence and greater self-determination skills in all children, whether a

disability is present or not (Cook et al., 1996).

Home modification for families with children with disabilities could become a serious consideration. In 1993, Hovey conducted a survey of families with children who had disabilities and discovered some interesting reasons why modifications were not always made. Financial considerations were a challenge for many families, but for some families the degree of difficulty in making the modifications was an even bigger problem. If the child's disabling condition occurred to an older child, then it was more probable that a family might make alterations to help the child remain independent. Furthermore, families generally made accommodations for boys to foster independence, but were far less likely to make accommodations for girls (Lewis, 1986).

Some disabilities were more apparent and readily identifiable than others. Learning disabilities have been called the hidden disability because students with learning disabilities do not always show outward signs of them. Many are not in wheelchairs or did not have obvious physical signs of a disability, but this was not the case for all students with learning disabilities. In some cases, the research that applied to students with physical or cognitive disabilities did apply to students with learning disabilities simply because there may have been other complicating factors involved for students who had been identified with learning disabilities.

More recent research continued to highlight the importance of the family in the development of self-determination. Zhang, Wehmeyer, and Chen (2005) found three important obstacles that discouraged families from supporting the development of self-determination in children with disabilities. These were (a) anxiety about how much self-determination could reasonably be expected from a child with disabilities, (b) indecision

about the best strategies to nurture self-determination, and (c) apprehension that risk-taking on the part of their children may result in harm. These are legitimate concerns that educators and other professionals need to address with families to help them as they help their children to become more self-determining.

Grigal (2001) conducted a study in which she questioned parents about their attitude regarding self-determination. Parents strongly supported the belief that their children should be taught self-determination skills in school. In this same study, parents also indicated support for the involvement of their child in the IEP process. However, the study could not provide any data on how or even if self-determination skills are taught in the home.

Bronfenbrenner would agree that the old saying that children learn what they live is still true today. Families, and the larger society that encompasses them, send both covert and overt messages to us all, and persons with disabilities are affected by both what is said and what goes unsaid. If families and/or the community are not willing to establish an environment that enhances a person's growth and feelings of self worth, then it is difficult, but not impossible, for that person to exercise the skills of self-determination. Furthermore, self-determination develops as a result of the dynamic relationship between an individual and the social context in which he or she interacts (Bashir, Goldhammer, & Bigaj, 2000). This theory is well aligned with the theories of Bronfenbrenner on human development.

Personal Relationships

Just as a family can have a powerful influence on the development and sustenance of self-determination, so can positive relationships. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that self-determination was enhanced as a result of positive relationships in the life of the individual. Ward (1996), who characterized himself as a man with disabilities, stated that the role

models in his life were a major factor in his own self-determination. Bashir, Goldhammer, and Bigaj (2000) stated that, “Self-determination develops as a result of the dynamic relationship between an individual and the social context in which that person interacts” (p. 54).

Field & Hoffman (1996, 1999, 2002) and Ryan & Deci (2000) found evidence of the importance of interpersonal relationships in the development of self-determination. Participants reported that “other people” were identified most often as either a help or a hindrance in their development of self-determination. Parents were frequently mentioned as either a major barrier or a wonderful facilitator in developing self-determination because they were seen as too overly protective and controlling or as supportive partners in the growth of the individual. The positive influence of friends, colleagues, and significant others were also mentioned as powerful contributors to behaviors of self-determination for students with learning disabilities (Field et al., 2003).

Communication Between Settings

Bronfenbrenner (1979) had a series of hypotheses concerning the individual and his of her ecological surroundings. He called the relationship between one parent and the developing child a “dyad,” and he felt that when the child and parent shared experiences in a variety of environmental settings then the development of the child was enhanced and strengthened. The extent to which the linking person, in this case a parent, participated in a number of joint activities with the child in a wide variety of situations “encouraged the development of higher levels of skill and tended to generate especially strong and persistent levels of motivation” (p. 214).

Inasmuch as parental involvement is beneficial in a variety of circumstances that are

familiar to a child, when a child moves into a new setting, the presence of supportive relationships help to make the transition much more productive (Patrula, 2001). In Bronfenbrenner's (1997) view, communication between settings for an individual is important. Bronfenbrenner asserted in his Hypothesis 41:

Development is enhanced to the extent that, prior to each entry into a new setting (for instance, enrolling in day care or school, being promoted, going to camp, taking a job, or retiring), the person and members of both settings involved are provided with information, advice, and experience relevant to the impending transition. (p. 217)

Abery and Stancliffe (1996) also cited Bronfenbrenner and Garbarino (1982) in their description of ecosystem perspective. They put forth the idea that self-determination had a skills base, a knowledge base, and a motivational base influenced by environmental elements. They viewed self-determination as a byproduct of interactions between an individual and the numerous environments in which he or she functioned (Field, 1996).

Education for self-determination is vital for all individuals but particularly for persons with disabilities. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) conducted research that found that students with cognitive or learning disabilities who employ the skills of self-determination were more successful in adult outcomes such as employment and achieving higher earnings than disabled students who were not able to exhibit the skills of self-determination. For this reason, Zhang et al. (2005) believed that educators must form a partnership with families to promote the growth of self-determination in children with disabilities. "Thus, it is important to assist families to enable their children to develop self-determination-related skills and to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of that outcome" (Zhang, et al., 2005, p. 63). This partnership allowed for communication from one setting to the next to facilitate the

growth of the individual toward self-determination.

*A Conceptual Framework To Guide the Study of Self-determination in Youth
with Disabilities*

This study seeks to develop an understanding about the way community college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in high school describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining. My review of the research and literature suggests a variety of factors that affect the degree to which a person is able to be self-determining. The combination of home, school, and the total ecology of an individual's environment all interact with the individual to create the essential elements of a self-determining individual. The interactions among these components are different for each person with disabilities, but nevertheless they are there.

We do not know enough about what really works to be effective in developing programs to train for self-determination. There is substantial rhetoric in much of the literature about why people with disabilities should be given opportunities to develop their capacities for self-determination, and there are reports from adults on their lives, but there are very few narratives from youth with disabilities in general and youth with learning disabilities in particular.

As previously noted, IDEA was reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004, and the transitioning facet of the legislation has been strengthened. The transition process suggests opportunities for the development of self-determination through the IEP process, but the law itself does not specify self-determination instruction. Moreover, we do not know if this process creates an effective means to foster self-determination skills, nor do we know what really helps to produce youth with learning disabilities who are self-determining.

We need to gain more information from youth with learning disabilities themselves about what worked and what did not work so we can create effective training strategies to produce individuals with self-determination. To develop programs, and to understand the interaction among school, family, and the wider ecology of their surroundings, we need to turn to the real experts, youth with disabilities, to tell us what has worked for them.

The conceptual framework I use is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of the importance of studying the total environment within which a child develops to understand the child him or herself. The idea of examining a child in the context of his or her total environment, including the educational setting and the home, is a new approach to the study of self-determination. I combined Wehmeyer's view that self-determination is an educational outcome with Bronfenbrenner's analysis that self-determination is a product of the child's total environment.

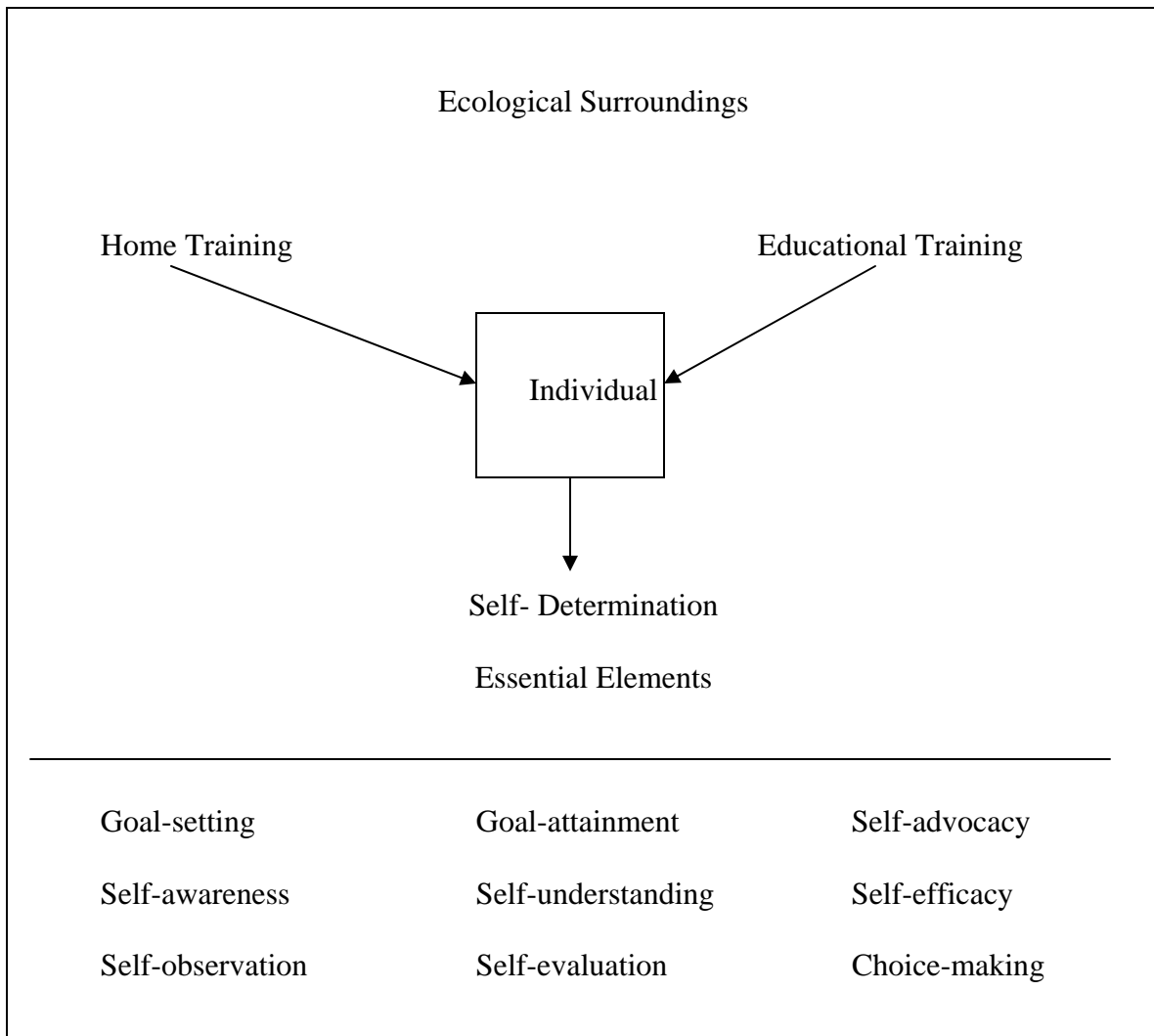
The guiding conceptual framework developed for this study is based on the theory that the child is the center of the ecological surroundings and developed into a self-determining individual through the influences of the home and the educational setting. The evidence of self-determination was the ability of the youth with learning disabilities to demonstrate the essential elements of self-determination: (a) goal setting, (b) goal attainment, (c) self-advocacy, (d) self-understanding, (e) self-efficacy, (f) self-observation, (g) self-evaluation, and (h) choice-making. Conceptually, the inter-related components are shown in Figure One.

In this study, I deliberately included the impact of special education services in the research question because I wanted to understand the impact, if any, of the services provided to the youth with learning disabilities on their capacity to develop skills in self-determination.

Those services could have included but were not limited to academic instruction in the various settings outlined in Chapter 1, case management services provided to students with an IEP, and transition services provided by a transition facilitator, the school counselor, teachers, or administrators.

The guiding conceptual framework allowed me to identify and categorize various influences that could have had an effect on the development of youth with learning disabilities into self-determining persons. At the same time, the guiding conceptual framework allowed me to test some elements to see if they were truly representative of a self-determining person as well as providing me with some markers to establish if the individuals were actually self-determining.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework to Guide the Study of Self-determination in Youth with Disabilities*



Research Context

In addition, the guiding conceptual framework suggested by the contextual theories of Bronfenbrenner and Wehmeyer guided the research and assisted me in identifying the requisites used as the essential elements of a youth with learning disabilities who effectively demonstrated self-determination skills. The research questions and sub-questions flowed

naturally from the identified research. These questions were used as guides as I talked with the participants about their life experiences as they developed into self-determining individuals with learning disabilities. Table 2 represents the Research Context in graphic form and includes the theories, concepts and research questions addressed.

Table 2: Research Context

| Theories/Research | Concepts | Research Questions Sub Questions |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Self-determination, the combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior has become an important part of special education and related services for people with learning disabilities (Algozzine et al., 2001, p. 219).</p> <p>Self-determination is an educational outcome. The essential characteristics of self-determination are autonomous functioning, self-regulation, psychological empowerment and self-realization, and these elements can be taught (Wehmeyer et al., 1998).</p> <p>Development is a lasting change in the way a person perceives and deals with his/her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).</p> <p>The ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).</p> <p>So the existence and natural ties between the school and the home may determine a special education student's development of self-determination (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).</p> | <p>Characteristics of individuals with self-determination: Goal-setting Goal-attainment Self-advocacy Self-awareness Self-understanding Self-efficacy Self-observation Self-evaluation</p> <p>Effects of: Home training Educational training Ecological surroundings Home training Educational training</p> | <p>Research Question: How do community college students with learning disabilities describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining?</p> <p>Sub-question 1: What was the student's personal definition of self-determination?</p> <p>Sub-question 2: Did the student receive any instruction to help him/her achieve self-determination?</p> <p>Sub-question 3: If they did receive instruction, what type of instruction in self-determination did the participants report as being most effective for them?</p> <p>Sub-question 4: How did participants who had not been instructed in self-determination learn to be self-determining?</p> <p>Sub question 5: What aspects of home life and social experiences did participants consider to be most important in helping them to become self-determining?</p> |

Overall Approach and Rationale

Research and literature underscore that, although some youth with disabilities are able to make effective decisions about their lives, many are not. Youth with disabilities appear to have received a varying degree of training for the decision-making process, but we do not know why some youth with disabilities seem to be able to make decisions regarding life choices and others do not.

We needed to talk to individual youth with disabilities to learn what works and what does not work for them. We needed to learn about their lives, the paths they have walked, and those they hope to walk in the future. Very little existing research and literature has captured the narratives of young disabled adults. Our society has certainly changed its attitude toward the disabled; however, much of what has been done in the recent past has been based on direction from legislators who relied on input from parents, employers, school personnel, and some disabled individuals. All those sources are important, but the voices of those who actually live the experience of developing self-determination should have had the most influence.

Thus this study asked community college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in high school to describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining. In Chapter Three, I explain the sampling methods and the design and methodology of this narrative research.

Chapter 3: Design and Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the theoretical tradition I used to explore how individuals who had received special education services in high school described the influences on their capacity to be self-determining. I outline my rationale for the site and population selection, and I explain the data gathering and data analysis procedures. Additionally, I discuss the trustworthiness of the research. As a final point, I discuss the ethical concerns I addressed. At the end of the chapter, I also describe my personal experience with this subject.

Theoretical Traditions

In this section, I describe the theoretical tradition I used to shape the design of this research project. Dewey (1910), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), MacIntyre (1981), Geertz (1995), and Bateson (1994) all contributed to the narrative inquiry movement. I used narrative inquiry to answer the research question and to further our knowledge concerning self-determination. I chose this approach because I believed it was the best way to link the conceptual framework to life. Narrative inquiry provides a way to impart meaning to the home and educational experiences of participants.

The belief that experience and education are tied together is not a new one. John Dewey was one of the foremost educators of the last century. He said that life was education, and according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), believed that life, experience, and education were so closely tied together that none of these elements could stand alone without the other two.

Field (2001) described Dewey's (1910) perception of experience and life thus: “Things experienced empirically are what they are experienced as’” (as cited in Field, 2001, p. 6). Dewey further stated that, “Our experience of the world is constituted by our interrelationship with it, a relationship that is imbued with practical import” (as cited in Field, 2001, p. 6). Dewey illustrated this concept as a noise heard in the dark. If the source of a noise heard in the dark is unknown, the primary reaction to it may be fear. If a light is turned on, the noise might be easily explained—a shade hitting a window, perhaps—but that understanding did not alter the fact that it was first experienced as fearful, and it was, in fact, fear that influenced and determined the initial reaction. The fear was the experiential character of the moment, and the subsequent behavior was based on the demands that the fearful experience provoked, regardless of the cause (as cited in Fields, 2001).

A modern link to Dewey's work is that of philosophers Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who presented experiences as metaphors used to describe the link between life and action. The philosopher MacIntyre (1981) made his contribution to narrative inquiry by introducing the idea of narrative unity. The unity of experience in people's lives has become an important component of narrative inquiry. Continuity links all parts of an individual's life together. Nothing happens in isolation. Narrative inquiry looks at the whole of an individual's experiences in order to understand any one particular event (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The anthropologist Geertz (1995) believed that change is the basis of all history, and the narrator provides the thread that makes sense of the past, present, and future. Bateson (1994) is another anthropologist who wrote about life as a series of changes, but

added the key concept that the narrator learns throughout all the changing experiences. In addition, Bateson (1994) concluded that people use metaphors and story telling as teaching and learning tools. Coles (1989) called attention to the stories others told as a means of both teaching and learning. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) summarized the work of a variety of authors in the following comments:

Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it.... Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience; therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively. (p. 18–19)

Much educational research is based on quantitative investigation, and this type of inquiry certainly has a valuable place in the field. Nevertheless, qualitative research also has a place in the offering insights into problems of concern in research in education. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provide an explanation of the use of qualitative research as a way to gain a clearer understanding of learning. Connelly was hired for a quantitative study to measure the effectiveness of a new educational strategy, and the overall results were positive, as measured quantitatively. However, Connelly questioned the results by claiming that other factors, in addition to the new instructional method, might have influenced the learning of each individual. He concluded that this unknown element may have had a greater effect on student learning than the method measured and reported. One way to discover the reasons for the improvement is through qualitative research and, more specifically, narrative inquiry. Thus, narrative research enables investigators to “link the living with the study of living” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxiv).

The combination of time, people, action, certainty, and context are the benchmarks of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Time is an important factor because nothing occurs in a vacuum. Timing and time itself are characters in the plot of the play known as life. It is important that we understand the function time plays as we develop the narrative account of any event.

It is equally important to understand the people involved in the events. What the people bring to an event is as important as the event itself. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described that this way.

We take for granted that people, at any point in time, are in a process of personal change and that from an educational point of view, it is important to be able to narrate the person in terms of the process. Knowing some of the immediate educational history of each child as that child moves from what was, to what is, to what will be in the future — is central to narrative educational thinking. (p. 30)

Clandinin and Connelly considered action a narrative sign. Actions occur for a reason, and each action is rooted in all the actions that have gone before and foreshadows all actions that will follow. In narrative inquiry, it is important to understand actions in the context of surrounding events; without that understanding, the true significance of an action remains unknown.

Another benchmark of narrative inquiry is certainty, which is difficult to achieve. Many possibilities may explain an outcome, so a best guess may be as close as we can come to knowing absolutely that X produced Y. But without narrative inquiry, we may not have known that X existed at all. Much of what has passed for certainty has not always been what it seemed. In narrative inquiry, we are forthright in our assertion that

certainty is elusive.

Finally, context is the background or milieu in which everything is grounded. Time, space, and people are all a part of the overall context. Without an understanding of the context, it is difficult to clearly understand the participant or the elements that surround him or her. In narrative inquiry, it is important to capture the context to more clearly understand the participant.

A further essential characteristic of narrative inquiry is trust. Trust must exist between the researcher and the participant for the researcher to accurately capture the participant's realities. Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to be an active and involved listener, and it also requires the researcher to possess an understanding heart. Trust also means that each participant has a willingness to be heard and faith that he or she will be truly understood. Thus, experience becomes a product of the collaboration between the researcher and the participant, and both voices eventually become audible (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Another important aspect of narrative inquiry is the use of stories to illustrate a point that the narrator wishes to make. Stories are the principal format participants use to explain their relation to the events in their lives. Gibbs (2002) found that participants often organized their experiences into individual stories. The way a person told a story signaled the way the participant felt about the experience. Gibbs described several different types of stories. The first category contains stories with morals or ethical lessons. Such stories give warnings of what not to do or describe how to behave. The second type of story tells about a successful occurrence, usually when the participant had overcome some obstacle, grown in some way, or reached a major turning point in his or

her life. Another type of story describes examples of incompetence. These stories tell of disaster caused by the inability of a person to do a job, such as someone who made or caused a medical mistake. Oral culture and urban legends passing on community traditions were examples of other forms of storytelling.

Stories help individuals to form their identity and also help them put some order in their lives. Stories give participants a way of sharing their inner lives with the outer world at large. Furthermore, they provide a way to come to know ourselves because the reality of our lives is revealed in the telling (Gibbs, 2002).

Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) argued that there are four key reasons for conducting narrative inquiry. First, it allows the researcher to examine the lives of participants in a holistic manner. Through the process of narrative inquiry, phenomena and other issues can be examined in relation to the life stories the participants shared. Second, the narrative was replete with metaphor and dialogue that created a context for better understanding the elements that affected individual characteristics and growth. A third compelling reason to use narrative inquiry was that it produced insight and understanding into the relationships and interactions between an individual and society. Finally, Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) stated that narrative inquiry “permitted the incursion of value and evaluation into the research process” (p. xiii). The participants send messages to the researcher through language, helping the listener understand the significance of the story to the participant.

Why Narrative Inquiry?

I decided to use narrative inquiry for several reasons. The most important aspect of this research, for me, was the opportunity for the voices of the participants to be heard

and understood. Each of them was different, and they each had their own unique histories, but some common elements became apparent as the research progressed. In addition, I was curious about the influences on the development of self-determination for individuals. Although I believed in the power of education, I also believed in the power of the home and in the integration of individual traits, family, and formal education.

I have examined the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities and have explored how those experiences interacted to produce their present circumstances. Numbers on a chart or recorded group observations would not tell us how the individuals came to be where they were. We could not know that unless we heard from each individual about his or her observations, encounters, and how events unfolded over the course of time. We must have heard from each person to understand who that person was and how various educational and family events affected him or her. For these reasons, I chose a narrative inquiry approach to better understand the individuals involved.

Organization and Process

I engaged in extensive interviews with three young adults, who were enrolled in community college, and who had been identified as having had some form of learning disability when they were in high school. I used narrative inquiry methods to conduct open-ended unstructured interviews that were taped and later transcribed. I wanted to know how individuals with learning disabilities who received special education services in high school described the influences on their capacity to be self-determining.

This series of in-depth interviews enabled me to understand and interpret the experiences of the youth participating in this study. As stated earlier, much of the follow-up work on programs that instructed students in various aspects of self-determination had

been done within a 6-month to 1-year time period following the initial training (Algozzine et al., 2000). One individual I interviewed had finished his first year of college, another participant had finished 2 years of community college and was going off to a 4-year college, and one had been in school for 7 years and still not graduated from community college. My purpose was to discover what influenced their capacity to be self-determining. I located the participants through the counseling centers of their respective community colleges. In this way I was able to use purposeful sampling with the community college criterion as a proxy for self-determination. I specifically sought students who had completed at least their first year of community college because I believed their attendance at the community college would be, in itself, a proxy for self-determination.

The selection of community college students who had received formal special education services for a learning disability narrowed the range of participants considerably. The reason for selecting this population was to distinguish students who voluntarily admitted that they had, in the past, received special education services. In addition, students enrolled in a community college program demonstrated a degree of self-determination because they were no longer legally bound to remain in an educational setting but were there by their own choice.

Site and Population Selection

I selected the community college setting because students identified as having a learning disability in high school often choose to attend community college after graduation. Their choice is often based on lenient admission policies that do not require a high grade-point average or the submission of SAT scores. In addition, many high

schools invite counselors from community college counseling centers to meet with graduating special education students to inform them of their services. In this way, special education students are made aware of the kinds of support available to them should they decide to go to the community college.

Annette, (not her real name) one of the community college counselors I interviewed, described the process students had to follow before entering the community college. The admission process requires all students to fill out a brief application form and take placement tests in math and reading. Students are then placed in classes based on the scores earned on the admission tests. They may be required to take remediation courses in math or English, depending on what the test scores indicated that they need. Students who had had an IEP in high school are urged to register with the counseling center to be eligible for special services, such as tutoring and note-taking accommodations. Students are also urged to notify and discuss with their professors any disabilities they have, in addition to any accommodations they may require to be successful (Annette, personal communication, April 26, 2004).

The setting for this study was the special programs offered through the various community colleges. Former special education students identified as having some type of disability are eligible to receive certain support services at the all community colleges, but students had to apply for the services, be screened, and be accepted by the counseling centers before the services were made available. Students had to apply for these services by submitting copies of the IEPs they had in high school and copies of their educational and psychological assessments.

After they had been approved for services, students had to approach the individual class instructors and explain the accommodations they needed — additional time for tests or assignments, taping lessons or having someone take notes for them, sign-language interpreters, large-print books or taped books, and so on. The guidance department helped the students with disabilities and the instructors in making the necessary accommodations.

Sampling

I located three former special education students through the counseling centers of three different community colleges. My intentions were to use participants with learning disabilities because I am also learning disabled and felt I could communicate based on shared experiences. Additionally, I used students with learning disabilities because little research had been conducted to understand the role self-determination plays in their lives. We need research to help us understand the variety of elements found in all areas of life that had either facilitated or hindered the development of self-determination by individuals with learning disabilities who had received special education services.

I went to four community colleges armed with a letter of introduction to the counselors and letters to prospective participants outlining the research I intended to conduct. I spent approximately one hour with each counselor, and at the end of every interview, they agreed to share my letter with prospective candidates. I was fortunate in that I happened to know many of the same people they knew through my professional background as a high school special education department chairman, so they were receptive to my request.

I made my first contact with a college counselor named Annette who took me to the Student Assistance Center where students met with a professionally trained instructor who helped them implement identified accommodations. I explained my research project to the instructor, Marlene, and she agreed to give my letter of introduction to appropriate student candidates. She had one person in mind, Rana, who she felt was the best representative of self-determination in her program. The next day I received a call from Rana stating that she had read my letter and was interested in the project. I questioned her regarding her disability; we talked about the fee I was willing to pay, and she agreed to meet with me. We set up an appointment to meet the following Tuesday.

I had hoped to secure all of my participants from a single community college, but that did not happen. Even though Marlene gave my letter to several other prospective participants, only one person responded. Fortunately, the one Marlene considered the best qualified for this research was the one who responded, but I was forced to look elsewhere for my next participant. I went to a second community college, but the counselor was not able to find anyone right away. As it happened, I did get two people from that college who eventually called me about the research study, but not until after I had already found my last two participants.

In an effort to find my next participant, I went to a community college in a nearby suburban county. The counselor with whom I spoke was very helpful and agreed to give my letter of introduction to students who had been identified as having some type of learning disability in high school. She also told me that she had one person in particular in mind and that she planned to approach this young woman first. The next day, Mindy called me. We talked briefly on the telephone, and I was able to determine that she met

the qualifications for participating in this research. In addition, she seemed eager and interested in participating in the project. We agreed on a meeting time in a student study area at the community college.

Finding Quinton, my last participant, was a challenge. I had contacted all the local colleges and had found only two participants. I contacted all the colleges again, and no additional participants came forward. I finally contacted a community college quite a distance from my home. I ended up calling the college and briefly explaining what I wanted. That conversation led to an invitation to come and talk to one of the counselors who dealt with students with identified disabilities.

When I got to the school, I spoke at length to the counselor, and he stated that he had two candidates he considered to be excellent examples of self-determination in action, and I could meet them both that day. I had a choice! He described them both to me, and I knew at once which one to choose. One candidate was male and one was female. One was African American and the other Caucasian. I chose Quinton, the African American male, and the counselor arranged our first meeting. My other two participants are female Caucasians, and I felt that Quinton would add some valuable diversity to this research project. Quinton and I met briefly, and he agreed to participate.

Data-Gathering Methods

This was a narrative inquiry study conducted in an effort to understand how individuals who received special education services in high school described the influences on their capacity to be self-determining.

In our initial meeting, I gave each participant an informed consent form to sign. Because all the students were older than 18, they could sign without consulting with their

parents. After they signed the informed consent form, each participant was assigned a fictitious name to protect their anonymity, and this was the name they retained throughout the research project. The participants were given the option of choosing their own fictitious name, which they appeared to enjoy doing. The participants were interviewed in multiple sessions about training they may or may not have had in the area of self-determination and the effect that training had on them in becoming self-determining individuals. If they had received no training, I explored what they believed had helped them to become self-determining, if, indeed, they felt that they were.

I reimbursed each participant for their time and any expenses they might have incurred by paying \$8.00 per hour to each participant, as was mutually agreed upon in our initial meeting. I intended to explore their life stories within the context of developing self-determination skills.

The individual interviews were conducted over several sessions, and each interview was taped. I spent up to 10 hours with each participant in increments of one to two hours at a time to get the story of their lives in relation to self-determination. The participants and I examined their experiences and how those experiences influenced them where they were in their lives at the time of the interviews and where they hoped to go in the future.

Following each interview, I had the interviews transcribed. I initially decided to transcribe the tapes myself because I did not want any mistakes in the interpretation of what was said. I even borrowed a transcription machine to facilitate the process, but it soon became apparent that this was not a wise idea. I was concerned that I would be unable to accurately type the responses, so I paid someone to do this for me. After the

tapes were transcribed, I listened to each one to check for accuracy and gave the participants an opportunity to review them for accuracy and revision if necessary; however, none of them were interested in doing that.

All of the tapes were stored in my home office and labeled to ensure that the participants remained anonymous. I did offer to return the tapes to the participants after I had completed the research, but they all seemed uninterested in that also.

Table 3 presents a data collection matrix that shows the relationship between the research questions, sampling decisions in narrative inquiry, and data collection and provides some sample interview questions.

Table 3. Data Collection Table

| Research Questions Sub-questions | Sampling Decisions in Narrative Inquiry | Data Collection | Sample Interview Questions |
|---|---|---|--|
| What was the student's definition of self-determination? | The first year of enrollment in community college served as a proxy for self-determination. | Each interview was taped, and fictitious names were used throughout the process to protect the anonymity of the participants. | What has helped you the most to obtain your dream, and what has hindered you the most? |
| Did the student receive any training to help achieve self-determination? If he or she did receive training, what type of training in self-determination did the participant report as being the most effective for him/her? | Three students enrolled in the various community colleges were selected. I asked the counselors of students with disabilities (who were working in the counseling centers at the community colleges) to assist me in locating students who had received special education services in school prior to college. The counselors gave students letters of introduction from me explaining the research project and inviting them to participate. | I had all the tape recordings transcribed to ensure accuracy. Each transcription was offered to the individual participants for review to ensure accuracy, but all declined the review. Tapes were stored in my office in a locked cabinet until the research project was completed and then were given to the participants at the end of the project. | What more could the educational system have given you? Do you feel that you were given the training necessary to enable you to make the choices required to get you where you wanted to be? Have you learned to be your own best advocate? |
| How did a participant who had not been trained in self-determination learn to be self-determining? What aspects of home life and school experiences did the participant consider the most important in helping him/her to become self-determining? | I interviewed the students, and three were selected. After they agreed to participate, they were given a consent form to sign. After they signed the form, the participants were paid for each interview session. | | Did you feel that you had the skills you needed to set your own goals? What enabled you to make the best choices for yourself? |

Data Analysis Procedures

As the interviews progressed, I began coding the responses to identify emergent themes. I purchased the computer program NVivo to aid in the coding process, and I began memoing and keeping a journal of the process as I worked with the participants. Some of this was coded as well.

As I worked to produce a research text, I searched for the patterns, narrative threads, and themes that evolved across the experiences of the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Some of the codes I used emerged as I analyzed the responses. Some codes applied to all three participants and included (a) places where actions occurred, such as home and school, (b) names of characters that appeared, such as family members, (c) specific actions common to all narratives, such as goal-setting and working to reach those goals, and (d) story lines that highlighted the effects of their learning disability on their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Questions in narrative inquiry are usually broad and open-ended, but some topics did arise. These questions were: (a) What led a person with disabilities to be self-determining? (b) What kind of training, if any, did they receive? (c) If they received training, was it effective? (d) What aspects of the training were more effective than others? (e) If the individual with learning disabilities did not receive any formal training in self-determination, what was the outcome of the lack of training? (f) Did that absence of training cause a problem, or was the person able to become self-determining through some other means? (g) What were the other means that brought him or her to be self-determining?

Using narrative inquiry methods enabled me to conduct in-depth interviews to

find the answers to some of these questions. It proved difficult to divorce the individual from training or lack of training. Some of the participants had become self-determining without the benefit of formal training. Nevertheless, they were able to identify some of the factors that led them to self-determination independent of any formal guidance.

The goal of the interviews was to understand — essentially and experientially — the role that self-determination played in the lives of individuals identified as qualifying for special education services when they were in school. Each interview was given a unique heading and subheadings to help organize the data.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in search of emerging themes and concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants were consulted after each interview was transcribed to ensure that the essence of their experience had been accurately captured and described. The participants had the opportunity to review the transcriptions to ensure the research project truly reflected what they felt happened to them, but they felt that the oral review was sufficient.

Codes emerged as the interviews progressed, and I used these codes to organize the data systematically (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the interviews progressed, certain themes emerged based on participants' experiences. These themes were used to aid in the understanding of self-determination. The data were organized in the following way: (a) I read the entire transcript several times to get a feel for the material expressed by the participants, (b) I identified notable statements, (c) I identified themes and clustered various statements under the identified themes, (d) I developed a list of codes, and (e) I grouped codes together according to theme.

Table 4 shows the relationship among data from the interviews, how I used

NVivo, the concepts I focused on in my analysis of the data, and how these informed my research questions.

Table 4. Data Analysis

| Data from Interview Questions | NVivo | Concepts | Research Questions |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>I collected data from participants during the interviews. I developed codes as I analyzed the interviews.</p> | <p>I used NVivo to help develop codes and organize data into manageable units.</p> | <p>I explored the concepts of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Wehmeyer (1998): Self-determination is a product of the child's total development; and self-determination is an educational outcome. Essential elements of self-determination:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal-setting Goal-attainment Self-advocacy Self-awareness Self-understanding Self-efficacy Self-observation Self-evaluation Choice-making | <p>The main research question was: How do individuals who received special education in school describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What was the student's personal definition of self-determination? 2. Did the student receive any training to help him/her achieve self-determination? 3. If they did receive training, what type of training in self-determination do the participants report as being most effective for them? 4. How did participants who had not been trained in self-determination learn to be self-determining? 5. In addition, what aspects of home life and social experiences did participants consider to be most important in helping them to become self-determining? |
| <p>I consulted the participants throughout the research project to ensure that I was accurate in what I reported to screen out my own biases as much as possible.</p> | | <p>I did find a relationship between home setting, educational setting, and self-determination.</p> | <p>I developed other sub-questions, but narrative inquiry allowed me to focus on other questions and concerns that emerged as the research continued.</p> |

Trustworthiness

To verify the accuracy of the research, I considered several factors. First, was it possible for other researchers to confirm the findings using similar investigative techniques? The findings of another researcher may not be completely identical, but their findings should be similar (Creswell, 1998). My research methods are easily replicable and would probably yield similar results. In a study by Field, Sarver, and Shaw (2003), limited qualitative techniques were used to identify personality factors of students with self-determination who were identified as having learning disabilities, and the qualities they found are similar to those I identified as essential elements of self-determination.

Another test of the accuracy of the findings was the ease with which an outside observer could recognize the truth of the experience by matching it with experiences they have had. I shared my findings with other special education teachers, and they seemed to feel that these experiences accurately reflect the experiences of some of the students they had observed. I also had the opportunity to speak with some parents, and they shared similar experiences, as well.

In addition, can the information gained through this research project be applied to a broader context? These experiences can be applied to other students with learning disabilities who showed evidence of self-determination. They do not apply to students who do not appear to have skills in self-determination, and we need to know more about the influences that have affected them.

Other factors have to be considered in any verification process. One was the influence the researcher may have on the observations of the participants. Although I got

along well with the participants, they clearly each had their own story to tell, and they were eager to be heard. They became very interested in the subject, and they were proud that they had something to contribute to a research study. I thought the fact that I also had a learning disability might be a factor, but it hardly came up at all, and when it was mentioned they were simply uninterested.

The transcription of the results needed to be accurate and thorough. I spent many hours reviewing the tapes and checking the accuracy of the transcription. I feel that the transcripts themselves are as accurate as it was possible to make them.

Another consideration was identifying other conclusions that could be drawn from the research. Could other interpretations be made from the data (Creswell, 1998)? The conclusions from the data are discussed at length in Chapter 6, but one of the most powerful conclusions was the influence of families in helping a student develop skills in self-determination.

A criticism of narrative inquiry is that it emphasizes an individual's experiences rather than the broader perspective of society as a whole. However, narrative inquiry attempts to explain broader issues of society through stories that illustrate an individual experience (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In this study, the broader issue was the development of self-determination. The stories of the participants help to illuminate the factors that influenced the participants in their development of this skill.

Another criticism of narrative inquiry is that the participants' stories might be subject to selective recall, poor or distorted memories, or links of facts that somehow change with time (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Conversely, participants may use such aids to memory as school records, old diaries, photographs, and conversations with

friends or family members to increase the accuracy of their reported experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). My participants seemed to have no trouble recalling the events of their lives or the influences that helped them develop their self-determination. They did not appear to need any memory aid; however one participant did bring in her IEP for me to review.

An additional challenge to creating trustworthy information was time. The trust so important in narrative inquiry did develop over time. It was created during the ten hours we talked and through shared experiences of recall and recognition, and mutual respect and understanding developed among us. There were no shortcuts in this process. It was imperative that enough time be devoted to listening and recording the stories of participants so that the truth of the past emerged. The fact that time is such an important element of narrative inquiry lends trustworthiness and credibility to the process because it encourages extended encounters and repeated observation of the participants (Creswell, 1998).

Information gathered over time that uses the participant's own words and images yields a rich and descriptive text (Creswell, 1998). This description begins to draw a word-based picture that helps researchers and readers understand what others have lived. The participants' stories were varied, but there were enough similarities to establish credibility (Creswell, 1998).

Peer review or the review of a critical friend provides another means of ensuring trustworthiness. One of the members of the cohort agreed to act as my critical friend, and her observations were invaluable. In addition, another colleague provided valuable feedback to me on the reported research. Having someone review the text who was

removed from the research project, but who was familiar in some way with the topic, created a system of checks and balances. This additional set of eyes and ears not only helped to ensure accuracy, but also gave me a clear and unbiased perspective (Creswell, 1998).

The participants had an opportunity to review the transcriptions as the interviews progressed, and they were invited and encouraged to read and react to any observations or statements made throughout the interview process and to any analysis that emerged. Participant input and involvement throughout the process provided another vital tool in establishing and maintaining the trustworthiness of the final product. Their reluctance to participate in reviewing the material puzzled me until I began to consider that two of them were not comfortable reading, and all three had very active and busy lives. They may not have felt comfortable reviewing the written section, and they may not have had the time. In addition, I usually spent time before each interview briefly reviewing with them what had been discussed in the previous interview. They always corrected me if there was some misunderstanding, but usually our perceptions were similar. They may not have felt that any further review was necessary.

Ethical and Political Considerations

Several ethical issues were involved with this study. The first issue was requiring each participant to sign an informed consent form before they could be questioned. The challenge here was that although each participant was at least 19 years old, it was still my responsibility to ensure that each participant understood exactly what the proposed study entailed and what his or her part in the process was all about. Each individual seemed

excited at the prospect that their experiences could somehow be used to help others, so it did not present a problem after all.

One important consideration was that these participants all had some type of learning disability. Two had specific learning disabilities in the area of reading, and I had to be sure that they understood exactly what they were signing. I went over the document with each of them to ensure their understanding of the process.

Another challenge was that I needed to be sure that the participants felt entirely comfortable and would give me honest answers. Because I found the participants through local community colleges, I had to make sure they understood that I would not report to the college what they said to me, and that the information they shared would never affect their program. I had to win their trust and assure them that their honest answers would not, in any way, come back to haunt or hurt them. I needed to communicate to them that I was not concerned with what they thought they should say, but rather with what was actual and true. In all three cases, I seemed to gain their trust, and the sessions were ones of mutual sharing and respect.

A third consideration was to ensure that the anonymity of those taking part in this study was protected. Two of the three participants had no difficulty with having anyone know that they had received special education services when they were in school. The third was not necessarily trying to hide it, but she felt more comfortable not calling attention to herself as a person with a learning disability. Therefore, it was essential that her identity not be revealed. Additionally, participants needed to feel free to express any opinion without fear of exposure. Due to the highly personal nature of the information gathered in the interviews, I was somewhat selective in what I chose to include because I

did not want the participants to be identified through the revelations of their experiences that they did not want to have revealed. The most important consideration was that no harm should befall any of the participants through their involvement in this research.

Limitations

The difficulty with this process was that students did not automatically receive services from the counseling center. Students must have registered with the center and must also have identified themselves to their instructors as being former special education students before they could receive services. There was no way to identify students who had not voluntarily registered.

I did not intend to use students who had been in programs in the schools in which I had worked. I intended to focus on individuals with learning disabilities, and I obtained informed consent from the participants before the interviews began.

I did not intend this study to be an exhaustive exploration of the effects of self-determination. I hoped, however, that it would create insight into some factors that enabled former special education students to use self-determination in the decisions they made for their lives. In the next section, I relate the life stories of the participants and analyze their stories in relation to their development of self-determination.

Chapter 4: Life Stories

Scope of the Research Project

In this section, I tell the stories of the three participants I selected to be part of this research. I do not tell their whole life stories; instead, I tell those parts of their histories that illustrate their journey into self-determination. The research is replete with references to the importance of self-determination to individuals with disabilities, but these stories illustrate how these youth with disabilities developed into adults who were able to effectively utilize their skills of self-determination.

The early literature on self-determination centers primarily on students identified as being mentally retarded. Later, students with other disabilities were included in the literature of self-determination. Nevertheless, self-determination is appropriate for all students, and it is important to remember that the biggest difference between the general population of students and students with disabilities is often simply the label of “disability.” Students with and without disabilities are more similar than they are different. Research has stressed the desirability of self-determination for all students because people who exercise self-determination are more successful in adult outcomes (Wehmeyer et al., 1998). Based on this, instruction in self-determination is a reasonable and valuable pursuit.

The students who were selected for this research had all been identified as having a learning disability. In Chapter 1, I pointed out that I used the definition for learning disability provided by the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services

Administration (2000). That definition refers to a learning disability as “a disorder in one or more of the central nervous processes involved in perceiving, understanding, and/or using concepts through verbal (spoken or written) language or nonverbal means.” The definition goes on to stress that a person with a learning disability may be affected in a number of areas, including reading, writing, math, processing, or even emotional maturity (United States Department of Education, 2000). The life stories of the participants illustrate the challenges that a person with learning disabilities can face.

To put the life stories in perspective, I had to make a distinction among the effects of having a learning disability, developing self-determination, and functioning as most people usually function. Mooney and Cole (2000) describe the diagnosis of having a learning disability in a very graphic manner:

Despite our intelligence, despite the areas of profound strengths that were in fact vastly superior to those of our peers, we became simple and easy to understand. We knew it all along — “chronic disorder of the central nervous system”...But it was no longer the environment’s fault...the problem was within us. (p. 64)

Mooney and Cole (2000) go on to dispute that a learning disability rendered a person less than others. They argue that all the diagnosis of a learning disability means is that a person learns differently or unusually, but learning still takes place. “We learn differently...we always had...alternative learning styles and were never defective” (p. 65).

The effect of having a disability could be devastating to an individual. It could make them doubt the worth of everything about themselves. Is it any wonder that developing self-determination might be a greater challenge to a person with a disability

than it is to someone who has never been identified as clinically different? Nevertheless, youth with disabilities are far more like their non-disabled peers than they are different. They act as one usually acts most of the time in nonacademic areas of their lives.

In the telling of their stories, the participants illustrated the fact that they were very much like everyone else in some ways, but they had to work hard to develop strategies that allowed them to be successful academically. So while they dealt with the challenges of school in their own individual ways, they also faced the normal challenges life had to offer, and they dealt with those, not from a deficit position, but as any individual would. Therefore, I include their accounts of how they dealt with the events of their lives. Some things appear to have been affected by their particular learning disability, and other events, such as successfully meeting the challenges of adult outcomes, illustrate their self-determination or the influences on their capacity to be self-determining.

The literature has identified several elements of self-determination as being important for students with disabilities to possess; however, all students could benefit from these qualities. For the purposes of this research, I defined self-determination as having these essential elements: (a) goal setting, (b) goal-attainment, (c) self-advocacy, (d) self-awareness, (e) self-understanding, (f) self-efficacy, (g) self-observation, (h) self-evaluation, and (i) choice-making. In addition, I emphasized Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of the importance of studying the total environment within which a child developed to understand the child him or herself. I did this in an effort to understand the context of the narratives in relation to the concept of self-determination.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that the ecological surroundings contain an individual at the core. However, he believed that researchers had to look beyond single settings and into the relationships among a variety of settings to understand the development of an individual. He believed that the interconnections were critical in the development of a child and that the relationships between the settings were more powerful than those found in a single setting.

The literature of self-determination had identified family, friends, and educational background, which included teachers and accommodations, as powerful and important ecological factors in the development of individuals with self-determination. For this reason, I decided to explore the influence of family, friends, educational background, teachers, and accommodations, in that order, to answer the research question of how college students with learning disabilities described the influences on their capacity to be self-determining. I showed how these influences acted as forces in the lives of the young people I interviewed. In the course of narrating the events of their lives, the participants illuminated the factors that influenced their capacity to be self-determining individuals.

While I was conducting this research, I asked the participants a series of questions relating to self-determination. These questions covered such areas as their personal definitions of the subject and what they felt had influenced them in their development of self-determination. Nonetheless, I felt it was important to first understand their life histories to understand the influences in their lives that led them to their individual development of self-determination. For this reason, I tell their stories here, and I discuss their interpretation of the meaning of self-determination for their lives in chapter 5.

Selection of Participants With Learning Disabilities

I chose community college students with learning disabilities who had shown their ability to succeed in that setting because I believed their success would act as a proxy for self-determination. I spent approximately 10 hours with each participant, and in the course of the interviews they shared with me the factors that had influenced their capacity to be self-determining.

Each of the participants had a story to tell. When we met, I had them choose a name for themselves. The names they selected were “Mindy,” “Quinton,” and “Rana.”

- Mindy was 21 years old, and she had just completed community college when we began our interviews. A college in New England had accepted her, so she could obtain her bachelor’s degree. Mindy had an identified disability in the area of “written language.”
- Quinton, who had been identified as “dyslexic,” was 19 years old and about to begin his second year in community college. He had received formal instruction in self-advocacy skills through a program offered at the community college he attended.
- Rana was a 26-year-old woman who had been identified as “dyslexic” in elementary school and had been at the community college for about 6 years. Rana described herself as dyslexic, and I asked her to share her documentation with me. As seen during the interviews, Rana was considered to be learning disabled from youth, particularly by her mother, and from early childhood had learned self-determination under adverse circumstances.

Each of these participants told a story not unlike the stories of students without disabilities; however, they did illustrate the effects their disabilities had on them in their quests to become self-determining individuals. I tell their stories by introducing Mindy first and then following with the stories of Quinton and Rana. Each story presents a different aspect of living with a disability, but each story also shows the path they took in their development of self-determination.

The Introduction of Mindy

Mindy was a tall, attractive young woman with long ash-blond hair and a poised and elegant manner. She showed me a copy of her IEP, which indicated that she had a learning disability in written language. She also indicated that in elementary school she had been identified as having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). She received direct special education services in elementary school and resource help throughout middle and high school. She had recently graduated from the community college and was headed for a 4-year college in New England.

When we began our discussions, Mindy and I talked about the issue of trust between us. She appeared to be very comfortable with our discussion. “I’m a very open person.” She stated that she was not bothered discussing her life. “I can talk. I’m fairly open about me. I’m not going to lie to people because if I lie to people then they get this false image of me.”

I felt that I needed to address the question of her identified disability in the beginning, and we discussed that before we addressed any other questions. When I asked Mindy to tell me what disability she had been identified as having, she was somewhat vague. “I have I believe Attention Deficit Disorder — they never covered it with me

really. I believe I have ADD because that's what my brother has. So, I'm pretty sure I have ADD, and I had a little bit of dyslexia, but that was kind of ignored." Mindy went on to state that the only reason she knew that she had a learning disability was that she could not tell the difference between p's and q's, and she would write other letters backwards. "The only way I knew I had a learning disability is, when I hit about fourth grade and I was figuring out, you know, why I was being taken out of school, taken out of class, and why they had me on medicine for a while." Later in our interviews, she brought me a copy of her IEP that identified her as having a learning disability in the area of written language.

After we had discussed her disability, we talked about many subjects during the interviews that followed. I decided that the best way to tell Mindy's story was to begin where Bronfenbrenner would begin —with the relationships within the family — and then move out into the ecological surroundings in which Mindy found herself. These surroundings included school, work, and friends. Mindy's family seemed to have had a profound effect on her development, and it is important to hear just how they helped her grow into the young woman that I got to know.

Influence of Family

We began our first interview by talking about her perceptions of self-determination, but the conversation very quickly developed into a discussion of her family life. Mindy described her family as typical.

I live in a nuclear family. I have both my parents. They are still married; they fight, and they love each other like they are newlyweds. I have a brother, so I

mean it's almost like we're the million-dollar family, except we have a cat instead of a dog. But we're the two-child family.

Mindy's mom worked and her father was the one who stayed home with the children, or when he did work he took night shifts so he provided the care for Mindy and her brother when they were younger. Mindy identified herself as having a learning disability, and later in her narrative she identified her brother as having ADD, but Mindy's family did not appear to be any different than other families that had children without disabilities.

Mindy's early childhood appeared to be fairly typical of any child. When Mindy was old enough, she was placed in the "Chipmunk" daycare program held in a local church. "I guess I was more an outdoorsy kid, but I had a big imagination. I can have fun with just about anything. I wasn't really into television." Mindy described herself as having fun just playing with a neighbor who had been her friend since they were little girls. She spoke about going out with her friends and playing tag and other games. When she got a little older, she went to a babysitter whose grandchildren also stayed with her. Mindy described playing with those children as well.

I think it's more fun when you have other people your age. You do more things.

We had all our little fights also, but when you're 5 and 6, what do you do?

Mindy entered kindergarten at a time when both of her parents were working, so they gave her the responsibility each day of dressing herself for school. She had to pick out her clothes at night, and she was responsible for getting ready in the morning. She was responsible for brushing her hair. If she wanted it in braids or pulled back, she could ask her parents to help her, but she had to do it herself if her parents did not have the time

to help her. She eventually learned to do all of that for herself. “It was just little things like that.” She felt that she had been trained to be responsible from the time she was very young. At this point in her life, there seemed to be no realization on the part of Mindy’s family that she might have a learning disability.

Mindy had one younger brother. I asked her if her parents treated him any differently from the way they treated her. “I think for him it’s harder just because he’s probably expected to be doing as good as I do or better.” Her brother exhibited signs of ADD, and he was placed on medication for that condition.

Father’s Family

Her ecological environment extended to her grandparents, and both sets of grandparents had different but profound influences on her and her development of self-determination. She learned by example of what to do and what not to do by observing the life styles and opinions of her parents’ parents.

When Mindy was growing up, she was not very close to her father’s family because she felt they were difficult to be around. She said they would push her in a negative manner, and as she got older, that technique distanced herself from that side of the family. “I mean, when I was little, it was fun because they’d be like, ‘You can’t do that, you can’t make that lay-up in basketball,’ and I’d prove them wrong. When I got older I didn’t want to deal with it anymore.” Mindy began to see their challenges as a negative form of motivation that she no longer wanted or needed. “It was their way of challenging me, but I think when I got older and things got a little more complicated in life, I didn’t need to hear that.”

There was no mention of her grandparents being aware that she had a disability. As she grew older, they must have known that she had some challenges, but Mindy did not see their treatment of her as reflective of anything about her; that was the way they treated everyone. It was evident from her narrative that she had a negative view of that approach. On the other hand, it did seem to influence her in her development of self-determination because she identified what did not work for her.

Mindy had just received her Associate of Arts Degree the spring I spoke with her. Mindy was the first member of her father's family to receive any type of college degree; however, they did not seem to, as she put it, "make a big deal over it." The fact that she also had a learning disability made her accomplishment even greater, but Mindy made no mention that her grandparents even acknowledged that. Instead, the overriding focus seemed to have been Mindy's goal to be a teacher. They knew that she wanted to be a teacher, and they strongly opposed that. Mindy and her brother both wanted to be teachers, and a cousin of theirs wanted to be a social worker, but her grandparents on her father's side did not approve.

Mindy had learned to set her own goals and make decisions for herself, even if they were unpopular with some of her relatives. I asked Mindy if they had told her what they wanted her to do instead of being a teacher. Her reply was, "Nothing really, because they know I'm going to do what I'm going to do." They had told her brother that they wanted him to go into business, and they wanted her cousin to be a college professor. They must have sensed that Mindy would not be swayed, but this pressure to do something other than teaching had put a strain on their relationship. "Yeah, just grandma saying, 'you go for the big stuff'. It's made me hate her a lot. Or dislike her strongly —

I mean I don't hate anyone but I dislike her strongly. I love her, but I dislike her.”

Mindy's determination to follow her own dream for herself was an important indication that she had developed a strong sense of who she was, and as a result, she was exercising decision-making and goal-setting skills.

At the time of our interviews, this side of Mindy's family was facing a challenge with one of Mindy's cousins, and this uproar was forcing Mindy to take a hard look at her own life and make some decisions about what she believed to be right and wrong. Her cousin had two children and had never been married. The family tried to help her after she had the first child; however, she deliberately got pregnant again while seeing someone new, and she had elected to go on welfare instead of trying to get a job. This had caused controversy in the family. Mindy's father had distanced himself from the family because he refused to contribute financial support for this young woman and her two children.

Mindy had also decided to distance herself from her grandmother's family. She did not understand her grandmother's acceptance of her cousin's behavior while she criticized her for her decision to be a teacher. In addition, Mindy believed that her cousin was taking resources others might need more. Mindy made this statement in regard to her cousin.

But she likes what she's got because of welfare. She's got an apartment, she's got food stamps, and she doesn't even watch her children most of the time. That just goes against everything I believe in. It put a sour taste in my mouth with welfare because really this could be going to someone who really, really, really, needs it.

Mindy's cousin's dream was that she would never have to work again. At the present time, she has made welfare her way of life.

Mindy's reaction to her cousin's dependence on welfare demonstrated her sense of locus of control. Mindy had witnessed the effect that her cousin's lifestyle had on the family, and she had made a decision for herself. "I think that's one of the things that I've vowed — that I will never become her. I've actually even said that I will never go on welfare either." Mindy felt that as long as you had someplace to live, food on the table, even if it was only noodle soup, and clothes, even if they were hand-me-downs, you were not poor. "You are surviving, and that's all that matters. I mean, for Pete's sake, if you're from Indonesia, you're rich." Mindy appeared to have confidence in her ability to affect the outcome of her own life so this would never happen to her.

Mother's Family

Bronfenbrenner clearly understood that families moved from a dyad to include the broader extended family members, who all exerted their influence. Mindy's ecological surroundings included her grandparents on her mother's side of the family. In sharp contrast to her feelings for her father's parents, Mindy loved her mother's parents. This set of grandparents seemed to be role models for many attributes Mindy had learned to admire and helped her develop a strong sense of what was important to her.

The example of this grandfather's experiences in relation to welfare may also be coloring Mindy's attitude toward her cousin who is now on welfare. Her grandfather on her mother's side told them stories about living through the Depression, and those stories left a strong impression on Mindy. He told her that there were times her great-grandparents did not eat so the children could have food. His family never went on

welfare, although they did accept help from the Salvation Army. “They wouldn’t take any of the benefits that the government was offering them, but the only help they would accept was from the Salvation Army, which would come around and give food to them once in a while.”

One of the reasons Mindy admires her grandfather is because of what he had been able to accomplish with his life. The example he set for her made a deep impression on her and played an important role in her development of self-determination. “Well, I think those are the people in my family that I really admire — especially my grandfather.” Her grandfather had lived in a small apartment when he was living with his parents, and he hardly ever saw his parents or his older brother because they were always working. His older sister stayed home to take care of him.

When he grew older, her grandfather joined the army and saw action during World War II, and when he returned he went to work for a large steel mill in the area. The GI bill helped him to go to college and get a master’s degree in biology. He ended up teaching shop. His son, Mindy’s uncle, became a German teacher. This uncle became a strong motivating force in her brother’s life and was one of the reasons her brother also wanted to become a teacher.

Mindy’s grandmother became a teacher as well and worked until her children were born. Even though Mindy’s grandfather was never paid a great deal as a teacher, he never complained about his job. Despite that, he went from being a poor boy from a Depression-era family to a man living in a three-bedroom home with a wife who stayed home to take care of their children. Mindy viewed the success of her grandfather as an example of what people could accomplish in this country if they are willing to work hard.

“He said it doesn’t matter where you come from or what you’ve been through. I don’t want to be all patriotic, but in this country you can do anything that you want if you just decide on it.”

Mindy’s grandfather’s experiences in the Depression had a profound effect on him and shaped his opinion about career choices. His philosophy was that you did what you had to do to survive. “Very much he was old school.” She described her grandfather’s family as believing that if you had a job that allowed you to take care of your family, then that was all that mattered. You were responsible for your own survival. “You know that means if you want to be a teacher (of course he was a teacher), be a teacher. If you want to be a mechanic, be a mechanic.” To Mindy, the fact that she wanted to be a teacher was affirmed by the attitudes she had witnessed in her grandfather. She was making her own decisions for her future.

Mindy said she felt that she shared that same mentality that her grandfather had taught her, and that other members of her family have also exemplified. “I think it’s like my father, my aunt, and my uncle. We have problems, like my grandfather. We have the mentality of the only person that you have to praise or to thank really is yourself, and the only person that you have to curse is yourself in your life.” Mindy viewed the decisions that she made as leading her to where she needed to be. “I’m not saying that we’re going to become famous or that we’re going to become rich, but we live our lives very simply, and you know, we have a good life.”

Mindy felt that the example that her grandfather had set for her had made a difference in her life. He had been poor and had still managed to accomplish many positive things. “I think that might be my grandfather’s (influence). He’d been through

it. But I think that's something that gives me a lot of determination." Her sense of self-efficacy developed as a direct result of the influence of her grandfather.

Parents Taught Them To Care

Another powerful force in her life was the way her parents dealt with her disability. Mindy felt that when she was born, her parents had not been prepared to deal with the fact that their daughter had a learning disability "It's not one of those things in the 80s that the baby books prepared you for or the parenting books prepared you for...I think when my parents found out, they were almost devastated. They didn't know what a learning disability was, and that's something that made you feel like a failure — when they didn't fail at anything." It was not until the 90s that the literature of learning disabilities became common knowledge, and her parents became more comfortable with it.

Mindy felt that in previous years, parents may have thought that their child had a problem, but they simply dealt with it. A label had not been attached to the behavior at that time. Once a label was attached, everything changed. "Parents might have known their kid had something wrong or might have been slow a little bit, but once you label it, it becomes totally different."

Mindy felt that her parents had no one with whom to talk or ask questions about a learning disability. Other families sharing the same problems were simply not around, or if they were, her parents were not aware of them. Role models for her parents, or at least someone willing to answer questions, might have been helpful, but Mindy's parents appeared to take another tack with their children, instead. They did not dwell on the disability but emphasized what they could do rather than what they could not do.

Furthermore, Mindy felt that her parents had acted as role models for her. Mindy saw her parent's generation as taking up causes and fighting for the issues they supported. "I mean just like a lot of my mom's generation and like my dad's generation — you belonged at least to one organization, even if it was a gun group or a woman's organization or, you know, an environmental group — you belonged." She felt that the example her parents set taught her to care deeply for her own causes. She had developed a strong sense of duty and responsibility based on the lessons learned at home, and these attitudes had contributed greatly to her strong sense of self-determination.

Mindy talked about the importance and power of the individual, which was closely tied to her perceptions of self-determination. She had been taught that her vote was as important as that of the rich and powerful. "And they don't count more just because they're a celebrity or because they have more money." Her parents had taught her that she must exercise the power to vote as part of her responsibility. "Yeah, my mom's very liberal, and my dad's very conservative, but they said they don't care as long as we vote 'cause they've told me that, 'Don't vote, don't bitch'. That's the motto in our family." In this case, Mindy had been taught to identify what was important to her, to make her own decisions, and to take responsibility for those decisions. She had apparently internalized the lessons learned from her parents, and she seemed ready to take on the responsibilities of life, as she understood them at that point.

Mindy and her brother often made jokes about that belief. Sometimes, if her brother got mad at their parents, he would threaten to vote for the Communist party, but her parents did not seem to care as long as he voted. As for Mindy, she seemed to feel that her obligation was a deeply personal one. "And also, being a female, I feel like

people fought for my right to vote so it's my duty to make sure what they fought for is not in vain."

The Fight for Women's Rights

Disabilities were of no particular concern to Mindy's family, focusing as they did on women's right. For example, Mindy's mother was among those who had fought for women's rights. Mindy felt that part of her feelings of self-determination came from what her mother taught her about the rights of women. Her mother had also taught Mindy that if she wanted to be a doctor, then she should be a doctor, but that she could not control other people and what they wanted. She could only control what she wanted and what she could do. Additionally, she was taught that she did not have to depend on a man or anyone else for a good life.

Moreover, Mindy's family valued highly the right of each individual to make decisions. The women in Mindy's family were not protected from the world. Instead, they were expected to work and be self-sufficient. "Women were more independent, and we got through rough times." Her grandmother was an exception. "It's just my grandmother's more like a petite, little neighbor-protected type of woman, but in general in our family, they're gone." Mindy saw other women in her family as role models for her own life. "With my family, you were expected to have your own ideas. My great-grandmother was a teacher. That wasn't a big deal, but it was a big deal because it was a job outside of the home." Mindy was taught that she was expected to be a capable woman, but if Mindy's family felt strongly about the rights of youth with disabilities, Mindy never mentioned it. Therefore, it appeared that she was taught to be an independent woman and not an independent woman with a learning disability.

Moreover, Mindy did remember being read to when she was a child. The stories that her parents chose to read to her depicted women and girls who were in non-traditional roles for women. “They were books that showed powerful women in a time that there were not supposed to be strong, powerful women. I mean, those are women who are very determined themselves.”

Furthermore, Mindy talked about the way she perceived how women were viewed in both our society and in the societies of other countries. Mindy felt that in certain other countries; she had a better chance of succeeding with her disability than she did as a woman. “In another country I think I could get by with my disability. I could work past that, but I think it would be a total block on me as a woman.” She expressed the feeling that women are often treated and viewed more as sex objects, and that a strong woman is often criticized as being unfeminine. She did not seem to be concerned that she would be viewed as unfeminine. She was determined to make her own decisions for her life and to live according to what she believed was right for her.

Parental Support

It is important to note that the emphasis in Mindy’s family appeared to be taking responsibility for yourself and developing decision-making skills. In Mindy’s case, she was also taught that the fact that she was a woman meant that she was a capable person who had control in her own life. Mindy never mentioned any emphasis being placed on her disability nor on that of her brother. These young people appeared to have been raised as ordinary children rather than as children with disabilities. The prospect of preparing for adult responsibilities seems to have begun when the children were young and increased as they matured.

Mindy's parents did not help her very much after she graduated from high school. "I think it's like my parents, it's not mean or anything, but as soon as I got out of high school, I think my parents started to wean me off of having them there all the time." They forced her to be academically and financially independent. An example of the way Mindy's parents helped to move her to independence was how they sold her their old car. "My brother and I were never handed a car. We might have bought one of my parent's old cars, but they charged us 'Kelly Blue Book' for them, and we were responsible for our own insurance."

In addition, Mindy's parents agreed to pay for a college education up to the bachelor's degree for both her and her brother, but they made it clear to them that after that they were on their own. She expected to have to pay for her master's degree by taking out some type of loan. Mindy's parents told her that if she ever got married, they would not pay for a wedding. Her parents felt that giving them a college education would put them on the right road to success and independence. "By paying for our college degree, they have helped us better than paying for anything else, because by giving us a college degree, we can get better jobs and be financially stable on our own."

Mindy had to do a balancing act between family, college, and her work schedule. Since Mindy had been in college, she had not had an opportunity to see much of her immediate family. She had seen more of her brother because she described him as being loud, and she heard him in the house when they were both there at the same time. Mindy and her parents seemed to keep different schedules. "But I have a good relationship with them. I'm not like really super tight with them, but I think it's because I went my separate way. Well, you know, I'm getting ready to jump out of the nest." She described

her own schedule during the holiday season. She worked at the college, but in addition, she had a job in retail. She was working 50 to 60 hours a week and was going to school full time. She would not see her parents for weeks on end.

Mindy was a great example of self-determination in action. I wanted her to describe a typical day to illustrate how all of her ecological surroundings worked together, and how she managed to make it all work for her. Mindy complained that during the holiday period, customers would sometimes be rude or angry. I asked Mindy to describe her typical day when she was going to school and working during the holidays because that probably presented the greatest challenge for her. Her description was as follows:

The holiday spirit is not much into anyone. They are really mean and they are nasty. They fight and argue with you, but I'd have to be to work at 8 o'clock and I'd get up at 7 o'clock in the morning and then I'd work a full day and not get off until 11. So, I'd come home, try to get something to eat, and sleep and wake up early, and do a little bit of homework, or on my lunch break I'd eat doing homework — if I got a lunch break.

Friends and Community Influence

The literature of self-determination underscores the importance of the support of friends in the development and maintenance of self-determination skills, and Mindy seemed to feel strongly about the importance of her friendships in her life as well. Even when it was not a holiday period, Mindy worked at the academic center at the college and in customer relations at a local department store for a total of 55 hours a week. In addition, Mindy was attending college as a full-time student. She had little time apart

from work and school. She rarely got to spend time with her friends. Nevertheless, she did enjoy seeing her friends, and she explained that she had many groups of friends. When time permitted, she tried to spend time with the different groups, but she found that the groups do not always mix well. For this reason, she saw different people at different times.

She reported that she had two best friends. At the time of the interviews, Mindy was getting ready to go away to college, and she was also trying to visit with her friends. She was planning on going to Nebraska for a week to visit a friend she had known since the sixth grade who was now in the Air Force. "I'll go visit her because the funny thing is, when I move, I'm going to constantly be missing her because she'll come home to Carter, but it might not be the same time I'm coming home." She had another friend who was going to go to school in London, and she had plans to visit her as well. She wanted to maintain her contact with these two girls because they were such close friends. Mindy felt that, because of her schedule, she was closer to her friends than she was to her family because she saw more of her friends than she saw of her family. That is common for many young people Mindy's age and is typical of youth with and without disabilities.

On the other hand, Mindy seemed reticent when discussing her disability with her friends. Some of her friends did know about her educational disability just because they had known her all her life. She saw no need to share her experiences with other friends who had not known her as long. "Sometimes it comes up and sometimes it doesn't, and it's not like I'm going around saying, 'Oh, I have this problem you know.'"

Her friends did seem to offer a support system in her decision to be a teacher. Some of her friends also appeared to be interested in teaching. There were three families

in her neighborhood who were close, and of the five children from those families, all of them wanted to be teachers. Two of the young people wanted to teach in elementary school, another wanted to teach biology, Mindy's brother wanted to teach foreign language, and she wanted to teach history. She laughed and said that they could almost start a school right here in their neighborhood, but she was proud of the fact that so many of her friends also shared her dreams.

Mindy felt that her friends in her community influenced her ability to be self-determining. Bronfenbrenner would have agreed with Mindy's assessment that the influence of the community was important to her development of self-determination. She had lived in Carter County all her life, and she felt comfortable in her community. "It's where I lived, not Carter County as much, but in the neighborhood. It was very much like we knew who our neighbors were. We were very community based."

Her family had a lot of contact with many of her neighbors over the years, but some of the families had moved away, and they were not as close to the new neighbors. Nevertheless, a family that lived down the hill from them was very close to her family. Her best friend, her brother's best friend, and her mother's best friend all came from that same family. In addition, the fathers from both families were good friends as well. Mindy was also good friends with the older sister in that family. She felt that she had a bond with her other neighbors, and many who had been in the neighborhood for some time were considered good friends. "Even the neighbors that we necessarily don't hang out with or get along with all the time — we respect them and they respect us."

This community provided her with an anchor of stability. Her parents were part of this anchor, and they knew all the people Mindy knew. Here was a good example of

communication between settings. Her family was part of the community as a whole, and her friendship with the younger members of that community was encouraged. If they served as role models in any way, that fact was not discouraged because they all shared similar values.

Mindy felt that the families who lived in the neighborhood were families were similar to her own. She talked about other people her own age that had gone into the military or were now working. She felt that the sentiments among the people in her neighborhood who were her age were, “Find yourself in high school. After high school you better know what you’re going to do.” This was in contrast to many other youth today who feel no sense of urgency as they graduate from high school — or in some cases even college — without knowing what they want to do with their lives. Youth with the skills of self-determination generally have some direction for themselves, and they have plans for how they intend to accomplish their goals. In this case, Mindy’s friends and her community had a very influential role in showing her the importance of making some preliminary decisions about the kind of career she wanted to have. Her friends and neighbors served as role models to her in developing goals and planning to attain those goals for herself, which was an important component of self-determination.

Religion — Going to Church

The literature of self-determination does not mention religion, specifically, but Mindy felt it was an important part of her life, and she illustrated the importance that her family and friends had in her evolving commitment to the church. She expressed the ability to be self-determining in her attitudes toward religious observance. Mindy described her family as being very religious, and she had been encouraged to stay closely

connected to the church. She had gone to church one day a week until she was 16. At that time she got her first job, and she tried to tell her mother that she did not have time to go to church once a week anymore. However, her mother would not accept that. Her reply was, “You go to church once a week. I don’t care if you go Wednesday night, I don’t care if you go Sunday morning, or you can go Saturday night, but you are going to find some time to go to church.” So Mindy still attended her church once a week. Even though Mindy did not get to stop attending church, she later discussed the fact that her religion remained an important element in her life. People who exhibit skills in self-determination can decide to acquiesce to the desires of others, if it is in their best interests to do so. Refusing her mother’s requirement to attend church would have made the living situation very uncomfortable, and because she was living in her parent’s home, her wisest move was to go to church once a week.

Bronfenbrenner believed that the total ecological surroundings of an individual had an impact on their development, and as mentioned previously, the literature of self-determination emphasizes that the influence of friends can be a powerful force in the development of self-determination. Mindy grew up with a tight-knit group of friends in her neighborhood who had a shared background. “But we were all pretty much raised together. We all went to the same church for a long time, too.” Mindy’s mother left that church and went to another. Her father also changed churches. “But my brother and me go to a Baptist Church with our friends. Which my mom doesn’t care as long as we’re going to church.” Mindy’s grandmother was a Catholic and felt strongly that if you were going to be Christian then you had to be Catholic, but Mindy and her brother steadfastly

continued to go to the church of their choice. The influence of her friends appeared to be stronger than the influence of her family in this case.

Her experiences in the decision making process surrounding church attendance had nothing to do with her learning disability, but it did illustrate her ability to decide when to fight for an issue and when to compromise. Her parents were remarkable in that they did not force their own particular religious preferences, but allowed her to choose her own, thereby providing her with another opportunity to exercise decision-making skills.

School

Many students do not like school. That is unfortunately not unusual and is not always related to the presence of a disability. Conversely, not all students with a disability dislike school. The experiences of the individual color their attitudes and help form their perceptions. Mindy's experiences were not all bad ones, but the circumstances that surrounded her learning disability left a strong impression on her. In this section, I examine the influence that school had on her development of self-determination.

Elementary School

School offers a powerful ecological influence over the development of any student regardless of the presence of a disability. Mindy's passage through the educational system had an impact on her development just as it would have had on any other student; nevertheless, the fact that she had an identified disability did color her perspective of her academic development. Mindy was identified in first grade as needing special education services. She was also placed on medication around November of her

first grade year. “I was identified in first grade because, what happened was, I was in the middle classes and that’s when they pulled me out of the mid-level classes, and they started putting me in the lower classes.” In addition to her change of placement, she was pulled out of her regular classes and taught in a small group situation. “We did reading, we did writing, and we did other things, just like skills. It was pretty much a continuation of class. I didn’t learn anything different.”

She felt that her primary difficulty had been in writing rather than reading. She described herself as an avid reader in elementary school, but she did express a feeling that her greatest difficulty was in her ability to express herself in writing.

I was reading a book a night in second grade. Um, well not really a night, but I was reading a lot. When I had free time, if I didn’t want to sleep, I’d be reading, especially the weekends. I never thought I really had a problem.

However, once she began the medication, everything changed.

Medication and School

The issue of medication had been a powerful force in her life in elementary school. She had a strong resentment toward her experiences during that period.

I think that in elementary school, things could have been done a lot better, instead of trying to push drugs on us. I was put on medication. It was not good for me because I almost became zombie-like and the school wanted me to stay on medication and my teacher told my parents that, “she’s not functioning. She’s just sitting there....”

Mindy did not really have a reason for why she had been placed on medication, so I asked her some questions about her experiences that had led up to the decision to

medicate her. I asked Mindy how she had been doing academically before she was first placed on medication. She replied that she was doing fairly well. “I was like the head of my math class and then when they put me on it I was tired. I couldn’t stay awake to do my homework.” At that point they put her in the lower reading and math classes. “I was fine until they did that. You know, these people didn’t know this. I knew this and I got tired of trying to explain to people over and over again that eight plus one equals nine.”

I asked her about her behavior in classes before she was placed on medication. She did not feel that her behavior had been any worse than that of the other students. “I would talk. I would raise my hand a lot, and I would participate. But I had stuff to say, but I didn’t think I was that bad. I mean, there were kids a lot worse than me.”

I wanted to know if she had perhaps just been sitting in class but was unable to pay attention to what was going on. Her reply was, “I just remember spacing out a lot more when I was on the medicine.” She said that after she started taking the medication she was not able to pay attention in class and when she went home she just wanted to sleep. “I’d get home — I’d be so tired and I’d just remember that my mom would always have to write notes for me because I would sleep all the time.”

Mindy had a great deal to say about her experience with medication. “I mean it was hell for me. It really was, and it’s bad, you know, when an eight year old is so tired that they don’t want to get up and eat dinner.” Her mother had to feed her in bed because she could not get up. They changed the medication but the results were not much better. For much of her time in elementary school, she was not able to go outside and play in the afternoon because she would come home and sleep. She slept in the car going and

coming from school, and she slept through meals. She was so tired that she could not do homework despite the efforts of her mother to keep her awake.

They tried keeping me up. I was getting very irritable...“I’m going to bed now. I don’t care.” They could keep me up until 6:00. “I’ll stay up, you know I’ll stay up, deal with this for a little bit but, after 7:00 I’m going to bed. There’s nothing that you can say that’s going to keep me up.” And that’s how it was.

Weekends were better because she was not on the medication. She would sleep late on Saturday until the medication would work itself out of her body, and then she would be up and functioning. Part of Saturday and all of Sunday she seemed to function well, and the process would begin all over again on Monday when she had to start taking the medication again. This was Mindy’s life from the second to the sixth grade. After that, she refused to take the medication.

Mindy blamed the school for keeping her on the medication, but I explained to her that schools may discuss medication, but it is the doctor who actually diagnosed and prescribed medication. Her reply was, “That’s okay, my doctor was an ass.” Apparently she had a doctor who Mindy felt never listened to her. She had another doctor who she felt was much more responsive. She described the difference between the two doctors as she gave an account of an injury she had incurred.

I hurt myself in basketball one day. I hurt my knee. The first doctor said that I would be fine. “Come back a week later.” I talked to the other one, and he said that I had broken off some cartilage. I told that to the first doctor, and he didn’t believe me.

The first doctor finally retired, and she began to see the second doctor, who she believed was more responsive to her needs.

Hand Holding Metaphor for Special Education Services

Mindy described the special education services that she received in elementary school in terms of teachers holding her hand. “The reason is that when I hit middle school there was nothing holding me back, because when we hit middle school it’s no longer teachers holding your hand.”

Mindy felt that the attention students received in elementary school was not helpful. Instead, she felt it was more detrimental to students than teachers imagined. “And I think that was just wrong, because a lot of kids get labeled as stupid, or the kids with ADD — they get labeled as out of control.” Mindy felt that these labels followed students throughout their careers in the educational setting. “It’s just they get labeled at that age, and I think it follows a lot of them through.” Mindy remained in the lowest reading group all the way into middle school, but she was moved up to a middle math section somewhere in elementary school.

Nevertheless, she did like some aspects of elementary school. “I had very nice teachers.” She also liked going to the media center and art class. “I don’t know, I just didn’t get yelled at as much. I just could blend in more. I wasn’t being singled out and also, I could sleep.” Other than that, there was really no favorite part of elementary school.

Mindy mentioned being yelled at in elementary school, and I asked her if that had happened to her frequently. “Yeah, sometimes they’d yell at me — not yell but they’d say stuff, like in class, like you need to participate more or something like that.” Mindy

would refuse to participate. “Because I didn’t care. I was like, ‘leave me alone.’” She said that they would ask her if she would like to share her writing with the class, and she would refuse. “It wasn’t really supposed to be a rhetorical question, but I’d be like, ‘No.’ I’d never ask a kid, ‘Do you want them to?’ because they’re going to say ‘No.’” She did not see herself as a shy person. She just did not want to be bothered. “I didn’t feel like getting up in class and speaking to the class, and all I wanted to do was sleep.”

She also mentioned having a strong dislike for the assistant principal in her elementary school. Mindy wanted to get out of band, but the assistant principal convinced Mindy’s parents that it was in her best interests to keep her there. Mindy did not practice, and she hated the whole experience. When she went to middle school, they tried to convince her to remain in band, but she refused to join. Here is an early example of Mindy making a decision for herself and following up with action.

In elementary school, her relationships with her peers were limited. Mindy characterized her interaction with her peers as one of voluntary isolation. “Oh yeah, with my peers, like, ‘Leave me alone.’ And if you didn’t leave me alone, I would be even more mad.” Members of her class tried to make friends with her, but she wanted them to go away. In addition, all the students were placed in groups, and she was forced to work with people whether she wanted to or not. Her reaction was, “I did not like the group thing.” She was with most of the same people through elementary school, but as an adult she had chosen to be in contact with very few of those people.

Elementary School — Handling It Better

I asked Mindy how she thought her disability could have been handled better in elementary school. She felt that just because a person had some type of disability, they

should not have been excluded from the regular classroom. She felt that some students with extreme disabilities might have benefited from being pulled out of class, but the majority of students with disabilities did better when taught in the regular classroom. She stated that, in her opinion, teachers were wrong to pull her out of class, but Mindy had reached a measure of peace about her experiences in elementary school. “I wouldn’t have done anything different because of where I am.” In retrospect, she felt that if she had needed to be pulled out, that was fine. Nevertheless, at the time Mindy did not believe it was necessary to remove her from class. “I think I could have learned just as well if I had been in the classroom.”

She also felt that once a student was labeled, that label became mental retardation, even if nothing could be further from the truth. “But at my elementary school, the children with learning disabilities were treated the same as children that were retarded — they were in classes where I don’t think they could advance themselves whatever.”

I asked Mindy to explain what she meant by being separated from her peers and being labeled. I asked her if she had been aware of being labeled. “Oh yeah. I knew I was being labeled because I was in the lowest reading and math groups. I knew my peers were labeling me. I mean, I was one of the ‘stupid’ kids.” Mindy said that after a while, you started to believe that you were stupid.

Mindy knew that she was in a different group in elementary school. Her cousin went to the same elementary school and told her what the other students were saying about her. She was in the lowest groups, and Mindy felt there was no way to hide that fact from children.

No matter what they call the group, “Roses,” “Tulips,” or “Dandelions,” the kids will learn what group they’re in. You can be in Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, and they’ll still know which group they are in no matter how you name the group.

For a long time, Mindy believed that her teachers had been responsible for her placement, but she said that later she decided that others were more responsible. I asked her whom she thought was responsible for her being pulled out of class, and she replied that it was the administration in the school. She felt that the principal or the assistant principals were the ones who really made the placement decisions. She felt that if it had been left up to the teachers, things would have been different. It is interesting that she did not seem to have any clear idea of the process of placement or team decisions. She did not even mention the part her parents had to play until later in our interviews. The concept of using the IEP process as a means of teaching self-determination was painfully lacking in her narrative.

Mindy felt that there had been a significant difference between the way the elementary and middle schools treated students of different skill levels, and middle school was the better of the two.

In elementary school, it was your own class, it was people in the classroom and you were put into different groups. Where in middle school maybe you were put in different groups, but those groups moved with you from the classroom on. You didn’t have to look at the people who were different from you. Now, in that classroom in middle school you were all the same. Not necessarily the same, but generally you were at the same level academically, but in elementary school you weren’t. You had to look at the kids who were extremely smart. You had to look

at the kids who were average, and then you had to look at the kids who were at the bottom.

Mindy mentioned that politics played a part in placement decisions, and I asked her what she meant by that. “Some kid’s parents made more money. Those kids were treated specially. Stuff like that, we knew it.” I then asked her what part her own parents played in decision-making regarding her placement. Mindy stated that she felt that her parents thought they had made the best decision for her. Her parents relied on the advice of her teachers and her doctor to obtain the best placement they could for their daughter. “I mean, parents will do whatever if they think it’s the best for their children, and I just think that’s what it is. I think my parents thought it was the best.”

Mindy discussed the fact that when she was in the class for students with learning disabilities, she often felt like she was a burden to the teacher. Sometimes when she was in classrooms for students with learning disabilities and the students began to act out, she felt guilty because the teacher had to spend time with her. She would often tell the teacher that she did not need any help. The teacher was trying to make sure she got to everyone, but it made Mindy feel that she took up time when she did not feel that she needed the attention as much as some of the others did. She felt that the teacher had too many students and not enough time to help everyone.

Mindy’s IEP and Written Language Deficit

When Mindy brought in her IEP for me to examine, there was no mention of ADD. Instead, it clearly identified a learning disability in the area of written language as being her primary disability. She was identified as being in the low range in the area of

dictation, but she appeared to be in the average range for everything else. In addition, she was supposed to have been in regular classrooms.

We discussed Mindy's development in the area of written language. She felt that in elementary school, she had never really been taught grammar. She stated that they had spent one week learning vowels and commas and that was it. She felt that her major problem had been the way she wrote words. She claimed that what she wrote looked more like Norwegian or alphabet soup.

Mindy also talked about having difficulty in spelling and in not being able to distinguish between various letters of the alphabet. In addition, she also had difficulty in expressing her thoughts in writing. "I guess I had problems with processing my thoughts, but once I hit middle school that kind of stopped. I kind of was able to process my thoughts a little bit more."

Mindy had never been told why she had an IEP, and because no one really discussed the reasons she had it, she assumed it was unimportant. "I was pulled out of class. I thought something was wrong, but I didn't know what it was so I just assumed that there was nothing, because up until now I didn't know." We discussed her IEP and the implications that it might have for her as a college student.

After going over the IEP, Mindy asked me why that she had been placed on medication. I could not answer that. I explained that a learning disability in the area of written language had been identified as her primary handicapping condition, but that she could have had other challenges that were either not as great or that were not affecting her academically. Mindy appeared to be upset about what she had gone through in elementary school.

No, I'm just — I'm kind of pissed because I went through all that crap and taking that medicine, going through being so tired and drained and all that junk. It just gets me mad because it doesn't seem like it was anything that was long term.

For much of her time in school no one really discussed her disability with her. “I just went through school, and it was foreign to me, and my parents were real busy. I mean not that this wasn't important, but they had my brother, they had me — you know, they had to work.” Because no one discussed this subject with her, she decided that it was unimportant and that she was not involved. “It's just that I didn't really care. It sounded like they talked with my parents about it, but I was never really involved with any of this stuff.”

She stated that it would have made a difference to her if someone had discussed her disability with her, but apparently no one did. “It would have mattered. I didn't know anything about it. I knew that there was something but what it was I didn't know.” Mindy interpreted this silence as if she were being trained not to care. “I didn't think anything of it. I've been kind of trained that way because it's not being involved in it at all, then it's not a part of me.”

Mindy went on to elaborate on the theory that she was trained not to care. “Them not telling me had made me not care.” She talked about conspiracy theories and the fact that at first everyone wants to know — whatever information is hidden — but if it went on too long then people stopped caring. “You know, that's how I feel. You don't want to tell me, fine. Let's move on. It is no longer important.” But Mindy was not ready to move on. She continued to talk about it.

They should not have waited for the perfect moment to tell me that, “this is, oh, your disability.” They should have been telling me ever since I was taken out in elementary school to do special reading classes. They should have told me what my disability was from then on.

Mindy expressed a great deal of anger regarding the lack of communication that she encountered concerning her disability. “I’m no longer curious, and I’m no longer entertained by the idea.” Before continuing, Mindy sat and thought for some time and then she persisted. She said that she had wanted to know for a long time, but it was now to the point that she might as well get over it. I asked her why she wanted to know, and she said that she had been taken out of class and there was a reason for that, but no one ever told her. “Because there’s a reason why I was being taken out of class, there was a reason why I was being separated from my peers, labeled, there was a reason why, and I wanted to know why, but no one told me.”

Involvement with the IEP process is a major recommendation in the literature on self-determination. Participation in the process allows students with a disability to learn how to advocate for themselves in an authentic situation. Mindy had effectively been excluded from the benefits of the entire process to the extent that, as a young woman entering her junior year in college, she was suddenly presented with information about her identified disability. Someone should have sat down with her and explained what her disability was and what it meant for her life, and this probably should have been done as soon as she was old enough to understand what it meant for her educationally. It was only through the process of these interviews that she had learned the information, and her

reaction was understandable given the events that had occurred to her in her elementary school.

Middle School

Middle school appeared to be a turning point for her. In elementary school, Mindy had been placed on medication to address her attention deficit disorder. The medication had made her very tired most of the time, and when she reached middle school she refused to take it anymore. Previously, it has been noted that she refused to continue with band when she entered middle school, and she also took the huge step of refusing to take the medication prescribed for her to help her deal with her ADD. I asked Mindy what her parent's reaction had been. "I kind of told them I wasn't going to take it. 'You know you can't force me to do it.'" Her parents knew that they could not make her take the medication, so they agreed that she could stop taking it. Her grades went up because she could now do homework, and she became more active. Mindy had demonstrated her ability to make her own decisions about some important aspects of her life.

Her experience in middle school appeared to be more positive. "I liked middle school. There really wasn't anything I did not like about middle school." There were a few teachers she did not like, but she could deal with them. In addition, because she was not on her medication, she was able to get along better with her peers. "Yeah, because I wasn't just sitting in class. I wasn't as irritable. I wasn't as tired and drained, so I talked more with people, and I could stand them a little bit more." On the whole, she reported that middle school was a positive experience for her.

Another reason Mindy liked middle school was that she felt she was not singled out as much. She felt that she was treated as one of a group, and she liked that

anonymity. “I had a chance for advancement and then, with teachers, it was weird. They knew you, but they didn’t know each of your stories. They didn’t have a chance to know everything about your life.” Additionally, the school was much bigger, and the principal did not get a chance to know who the students were. “The principal knew me by name in elementary school. There’s no way (in middle school). The principal’s too worried about trying to get more portables to go out on to the gym field than stuff like that.”

Mindy believed that middle school changed everything. In her opinion, there were too many students and not enough teachers for students to be treated individually. “That’s because in middle school they couldn’t hire. They didn’t have the time or the resources to care about your problem.” She felt that this had been to her advantage because it gave her more of an opportunity to socialize with her peers. Up until that time, she had been with her small group of seven or eight other students with a variety of disabilities, but she felt isolated and segregated from the majority of students. Middle school gave her the chance to get to know a variety of people.

Middle school offered her another avenue to independence. When Mindy was in elementary school, her parents helped her with some of her work because she had been so sleepy during the time she was on medication. Once she got to middle school, she was no longer on the medication, and her parents no longer offered her ongoing assistance. “When I got into middle school, they would help me when I asked them questions, but they wouldn’t sit down and do my work like some parents do.” Her parents set a time for her to do homework, and they expected her to do it. “And they wouldn’t be looking over my shoulder making sure I did all my homework.” According to Mindy, she did usually complete all of her assigned homework, and that habit continued into college.

High School

When Mindy entered high school, she began to exercise her independence and to make many more decisions for herself. At this point, she already appeared to be a young woman with self-determination skills. Mindy was able to get a job and then buy her own car. She was able to go and do what she needed to do without relying on her parents. “I became, I think, less of a burden.” She saw herself as a burden to her parents when she was younger and more dependent on them to take her places. “So, it’s good not to be a burden.”

Being a burden seemed to be a significant concern for Mindy. She had not wanted to be a burden to her teachers in elementary school, and she did not want to be a burden to her parents by asking for rides or money. It seemed important to her to be independent and to be able to take care of her own needs. She was showing more and more evidence of being self-determining.

I asked her what had helped her in high school in developing her ability to be self-determining. She said that the knowledge that high school would soon be over was a big help to her. She was elated that they were not all going to remain in the county the rest of their lives, and that was important to her. She stated that in a way she had lived in a foreign country all her life. She expressed the belief that it did not matter anymore because she would never see those people again, anyway. “So, that has probably been one of my really big self-determination points is get out of Carter. Get out of the Mid-Atlantic States.” Mindy said that it had been her goal since she was eight years old to move out of Carter. She expressed a desire to move up to New England and to live there.

Challenges in High School

Mindy talked at length about what she considered troublesome in her education, first as a student with a learning disability in a self-contained class in elementary school, and then as a student with a learning disability in high school. Mindy felt that students who were in her program in elementary school were not always challenged as much as they should have been, and Mindy felt that the school did not know how to handle them.

There were kids that were in there that are doing a lot better than I was. I went through school with them because they were labeled, but they were just as smart if not smarter than people in the upper reading and math groups. They should have been in upper reading and math groups, but because they had this problem they were put down in the bottom.

I asked Mindy if she ever heard from the others from her elementary school group. She said that she knew where some of them were, but she did not communicate with them and had not for some time. One was in an Ivy League university, but two of the others had not been as lucky. One of the girls dropped out of school, and another made it through high school but was having a hard time. “Jack got labeled, and he was stuck with the label and he didn’t feel like destroying it. So, he kept it that way. He barely graduated high school.” She was not sure where he was. Mindy felt that these were bright people who should have made it to college, but they did not. She felt that part of the problem was that they had not been given the kind of work that pushed them to learn.

Mindy contrasted that to her experience in high school. She expressed the opinion that the requirements for high school graduation were not challenging enough. “I

know people that get their high school diploma. I think people should have to take more English and science and math.” She charged that she was not given enough preparation in math or other subjects. “They should have more requirements — you know, every school year, freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. Because some people are graduating who have only gone up to basic algebra.” She felt that she was not the only one who had not been adequately prepared. She felt that many students needed more challenging academics. “And they’re not prepared to go out into the workforce, and they might want to be a carpenter and carpentry deals with a lot of geometry, and maybe they didn’t take that in school.”

Mindy stated that, at one time in her life, she had been in the bottom classes and that she had been able to move up. She had been forced to take some career education electives, but had been very uncomfortable in these settings because of the behavior of the other students. “I used those as filler classes. I didn’t like to go to those classes because I knew who was going to be in those classes. And you avoided them as much as you could.” She believed that there was a reason that some of the students caused so much trouble. “Some of those kids were stereotyped as being bad; they became bad because they were constantly stuck with the same kids, and they lived down to the expectations.” She implied that if these students had been challenged more they might have risen to the occasion rather than living down to the expectations.

Mindy expressed some strong feelings about career education and the education of the more academically oriented. She felt that the disruptive students were being pushed off into some of the career-orientated classes, but they still continued to be so disruptive there that no one benefited from instruction. She felt this was done in an effort

to allow the more academically able students to learn and earn better grades in a less troubled environment. She felt that discipline was the key and that “the trouble kids” were not being disciplined appropriately.

It sounds horrible, but I think our society is hooked on getting the grades, getting the smart kids — we cater to the smart kids, we really do. We take the troubled kids and shove them down into the lower skilled classes instead of having them in anatomy; they’re in skills classes. But that’s not helping the people that actually want to learn. I just think there’s not enough discipline in schools — like those kids can get away with murder.

In her description of high school, Mindy had not been talking about students with disabilities. From her perspective, she was describing students who were not motivated to learn and who were disrupting the other students. Although she did not mention self-determination directly, she felt that many of the problems in schools had arisen from the fact that these students did not see that they had any choices for their lives. They were on the bottom, and they did not see a future. In this case, self-determination skills might have been helpful for these students as well. They might have identified some goals for themselves that would have helped to place them on a more positive path.

These situations did not negatively affect Mindy because she had already developed a measure of self-determination. By now, she had already identified some goals for herself, and she had begun to move toward those goals. As Mindy continued to improve in high school, she was placed in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. She first stated that it had not been a big accomplishment because the counselors needed to put people somewhere. Mindy laughed and said that some students claimed they were stuck

in the AP classes while they were waiting for work release. However, when questioned further, she did state that she felt she belonged there. Eventually, she even took some courses at the community college while still enrolled in high school.

High School Cliques

Part of the high school culture involves the different groups that form in a school environment. These groups made up part of Mindy's ecological surroundings in her high school setting. Mindy described the different groups in her high school. "Yeah, the whole thing is that it's such a big high school that everyone is classified." She described the "band geeks," the "smarts," the "local university group," the "skill group," the "tech freaks," the "language group," the "jocks," the "troubles," the "goodies," the "jerks," the "art freaks," and the "religious groups." "And sometimes you don't even get to know a person's name, but you can tell by just looking at them, oh, they're in the arts group and the smarty group. You can't tell who a person is without knowing what group they are in."

I asked Mindy what group she had been in, and she classified herself as having been in "under the skills" group. "I was like the average, not the average but the kids that are, the skills kids. I was under the kids that were more than likely to go to college." The students in her group might possibly go to small local colleges or community colleges.

For a brief time, Mindy's group included the girls who played basketball, and she played girls' basketball in high school until it stopped being fun. She felt that she did well at the sport. "I did pretty well. I couldn't stand it any more because I think people take it too serious. It's just a game." One of the girls on the team started berating the other girls if they lost a game. Mindy felt that the girl's anger was unnecessary. "We're

having fun. You know it's not life. We lose the game, we lose the game, and our coach told us, 'don't expect to win every game.'" Even though Mindy seemed to have had a calm and reasonable attitude toward the student who was so upset about losing, she eventually decided that the pressure was something she did not want to take, and she quit the team. Here is an example of a combination of her self-awareness and a choice she made based on her self-knowledge. She decided that the pressure of the girl who wanted to win at any price was an aspect of competing that she did not like, and she decided to remove herself from the situation.

Self-Advocacy and Compromise

Finally, it became time to move on to college. In her selection of the colleges she planned to attend, Mindy demonstrated the ability to set and attain goals, to be her own self-advocate, and to be able to make reasonable compromises when necessary. Students with learning disabilities usually go through some transitioning process as they move from high school to the world beyond, but the only planning Mindy described was the experience she had with the high-school counselors.

Mindy stated that her counselors in high school never helped her. She said that they were supposed to meet with students once a year, but they met with them in the ninth grade and that was it. She described the counselors as spending more time with the better students and trying to get them into a good college than they did with the students who achieved in the middle ranges.

Mindy's high-school guidance counselor had not encouraged her to go to college, and when he did speak of college, he told her that she should go to the community college. "I know what my high-school guidance counselor's expectations were, he didn't

want me to go to college.” She needed to go to a community college for financial reasons, but she sought out the advice of another counselor to help her plan beyond the community college for the final two years of her undergraduate degree.

Mindy had to go to the community college. She never even applied to another school, and that is not uncommon for students today. She discussed the fact that she had a younger brother, and that her parents had to finance college for both of them. “I guess maybe it would have been easier if I had been the youngest one, and my brother had already gone through school.” Her parents still had her brother to put through school, and it was not possible for her to go directly to the school she wanted to attend, so she ended up attending the community college.

At the time of the interviews, Mindy had graduated from the community college and was preparing to go to the college of her choice. Even though she had not gotten to go where she wanted to initially, she had helped save her parents a great deal of money, and she was finally seeing a dream of hers come true. She was going to be able to leave this state to live where she had chosen, and she would be attending the school of her choice as well.

I asked Mindy if there had ever been a time as a young woman when she had allowed others to make decisions for her. She said that if she were in a restaurant, and she did not know what dessert to order she would ask about which one was the best. However, life-altering decisions such as where she wanted to go to school were up to her alone. She did not want anyone else making those decisions for her. She stated that even if her parents had decided that they had not wanted her to go to the university in New

England, she would have gone anyway. “I probably would have taken out a loan by myself and gone with that. It was the way that I was raised.”

College — College Education in Language Arts

Mindy’s learning disability is in the area of written language, and learning disabilities do not go away as an individual gets older. Students with disabilities have to learn to deal with the challenges their particular disability presents. That means they have to develop a high degree of self-awareness so they can develop strategies that work for them. Mindy continued to have problems with spelling, and she was also concerned that she had not been taught grammar or phonics in her more formative educational years. “So now that I am in college, I’m learning stuff that my (younger) brother is learning now, and I think that anything that dealt with writing at that time was so messed up.” One of the things she remembered being taught was that you added a comma whenever you needed to take a breath. Not only did this method produce run-on sentences, but also it was exceptionally difficult for her because she spoke rapidly and did not breathe a lot. When she took college English 101, she had to learn all the rules of grammar and punctuation for the first time.

Mindy described the other problems she faced in learning how to express herself in writing. “I think another thing that didn’t help was we never learned words. The way we speak is different than the way we write, and we were never taught that.” She said that she had never learned the difference between ‘til and until, then and than, were and wear, their and there. She did not learn that until she got to college. She knew that the teachers throughout middle school and high school tried to teach them that, but they didn’t have time.

Mindy was grateful that she had an opportunity to learn grammar and punctuation in college, but she saw some of her problem as a direct result of her learning disability, and some of her problem as a direct result of the way she had been taught.

But a lot of stuff was lost out during that time. So I mean, that's another thing with a disability. It's like, "I got it," but then sometimes I get mad and I'm like, "Oh why don't I know this," I'm like, "It's my disability, I think. Oh yeah, I wasn't taught grammar." To a degree, it is my disability, but then to a degree everyone that I went to school with wasn't taught grammar.

Mindy expressed concern that her writing could have caused problems for her. She stated that even if she had wonderful ideas, she would not be taken seriously if her grammar and punctuation were not correct. "So, grammar is a good thing to have that we didn't get."

Even though Mindy expressed her self clearly and articulately, she expressed concerns about the way she talked. She stated that it was important to her that she was able to speak clearly because she disliked people who mumbled. However, she thought that she did not speak perfectly, and that she could have benefited from speech classes. She observed that she had a bit of a southern accent, and that accent also affected the way she wrote. She gave the example of the fact that she did not put the "g" at the end of "ing." She said that she pronounced climbing as "climbin'" and when she wrote, she wrote the way she spoke.

Taking tests is a part of every student's academic experience. Mindy said that the elementary teachers had tried to teach her strategies, but she had to find strategies that worked for her. Nevertheless, she said that she had learned test-taking skills at the

college through a course offered there. She talked about the strategies she had learned, but she stated that she did not always follow them in quite the way they had been taught. She said that she had been taught to complete the multiple-choice section of the test first and then tackle the essay. Nevertheless, she did the essay first. She would begin work on the essay and then she might need some time to think, so she would do a few multiple choice questions until her thoughts came together. Then she would go back to the essay.

Unfortunately, Mindy felt that she could not deal effectively with computerized tests. She expressed concern that many of the computerized tests did not allow the test taker to go back and change an answer once they had made a selection. She felt that sometimes she needed more time on one idea than she might have needed on another. Even though she was allowed extended time, sometimes a question near the end of a test might trigger the answer to a question near the front of the test, but the computerized tests were not flexible enough to allow the test taker to go back.

How To Psyche Out a Professor

Mindy had learned how to compensate for some of her academic challenges by recognizing that a professor often deliberately or accidentally gave hints as to what he or she wanted as a response to questions or assignments. This is a skill that all students can and often do develop. At the time of the interview sessions, Mindy was taking a computer-based class in psychology from the community college. Even though she had just graduated, she needed a psychology class and decided to take it at the community college and get it over with. She did not like the course because there was no direct interaction with the instructor. "I've never taken an Internet class, and you don't get much feedback from the professor. You get some, but not as much as if you are in class."

She found this to be a big disadvantage when preparing for tests because she had to figure out what, or guess what, was going to be on the test.

Mindy also talked about the fact that it was a good thing to be able to understand a professor's philosophy so you knew how to respond to his or her questions. "It's good also to hear them talk about the subject and not just show pictures because when they talk about a subject, they inadvertently tell you which side of the line they are on so you know how to write your papers." She thought that it was a great deal more difficult to do that in math and science than in English or social science classes.

Applying to Community College and Disclosing Disability

It was important for Mindy to be able to exercise her skills in self-determination before she even applied to college. She was able to decide what she wanted to tell about herself and when she wanted to tell it. When Mindy applied to the community college, she had to disclose her disability to secure the accommodations she needed to successfully take the placement tests. Her main accommodation was extended time on tests, and she was allowed the extended time on the test that determined her placement in the college. She was not concerned about the attitude of the college toward her as a student with a learning disability, and she felt comfortable requesting the accommodation. She knew that she was going to that school no matter what, so she might as well have told them.

Once she started taking classes at Carter, she was eligible for accommodations in extended time for tests and quizzes. However, she said that she had only used it on one occasion. She said that she just had not needed to use it more than that. It appeared that Mindy had learned ways to accommodate for whatever problems she had. She had

learned that if she had problems with writing, she used spell check or grammar check. She used the things available to most people, and that approach had worked for her.

Mindy mentioned the fact that in the community college, no one had known if she needed or received accommodations to be successful. There was an element of anonymity that protected the identity of students so no one else knew. She believed that because no one knew if a student had a disability, everyone was treated as being normal. Mindy stated that when a student was in college, the other students did not care about anything except whether that student would help their group or not.

I think when you hit college, the biggest thing is just to get through college, succeed, and get good grades. They don't care if you are the funniest kid in the class, (if) you don't get good grades; we don't want you in our group. I think the disability no longer becomes a big deal.

In addition, students with disabilities were not forced to go get additional help if they did not choose to request it. "The help was there, but it was not in the class, in your face. It's very much if you needed to learn more about it, there were people here that could help you."

Mindy expressed the opinion that once you got to college, you should have been able to do the work like everyone else. It was acceptable to use accommodations, but students should have been able to perform up to the standards of the college. "I mean, you have this disability, but you're still expected to perform like another student, because if you can't perform to the expectations of a college, then why should you be going there?"

Mindy's Plans for Her Next Step in College

Mindy had a goal for her career and a plan as to how she intended to achieve that goal. Mindy planned to be a social studies teacher. She really wanted to teach history, but she understood that she would probably be teaching other subjects as well. To be able to teach history, she planned to go to a college in New England and complete a double major in history and secondary education. She then planned to continue and get her master's degree. She wanted to go straight through because she believed it would be harder to go back to school after an absence than it would to just go directly into graduate school.

When Mindy transferred to the college in New England, she would not have to take any more English or math. She would have to take another science class; however, she hoped to return to the community college next summer to get her science credits. She needed only two more credits in social studies to fulfill the requirements for her major; however, she needed many more hours in education to qualify to teach. She felt it was more important to take more history courses than it was to take education classes, but she had no choice in this. "I know that there are things that I need to learn, but I think it's more important for a teacher to know what they're teaching than knowing how to teach, because I might know how to teach but I might not know how to teach that subject."

During the application process to the college in New England, she did not disclose her disability; however, after being accepted, she explored the types of accommodations and supports offered to students with disabilities. She was impressed with what she learned. She was also impressed with the differentiation of accommodations she found there. "I also liked how they give more individual accommodations. I mean it's not like

everyone who's got a physical disability is grouped together. You are actually specific. You know, you are different."

A Very Satisfying Goal

Goal setting and goal-attainment are important aspects of self-determination. In addition, locus of control is another significant benchmark in deciding whether an individual shows evidence of being self-determining. As mentioned earlier, Mindy expressed the desire to be a teacher. She elaborated on her decision and talked about her approach to teaching.

Mindy felt that teaching would be a very satisfying goal. When she considered the teachers that she had, including her grandfather as a role model, teaching appealed to her. "And I'd say that's why I probably want to become a teacher because I saw what he had done." Mindy talked about a man who approached her at Thulin's, where she worked. Mindy's grandfather had taught this man. "If it wasn't for your grandfather, I would have dropped out. He refused to let me." That made such an impression on her that she had decided that it was "the best job ever." In addition, Mindy seemed to have been impressed by the teachers she had in her life. "I can name almost every teacher I've ever had from elementary school through high school. I'm not saying all of them were good, but the ones that were good were the ones that I remembered the most."

Mindy displayed a high amount of self-determination in considering the conditions under which she would like to teach. When asked to describe the type of educational career she would like, she expressed a desire to teach in a small town.

Realistically, I'd like to teach in a high school in a small town or inner city. I don't want suburbs; I want either rural or city. Those are the kids that need it. I

mean, they are the schools that get less funding, because out in Nebraska they don't have heat in their school because they can't afford it. Or kids in the inner city, where they have books that are 20 years old, and the kids are only 15. Those are the kids that need it. Those are the schools that are overlooked. But I'd rather do rural because I can't stand city life.

She displayed a great deal of self-awareness and decision-making skills as she continued her reply. Mindy went on to say that she did not like driving on the beltway, and she also did not want to continue living in the state because she did not like the weather. "I like it cool. I like cold weather."

Furthermore, the subject she would like to teach is world history. She expressed the opinion that many people she knew were more interested in the history of the United States than in world history. Nonetheless, she felt that an understanding of world history helped to develop a better understanding of the history of the United States. She also felt that knowing the history of the world helped understand world events in the present.

Additionally, Mindy was looking forward to teaching as long as it could be in another state, preferably one in the New England area. If she had to come back and teach here, she felt that she would not be happy about that. She believed that teaching had become too politicized in this area. "Well, I think the problem with this area is teaching is no longer about the kids." In her opinion, politicians saw education as a political issue instead of as a way to educate children.

Changing the System One Student at a Time

It is evident from the narrative that Mindy had developed into a self-determining young person. Mindy had some very strong opinions about special education as it is

practiced in this country. In her opinion, there was much that we as a country could do to make things better. I wanted to learn Mindy's ideas regarding how to improve educational settings to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities and produce self-determining young people, based on her experiences as a student with learning disabilities.

She expressed disappointment at the way some teachers dealt with students with disabilities. She did not feel that the older teachers, especially, really knew how to deal with students with disabilities. She believed some of the younger teachers did better because of more recent training about the needs of students with disabilities and that older teachers would benefit from more training as well. "I think that it doesn't have to be long training. It could be a day, but you have to realize you have to treat them as people. That's what they are." However, even with training, Mindy expressed the opinion that not much would really change until new teachers have replaced the older ones.

Even though Mindy felt that teachers did not always treat students with disabilities well, she felt that if she had been in another country, she would have been treated even worse as a person with a disability. Her strong beliefs about the rights of women both here and in other countries colored her assessment of her treatment as a woman with a learning disability. Earlier, she stated that she felt that in some countries being a woman would have presented a greater problem than having a disability. However, if only the disability were considered, then she felt the treatment as a person with a disability in another country would have been a greater problem than it is here.

If I were not in this country I don't know if I would have been treated the same, because as soon as you put disability behind something, people automatically think that that person can never be as good as the average person.

Mindy felt that people did not always treat other people well regardless of the location. "If everyone were to treat a stranger on the street as they treat their pet, the world would be a lot better."

Mindy expressed the belief that school systems did not always treat students with learning disabilities as a high priority. She did not feel that the education of students with disabilities was the main agenda. She felt that the excuse they used was that they were trying to keep the school system open for all students, so this small minority was less important, but she believed that the programs for students with disabilities should have received better resources. She also said that too much money went to sports and other activities that did not benefit the academic improvement of all students in general and students with disabilities specifically. "You could have another teacher in a classroom or you could get new books for the math department that you need. I think that should take priority over the sports team."

I asked Mindy how she would involve students who had learning disabilities in her classroom. Her reply was that she would not single them out. If they needed additional help or special accommodations, Mindy would discreetly offer them the help they needed. She said she would not treat them like they had the plague, and she would not treat them like they needed their hand held. Instead, she would treat them like she would treat any other student.

I asked Mindy to describe how she would teach a student with learning disabilities in her class. I was interested to see if she felt that having a skills specialist or an inclusion teacher in the class would help her. Her answer was that it depended on the severity of the disability. If the disability were severe, she would want the help, but if the disability were not severe, she would try to help the student become more independent.

Because, it is going to make that child stick out as having a problem, and if it was a severe one, fine, I'd welcome the help, but if someone does not have a severe learning disability I'd try to get them, especially in high school, to not rely so heavily on the help because they'll be graduating soon.

Mindy felt that if she were teaching ninth grade, she would slowly try to wean them off of help. She said that she would still offer help, but she wanted them to get to the place where they were not constantly relying on someone to help them. Mindy stated that she believed that often students with learning disabilities got more help in high school than they should, and once they got to college, they faltered without the accustomed supports.

Mindy believed that teachers faced a dilemma with students who had learning disabilities. They had to strike a balance between helping too much and not enough. She thought that she would not have a problem telling a student that they did not need as much help, nor would she have a problem telling a student that they needed to ask for more help.

Mindy expressed the belief that if she were a teacher she could change the system by changing one student at a time. Mindy stated that she believed that teachers could do more if they were free from the interference of the state. "It's the classrooms that change

people. It's the individual teachers and the way they run the classes that change people. That is the level where it is going to get done."

Mindy thought that much of the impetus for change in the education of students with disabilities came from educators, but that it would never be successful until parents also became involved. She felt that there were some improvements in the way students were treated —the push for medication did not seem to be as prevalent and differentiation in instruction seemed to be increasing — but it was not perfect yet. "I think the weird thing about the disability movement is, unless you're affected by it, you don't really care." However, Mindy felt that although learning disabilities are not yet socially accepted, there is still hope that in the future they will be.

I asked Mindy how she would help students become self-determining. Her reply was, "I think the way you make people self-determining is you don't baby them too much. You need someone there for you, but you also have to realize that you're responsible for everything that you do."

She went on to explain that she would praise someone for good work, but she would also tell a student when he/she did something wrong. In her opinion, we were not perfect beings, and we needed to learn to take responsibility when we did imperfect things. She also felt that sometimes we learned more from our mistakes than from our successes. She related that to the first test or paper she would complete for a professor. She said that the first paper or test was usually the hardest because she did not know what to expect, but after that it was usually easier, because she had learned from the first mistakes.

Effect of Having a Disability

I asked Mindy if her learning disability affected any other areas of her life. Her reply was that it did not really seem to make a major difference in her life. “I guess I kind of know my limitations, so I know how I can get through things. It’s not a major deal. I mean, there are worse things.”

Mindy saw her disability as something from which she would never be free. She described it in realistic terms. “I think the worst part is, like I said, ‘this is a part of me and I’m never going to get rid of it. I’m always going to have it.’ It’s not something that you can work out, lose weight or practice really hard, and it will get better.” Mindy believed that because it was not possible to make her learning disability go away, the best alternative was to learn acceptance. “Everyone has it, everyone has an Achilles heel. Emotionally, they do. You can learn to deal with it and grow with it, but you are always going to have it”

People could pass for normal with learning disabilities, and Mindy believed that many people did. Mindy felt that a lot of students with learning disabilities did not want to confront their disability because they feared that they would be labeled as a student with mental retardation. Mindy worried that they did not ask for help out of fear that they would be labeled.

I think I pass. I think I do a lot of passing just because I don’t think it’s anyone’s business. If they ask me, I’m not going to lie, but I’m pretty sure there are a lot of people up here that will lie about it.

Fortunately, Mindy felt that having a learning disability was not a huge issue for her life. She did not feel that having a disability reduced her potential at all. She did say

that when she was in high school and had lost both of her grandfathers, she did blame her disability for some of her problems, but she never felt that she had lost anything. “No, because it can’t be your life. I mean, your life isn’t like — I don’t know how to put it. It’s like — what you are and what you aren’t is who you are, but it’s not your life.”

We talked about what she would do if she had a child with a disability. “I would just explain to them that they are not a freak, first off. That it’s normal, and I would use myself as an example.” She went on to talk about the importance of positive role models in her life and how she would use that technique with her own children.

You have to find a role model for your child, and mine was my grandfather and very much other people in my family, like my mother and my father. But you have to find someone who’s similar to them and...you know it’s good.

We ended her story where we began, with the importance of her family and of the role models that taught her about self-determination. She knew nothing about Bronfenbrenner and his theories regarding the importance of the ecological surroundings of the individual, beginning with the first microsystem in the family. She only knew what had worked for her.

When she was a child, she had blamed herself for being in the lowest learning groups. As an adult, she had learned the difference between blaming herself and taking responsibility for her own actions. Some things she had no control over, such as being identified as having a learning disability. “But for the most part, my decisions and my actions are mine, and I have to be responsible for them.” Mindy had apparently accepted herself as she was, and she had effectively demonstrated elements of a young woman with self-determination.

Reflections on Mindy

Bronfenbrenner spoke about the ecological surroundings of the individual, and although he began with the family, he widened the surroundings to include all settings in which an individual must go. He also spoke about the importance of the communication between settings. Mindy's family certainly had a profound influence on her. She learned to take responsibility for herself and to value herself as a young woman. In addition, her parents had some communication with the school regarding the difficulties she had, especially in elementary school, and later they participated in the IEP process. Unfortunately, Mindy seemed to have had little involvement in that process throughout her time in school.

Mindy's experience with special education in elementary school seemed almost detrimental to her, and she harbored a great deal of anger as a result. She liked her teachers, but she did not like being pulled out of class, nor did she like the label she carried. She felt that labels of any kind were detrimental to the individual. She may have gained many skills, but the experience was not positive. However, she seemed to have developed some inward peace about the process because she was satisfied with her present life in college. One of her major complaints about special services in general was that they were too overwhelming. There was simply too much of it, and she characterized it as akin to handholding. In her own description of what she would do as a teacher, she said she would not give too much help.

Furthermore, Mindy liked middle school because she had made the decision for herself to stop her medication, and she was no longer pulled out of classes. The anonymity of being just another student gratified her. Her experiences in high school

were much the same, and by that time she was doing better in school. On the other hand, one of her major complaints about high school was that the programs did not challenge students to live up to high expectations. She felt that students should have been required to take more challenging classes, and she saw that as a remedy to many ills of the education system. Her experiences in college were even better because she did not feel different anymore, and the work was more challenging.

There is no doubt that Mindy had learned self-determination, but it would seem that, in her case, much of that came from her family. Bronfenbrenner was certainly right about the importance of the family on the development of the individual. Additionally, the influence of the communications between settings seemed to offer some support to Mindy as well. In the following section I explore the challenges that Quinton, the next participant, had to face.

An Introduction to Quinton's Story

The next life story is that of Quinton, an African-American male. He and I decided to meet in the college library because he had access to a small private room there that held a special computer he used as a study accommodation. We met there each time, and Quinton told his story. The other two participants in this research study talked easily and at length about themselves. Quinton talked also, but although he lacked the quantity of information the other two participants contributed, he more than made up for it in the quality of his responses.

He talked about the influence his family had on his ability to be self-determining, and he also talked about his involvement with Project Open Door, which helped him learn self-advocacy skills in college. Other important factors in his development of self-

determination were the Christian Fellowship he joined shortly after arriving at the college. In addition, he was facing some financial challenges, but he seemed to be handling everything fairly well.

The college counselor described Quinton to me as a student with learning disabilities in the area of reading who used assistive technology as a major accommodation to help him succeed academically. Although I requested an old IEP, I never did see any actual documentation. Nevertheless, his counselor reassured me that Quinton did meet the qualifications, and as I talked with Quinton, the information he supplied about himself seemed to verify what I had been told.

Quinton had more to add about the possibility of another disability. At our last session, Quinton informed me that he had taken a test in the fall and had been identified as having bi-polar disorder as well as a learning disability. He reported that he had gone to a doctor in the fall for a routine physical and had been given a test to complete. The doctor diagnosed him as having bi-polar disorder as a result of the test. Quinton stated that he did not agree with the diagnosis and that he was going to be retested. "I don't see myself being upset a lot, so I don't see how I tested to be bi-polar."

Quinton described the setting and the events that led up to taking the test. "It was at the same place (where he had his physical). There was some doctor going around giving all the kids the same test. That's the reason why I just took it. I just don't get it. Doctor wants a test, okay. That's the way I was taught, to respond to doctors. Okay, I'd do it." Quinton took no medication nor had he ever been treated for bi-polar disorder, but he said he was given a test in which he had to read and answer questions to determine if he had bi-polar disorder. Considering Quinton's reading ability, the results may not have

been valid if he had to read the questions by himself. Quinton stated that he intended to take the test again the next year.

Nonetheless, I knew that Quinton had been identified as a student with learning disabilities before we began our interviews, and I asked him to give a brief account of himself. He described himself as a strong person who tried to get what he wanted. He also said that he liked to have fun and that even though he was 19, he was still a teenager at heart. In addition, he also stated that he had many goals for himself, and he sometimes had to keep those goals in check. “I am a very religious person, too. Got to keep that in check sometimes, too. I’m a very, very religious person.”

He had several hobbies. He liked to stay physically active, but he did not do as much as he used to. He liked roller blading, biking, and lifting weights. In addition, he liked to work on cars. His godfather had two race cars, and he helped him with those.

He had recently become interested in music, and his friends had taught him how to play guitar and drums. He mentioned that he felt it was a shame that schools were cutting music programs because he felt that students could learn a lot from them. He said that he had not taken music in high school because it was not offered, and he was only now beginning to learn how to play an instrument because his friends were willing to teach him.

In those statements, Quinton demonstrated several examples of his self-determination. He demonstrated self-awareness and also that he had set goals for himself. Furthermore, he demonstrated a wide range of interests, and his determination to teach himself music was admirable. The statement about music not being taught where he went to school might have been a product of his learning disability. He had

attended a special school for students with disabilities, and it had not had the resources to teach some subjects. In this case, his learning disability might have indirectly caused him to lose an opportunity to learn more about music, but his own determination was helping him make up for that loss. It was time to discuss his family.

Quinton's Family

Returning to Bronfenbrenner, we first looked at the ecological surroundings of Quinton's family to see to what extent they had helped to influence him. Quinton's mother had earned a college degree in business management, and at the time of the interviews, she was a property manager for an apartment complex. His aunt, who lived with them, had an advanced degree from one of the Ivy League schools, and she was working part time, but he did not specify exactly what she was doing. In addition, she had earned a doctorate in divinity but had recently resigned from the church where she had been a pastor. Quinton's aunt had lived with them for many years, and she had worked with him extensively, teaching him to read, helping him to study, and proofreading his papers.

When Quinton was 3 or 4 years old, Quinton's mother had left Quinton's father because his father had not provided the support they needed. She had moved here from another state to establish her new life. Quinton's father had 12 children, but Quinton was his mother's only child. It was many years before Quinton had any contact with his father's family.

Quinton described himself as the youngest of his father's children. His father's family was spread out across many states, and his siblings were a lot older than he was. At the time of the interview, Quinton was 19, and the sibling closest in age to him was

28. His oldest stepbrother was 43 or 44. He had little contact with his siblings when he was younger, and Quinton was 11 or 12 years old before he met any of his father's family again.

Quinton recalled that when he was a young child, his mother had to work quite a lot. His mother worked so much because she did not want them to live in what Quinton described as a ghetto area. They moved to an area they considered a better location, and they remained there until the time of the interview.

Despite the busy schedules of the adults in his life, Quinton remembers his mother and his aunt reading to him quite a bit when he was a child. He attended day care before entering public school. He also remembered his day care teachers reading to the class quite a bit when he was much younger.

Quinton believed that he had received a great deal from his mother and aunt in helping him to learn to work for what he wanted. "They had taught me some lessons. Don't sell yourself short. Go for it. They taught me, 'don't give up' and 'if you want something bad enough you'll get it.'" He related a story about a pair of shoes he had wanted. He felt that he had needed a pair of expensive shoes, but his mother and aunt refused to buy them for him because they believed he would grow out of them too fast. They told him that if he wanted them badly enough he would have to earn the money to get them. He mowed lawns all summer to earn the money until he finally had enough to get the shoes. "Finally, I had enough money, but instead of doing that, I just kept saving my money. I felt like it wasn't worth it." He had learned his lesson. "They said if you want something hard enough, you will work for it."

Quinton's mother taught him to believe in himself from the time he was just a child. She helped him to become the self-advocate that he is now. "Probably always telling me that if you want something don't give up and you go for it." His mother and aunt helped him with his schoolwork as well. "They helped me do my homework when I wanted to do it." In addition, they continued to help him even in college.

At the time of the interviews, both Quinton's mother and aunt were working so much that they were not able to help him very much. His aunt did sometimes proofread his work when she had the time. "Yes, my mom works extra because she wants to get out of debt. My aunt just works weird hours. You know, one day she's home a lot, and next day, she's not home or she's late."

Quinton's History in School

Quinton was unsuccessful in elementary school, and he expressed a profound bitterness toward his experiences in the public school system. He was passed on from grade to grade even though he never mastered the basic skills he needed to be even minimally successful on the next level. He related failing social studies and never being held back, even though he felt that being held back was what he needed most.

He reported that he rarely completed homework, and he needed something to compel him to change. That something might have been being held back until he had developed the skills he needed to move on. He felt that passing him on was a great disservice to him and to all students who do not succeed. "If a child needs to be held back a grade because he is getting an F here and there, do it. It would be a lesson they learn. Do it."

He stated that perhaps, if he had focused more when he was younger, he might be doing better today. In addition, he believed that he was not offered work that challenged him. “They really weren’t challenging me with the school work. I really think there were two reasons why. One, I wasn’t doing it, and, two, they weren’t challenging me to do it.” He expressed the opinion that low expectations had been set for him, and he felt that the lower standards had a detrimental effect on his achievement. “I also think that maybe if they set the standards a little bit higher, like college preparatory school set their standards for their students to stay higher, you know, like above average.” Quinton expressed the belief that if the public school system had set higher standards for him then he would not be struggling to read as he was at the time of the interviews. However, he had found a way that was working for him to compensate for his deficit areas.

Quinton had more to say about the school he first attended. He attended public school from pre-K to fifth grade. Quinton was in general education classes until he was in the fourth grade. Until he reached the fourth grade, his difficulty with reading was not viewed as a serious problem, and he remained in regular classes. However, once he reached the fourth grade, they moved him into a remedial class for students who were having problems learning in their regular classes. “But it wasn’t like I was there because of a learning disability. All those other kids had mostly behavior problems. They didn’t really have a learning disability there either.”

After that, his mother moved him into a private school. Quinton characterized the time in public school as being one of upheaval in the public educational system.

And this was Manchester City Public School, when John Kinsey was in office.

So I think there were a lot of budget cuts while he was in office. I think there was a lot of foul stuff going on in public city schools.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that “the child’s development in both family and school is facilitated by the existence of open channels of communication in both directions” (p. 217), but as Quinton related in this next section, that did not happen for him. He felt that the teachers were unresponsive to parents. “The teachers were not teachers. They needed to be more in line with the parents about what’s happening.” He stated that they were passing academically unsuccessful students on to the next grade without consulting the parents. “You seriously need to have a talk with the parents and tell them what’s going on. My mom was like, ‘what’s going on and why are you not holding him back?’”

Quinton’s mother inserted herself into the situation even if she was not initially included in the decisions made for her child. Quinton’s teachers told his mother that there was no reason to hold him back, and she strongly disagreed with their opinion. Quinton continued to have difficulty succeeding academically, and he was tested in middle school to determine if special education services might be appropriate. The results of these tests did not demonstrate a need for special education, and Quinton’s mother had him tested again through a private agency. This testing did reveal that he had a disability in the area of language, specifically in reading, and he was given an IEP at that time. Her belief prompted her to explore other options for Quinton, and she had him removed from the public schools. She had to fight to have it done, but eventually she

forced the city public school system to pay for a more appropriate educational placement for Quinton where he remained until he graduated from high school.

His mother fought a hard battle because she felt he would not be successful in the public school. “I probably would have either flunked out in high school or probably would have dropped out of high school.” He said that his mother realized this because he was having difficulty keeping up with the regular education standards because he was reading on the second or third grade level. Quinton felt his new placement was better for him. “I think a part of me still misses that program.”

What Quinton’s mother had discovered in the process of her efforts to find appropriate education for Quinton was that he was dyslexic. The private school discovered through assessments that Quinton was not a good reader, but that he had outstanding comprehension skills. His mother’s search for a good school for him led him to Tucker Johnson. His aunt told him to take a look at how hard his mother was fighting to get him into the school because Tucker Johnson was not an easy school to get into. Quinton said that Tucker Johnson was a very expensive school, but the city and the community had paid for his education. It took a lot of work for his mom to get him into that school.

After Quinton entered the private school, he began to meet with some success. “From the private institution, I was taught how to learn with the disability that I have.” He was also taught how to build and repair computers and to work with computers as a support for his schoolwork. “I read the textbooks with a computer and mostly just do my work with a computer.”

He described the progress he experienced in high school in the following way. He was “jumping” back and forth between grade levels. During the school year he would be functioning on the fourth and fifth grade levels, but after returning from summer vacation, he would be on the third grade level.

The process that had brought Quinton to a private day school also secured an IEP for him. Annual IEP meetings were held while Quinton was in school, and I asked him to describe his involvement with those meetings. He said that he did attend the meetings, but he was not able to stay for very long. When he was in middle school, he said that he would show up at the meetings and occasionally the city representative would ask him to take a couple of tests, but that was about it. It was not until high school that he actually was able to contribute meaningfully to his IEP meetings.

High School

He remained in the same private school during high school. However, Quinton stated that he had a problem with his high school counselors. He felt that they had chosen a path for him to take without having shown him any other options. Although they never told him that he was not college material, they did try to steer him into more hands-on occupations, and Quinton was not interested in their recommendations. He felt that they should have tried to broaden his possibilities, not limit them.

Quinton was given the opportunity to learn about himself and his disability in high school. “They taught me that it could be worse, and you can get through it. They mostly taught me how to get over my disability.” They introduced him to the use of the computer as an aid for learning, and he still uses those skills in college.

Quinton used the computer to help him in both his reading and his writing. He felt that these accommodations helped him a great deal. He did not have an actual note taker in class because most of the instructors gave out PowerPoint copies of the notes, so everyone had a copy. He did use a tape recorder sometimes, and occasionally he asked other students in his classes to allow him to copy their notes.

Quinton learned some carpentry and plumbing in high school. He wanted to know something about these skills in case he had to do something around the house. He felt he could do what he described as the “small stuff” such as fixing the sink or the toilet. “It’s best to get your hands into everything to see how everything is. I mean plumbers, carpenters, and electricians get paid a lot of money. It’s best to get your hands into everything. I do everything.”

SDSD and SDDS Support and Tech School

During Quinton’s last year in high school, he demonstrated a great deal of resourcefulness and self-determination. In his senior year of high school, he was introduced to the State Department for Services for the Disabled (SDSD), but he was unable to obtain what he needed from them at that time. “My senior year, before graduating — I was trying to get into one of the state schools for college for continuing education.” Unfortunately, they were unable to offer him the type of program that he was seeking, so he decided to pursue other programs instead. After he had gone through the process of applying to the SDSD, he expressed a negative reaction to the effectiveness of their help. “Basically, I haven’t found them that helpful at all. Fortunately, the SDSD rejected me for what I wanted, so I decided not to go to SDSD.” He felt that the decision to go to the community college was a positive one for him.

Quinton did receive a small amount of financial aid from SDSD to help him pay for college. They monitored his progress, and if he did well, they gave him some money. Although Quinton felt it was not very much, he was happy to receive whatever support he could get. The State Department of Disability Support (SDDS) had also been able to help him financially by giving him enough money to cover the cost of his books. I asked him how he had found that help, and he stated that they had found him.

I think that person found me. They're sort of like a program that's an alternative to SDSD, but because SDSD couldn't help me; they decided they could do stuff and help me. They came out to my house to help me.

One of the options Quinton explored, in addition to the community college, was a technical school. "A Voorhees Technical (representative) came to our house and tried to sign me up if I were interested. Of course, they failed to mention that they wanted a hundred dollars seating policy right there on the spot when they were at our house." Quinton did not have the hundred dollars to give them at that moment, so he did not sign up. He felt that he could get the same training at the community college, and it would not have cost him as much, either.

There was another reason Quinton decided not to go to the technical school: They did not offer the tutors or educational supports that the community college had.

So, I sort of saw that as a choice but as a difficult choice. I couldn't really see myself actually succeeding past them so, really they wanted me to go get caught up with a bunch of bills stacking up here, you know, so I was like, "No." I was aware of my options.

Quinton felt that the technical school would be a good place if the student could sit and read a whole textbook and could sit and study for long periods of time. “You know, other than that, if you have problems with studying or if you have a learning disability, the technical school is not the place for you to be. That is the truth; that’s my opinion.” Quinton said that he knew what he wanted, and he could identify the resources he needed to secure his dream. He had the courage to say no to those in authority and to pursue his dreams. The only thing left to Quinton was the community college.

Project Open Door

Project Open Door is a support program located at one of the community colleges in this state. This program helps students with disabilities adjust to the rigors and demands of college life. Quinton’s mother suggested that he consider the program, and he decided to explore his options. Here again was an example of Bronfenbrenner’s communication between settings. His mother’s suggestion created a favorable impression for Quinton, and he was open to hear what they had to say. Willingness to listen helped him hear what he needed to pursue his goals.

The program instructed him in self-advocacy by teaching him the best way to approach professors.

If you go up to a teacher and say, “You know I have a disability and this is what I need to get through your class,” and if the teacher says, “Okay, I can help you,” or if the teacher says, “Oh, wow, I met a retard.” Then you know what to do.

Quinton has not had that happen to him, but he was realistic about his world. “That hasn’t happened to me, yet, but there are some teachers that will say and will respond to you like that.”

Quinton felt that he had been given some valuable training through Project Open Door by learning how to advocate for himself and by learning what resources are available for his use.

Mostly learn how to advocate for yourself and where resources are and what type of resources you can receive. You know that being on disabilities is okay. I can get teachers' notes, I can have somebody take notes for me, I can have tests read to me, I can have extra time. I think knowing about it and knowing about what services are available for you is good training when you go to college.

He had to learn what it was like to sit in a college classroom and how to communicate with professors. "Basically that takes a lot of guts, to go and talk to a professor about this, to say I need this and this and this." He also had to become an expert in time management skills as well. "You go into a high school, you hear bells going off, letting you know when to go to class next. You come to college, the only time you're going to hear a bell is a fire drill." He had to learn how to keep a schedule so he would be where he was supposed to be when he was supposed to be there, "and make sure you plug in lunch somewhere in your schedule."

Another challenge he faced was learning how to study for tests. "Oh man, also you need to make sure you have a discipline to sit down and study, because when I first got here I did not have discipline. I didn't know what studying was about." He had to learn to discipline himself to go over the material and read ahead. He also had to learn how to prepare for and take tests. He stated that the first time students took a college test, they were generally nervous, even though they may not have realized it at the time. He

also described how he had learned to approach tests. “Basically how I take a college test, you got to be cool, you got to be calm, and you just got to put forth with all effort.”

Project Open Door also taught him other important skills. He learned how to get around his disability regarding his class work by soliciting help from student advisors and counselors. They helped him with both schoolwork and any problems that might have occurred outside the school as well. They sat down and talked with him and told him what problems he needed to work on. He found this very helpful.

Project Open Door was composed of staff, teachers, and student mentors. The staff taught the participants how to talk to teachers and helped them with the other skills they needed to develop to succeed. The teachers actually instructed students in math and writing skills, and the mentors served as friends and advisors as students adjusted and grew in this new environment.

Quinton explained some of the details of Project Open Door. The only criteria for acceptance were to have some type of physical, mental, or learning disability. Applicants had to take an individual assessment to measure reading, math, and writing levels, and they also had to participate in an interview with the director. After they had gone through that process, the last step was to pay the fees, and they were in. Sometimes Project Open Door had too many applicants, and in that case a few students may have ended up on a waiting list. The project served ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students as well as students who had graduated from high school. Students in the ninth and tenth grades were usually the first to go on the waiting list, but they were promised a spot in the program for the following year. All students had to reapply each year to remain in the program.

Everyone in Project Open Door was taught the same thing except for returnees, who went to a different program in the afternoon. The returnees were given an opportunity to take some courses that would help them in college. They might also do job shadowing.

A mix of students participated in Project Open Door. Quinton said that some of them were forced by parents to come, and others wanted to come to find out what college was all about. He said that the ones who were forced did not really want to be there and predicted that they might have run into trouble later at college. Even so, he said, on the whole it was not so bad.

Nevertheless, he was concerned about some of the students. He described some of them as having more serious disabilities and others as not very responsive to authority figures. He said that some of the students who could do well put their heads down on their desks and lost participation points. He said that in college you had to be an active participant. The students got grades for the morning courses, which could be transferred into the college, and they received certificates for the afternoon classes. He expressed the belief that it would take some of the students a while before they caught on to the culture of college.

Being a Mentor

At the time of the interviews, Quinton had just completed his first year in community college, and he had been accepted to work as a mentor in Project Open Door. It was now his turn to teach the incoming students what he had learned the year before. He had some specific things that he wanted to teach.

As a mentor, I'm teaching that there is help around the disability. Just because you have been labeled for something and society says, "you cannot do this, you cannot do that," you can prove them wrong. It's going to take some time; it's going to take lot of effort, but you can prove them wrong.

Quinton had learned that from the mentors who had taught him. Some of them had been going to the community college for 4 or 5 years. They taught him that it would take time to succeed, but that it is possible to accomplish his dreams. "I learned that from them saying that it's going to take time, but you can get around it and prove them wrong eventually."

To be a mentor, Quinton had to be a college student with a disability. He acted as a role model for the new students. He described other duties as well. "As a mentor, I took roll, I cared for their safety and their medical needs, and if there were any problems I was sort of like a second helper. I was sort of like a teacher assistant to the teachers."

Quinton said that the students in Project Open Door listened to him because he was just like them. He told them what it was like for him and what he learned that had helped him succeed at the college. He told them that no college professor was going to come and ask what they could do to help them pass. He told them that it was all up to them now. "You're not a baby. When you turn 18, or when you're a college student and you walk into their classroom, you're an adult, not a child, not a student, not somebody else's child — you're considered an adult." He made it clear to them that the professors were not going to talk to their parents like they did in high school. It was all up to them. "So, I tell them that it is good to tell them the truth and what I know from experience. This is what I know, you know, and it's up to them. They kind of follow it or not."

At the time of one of our interviews, Quinton had spent the day working with the students he was mentoring. Phillip, who was one of them, was still waiting for his ride home. Quinton had been with the students since 8:00 in the morning, and at the time we were talking, it was close to 5:00. We met in the library, and Phillip waited not far away, reading a book while we talked. Phillip, an incoming freshman at the community college in the fall, was confined to a wheelchair. The library was about to close, and Quinton had decided to wait with him outside until his mother would come to get him. I mentioned to Quinton that his job seemed quite extensive. His reply was, "I make it that way. That's a habit with me." He stated that he had been told that he did not have to wait there with him, but he had decided to do it anyway. "They say I don't have to do extra hours and extra things for the program, but I do it because I can, and I'm trying to save money. So I make money and save money."

While we were talking, Quinton went to check on the young man and returned to where we were meeting. He had gone over to make sure that Phillip had something to eat. Quinton was concerned about him because Phillip, who was thin and frail looking, did not seem to eat enough, in Quinton's opinion, and Quinton considered that what he did eat was primarily junk food. "I just checked to make sure he had a snack. He does not eat a lot. That's going to scare me when he comes in the fall. He eats pizza and French fries and junk food."

In his first year of college, Quinton appeared to have learned a lot about himself, and he was trying to pass on the information to others. Here was a good example of Quinton's' development of self-determination. Quinton felt that it was important to eat a healthy diet, and he was trying to pass on what he had learned to those he would be

mentoring. “You sit down to study — that’s not going to sit real well in the stomach. You are going to fall asleep or just not be able to study because you ate so much fast food.” Quinton said that, although he did eat fast food on occasion, he tried to maintain a healthy diet. “I like to eat healthy because healthy food stays with you a lot longer, more brainpower.” He explained that when he first started in college, he was eating in an unhealthy manner, but he ran into some problems.

I couldn’t study worth anything because I was always tired. And then I was looking at somebody’s plate of food and I’m eating. So I changed the way I ate for a little while, and I got a lot of energy because I was eating regular food.” He was eating such food as salads, meat, fish, and poultry. He tried to have a good breakfast, lunch, and dinner with no fast food.

Quinton also exercised as much as he could. “That exercise helped a lot. Helped relieve stress, helped build energy, and helped lose weight.” However, he added, “It’s pretty good — since I’ve been here I gained twenty pounds.” He laughed and said that a famous coffee franchise was a demon, because he had also discovered that coffee, caramel, and whipped cream was not good for him, but he felt that the important thing was that he has learned the value of good nutrition.

To continue as a Project Open Door employee, Quinton would have to reapply next year. He had been approached to take the job of head peer mentor, but he did not want to take the job because he would have had to organize the schedules of the students and the mentors. He did not want all the responsibility along with everything else he was doing.

Quinton believed that the training he had received through Project Open Door to be self-determining had helped him in his work, in school, and in his relationships with his friends. He believed that he had learned how to be more self-confident and how to behave in a positive, self-assured manner. “Anybody can just go about being confident, strutting their stuff, but eventually you’re going to get knocked down.” He went on to talk about how Project Open Door had helped him at work. “There will be some things that travel from school to work, you know. Just dealing with a disability, you do have accommodations at work, too. You have to have documentation there, too.”

I asked Quinton whether he thought he would be a self-determining person if he had never received any training from Project Open Door. He stated that he would be self-determining, but he would not be in college.

I would probably be looking for a different field or different career. Project Open Door has shown me where college doors could be opened for you. (As) far as a student with a disability, if it had not been for Project Open Door, I would have chosen a different career field really.

Quinton said that he might have gone to culinary school because he had been good with food when he was younger. He said that he was also good with cars when he was younger, so that might also have been a choice. Nevertheless, at the time of the interviews, he felt that he had made the best choice. “Yeah, I like college a lot. When I graduate I don’t see myself just stopping from there. I will just go on, and either take more classes around here or transfer to a four-year university.” Despite his belief that he had made the right choice, college had not been easy for him.

College Courses

Quinton took an English class, two computer classes, and a fitness class for the first semester, and he passed everything except the English class. For the second semester, he took the English class again and two more computer classes, and for the second time he failed the English class and passed the computer classes. The summer that we met, he planned to take a math class to help him study for the math entrance exam. He did not plan on taking English again in the fall on the advice of his counselor, but had decided to wait until they worked out a strategy for him to succeed in English. His counselor advised him to wait until they could fully understand the scope of his disability before he took any more English. Therefore, he planned to take some math and computer courses for the time being.

Quinton stated that it had been awhile since he had taken any math, and he was concerned about the outcome of the upcoming math placement exam. He stated that he was good in math in high school, but that he had not taken any math since he had earned all the math credits he needed to graduate.

Quinton believed that at the time of our interviews he was reading on the sixth grade level, and he wanted to improve so he could bring his reading level up to the seventh or eighth grade level. Nevertheless, there were times when he felt he could read well, and there were other times when he felt overwhelmed by reading. “It is probably part of my disability, but sometimes I feel like I can’t really read. It’s too many words that I don’t know. I see some words that are really too big for my vocabulary.”

He had tried devices such as the pens that the students passed over a word and the pen helped to identify the word. Unfortunately, Quinton had not found that to be helpful.

The person who ran the disability technology program at his community college discouraged him from using them because she told him that they did not work that well. At the time of the interviews, he depended heavily on the computer for assistance with his reading.

When Quinton did read independently for enjoyment, he liked to read about new technology that had just come out. He enjoyed reading about computers, and he took pleasure in confronting some of his teachers with the new information he learned. “I like to challenge a whole lot. I keep them on their p’s and q’s they say.” He also enjoyed articles about car maintenance. He did not have a car of his own, but he helped his friends with their cars, and he liked to know the latest information.

Quinton had another ambition concerning reading. He wanted to read the Bible all the way through just once by himself. At the time we were conducting the interviews, he read the Bible with the help of his friends and the computer, and he also studied books and study guides about the Bible with the help of the computer. He had tried to read it by himself, but he had not been successful.

Goal Setting

Quinton appeared to have a great deal of drive, and I asked him how he got to be whom he was. His response was that he had had to first decide what he wanted. “After you say to yourself, ‘What do you want first?’ you look for guidance from everybody you know — friends, family members, teachers. You look for guidance everywhere.” He continued to explain that once you had gotten advice, you had to set goals for yourself, and you also had to take time out for the small things. “Don’t just stay focused on what you want to do. Take time out so you won’t be dying when you get there.”

Quinton went on to say that settling for less than you wanted was not a choice. He said that it was not acceptable to go to work at a fast food place for the rest of your life, but it was all right to work there for a while to earn money to pay for college. “You can use small stuff to get there. Get a part time job to make some money, or to pay for education, or to pay for continuing education. Just don’t settle for anything, basically. Want more.”

Quinton outlined his goals for the future. “Once I graduate, get a nice job, save up a lot of money and invest a lot of money, I want to retire before I turn 40.” He planned to get several computer science degrees or certifications, and he was considering starting his own computer business. He planned to stay at the community college until he got his degree from there and then move on to a four-year college for his Bachelor of Arts in computer science.

Quinton stated that he believed that the federal retirement systems would not be around when he was old enough to retire. For that reason, he wanted to earn a lot of money and invest it when he was young. He felt that he had about 20 years to make his fortune, and if he was in the field of computers, he might be able to reach his goal.

He planned on doing repair work and preventive maintenance. He did not feel that he was skilled in programming. Additionally, he believed that technicians from other countries were replacing programmers, so he did not view that as a secure profession. He felt that although it was a good idea to be skilled in many areas such as plumbing, carpentry, and computers, his real love was computers. The other skills might have helped him find temporary jobs so he could pay for the education he needed to be able to work on computers.

Quinton considered all of his options when making his plans for the future. When Quinton was in high school, he had played some basketball, but he had become interested in baseball in college. He had played the previous year for the college club. Although the college did not actually have a team, a club there ranked as a semi-pro team. He played for the club for a while, but his grades began to suffer, and he withdrew from the team. He wanted to play again this year. Although he loved the game, he did not really plan on trying to become a professional player because he believed that baseball or a career in sports was not secure. Injuries or other problems made the sport too risky as a career, and he had to find something that offered more security.

Quinton had plans for his future, but he was realistic about the amount of time it would probably take him to reach his goals. He wanted to complete several computer certification programs at the community college, so he expected it would be at least 4 years before he could graduate and move on to a 4-year college. He said that one student he knew had been at the community college for thirteen years and was just graduating this year. He was not worried that it might take him a while to reach his goal. Quinton not only knew what he wanted, but he had a plan for how to get there. He knew his strengths, weaknesses, and his preferences, so it was evident that he had done a great deal of thinking about his future. Here was yet another example of the level of his self-determination. In the next section, I describe Quinton's explanation of the support he used to help him reach his goals.

Friends as Family — The Fellowship

The college encouraged various clubs, and the Christian Fellowship had started out many years ago as a club. Members of his church had become students, and they

reached out to other believers and nonbelievers. It had been in existence for more than 10 years and at the time of the interviews operated as both a church and a group fellowship. Fellowship members approached Quinton during club rush week in his first year at the college. His aunt had heard about the group and encouraged him to join, and he felt that it was worthwhile to join. “Keeps you in line basically with God and Christianity while you’re on campus, while you’re away from home, really, and because, you see, even while I’m going to community college, I’m still far away from home.” The fellowship appeared to be a powerful force in his life.

His family expressed approval that he had joined the fellowship. His mother told him that she believed that it was worthwhile to belong to the Fellowship, and his church at home wanted him to start a similar organization for them. However, he felt that he was not yet ready to do that. Bronfenbrenner’s emphasis on communication between settings is certainly illustrated in this account. Both his aunt and his mother knew about the fellowship and encouraged him to join. The fellowship seemed to have taken the place of his family while he was on campus.

It appeared that his friends and family had exchanged places in some respects. In speaking about the fellowship, Quinton said: “Yeah, I’ve known them for quite a while; I sort of count them as my family now.” Not only did he meet with the members of the fellowship to study his schoolwork, but also a friend of his conducted Bible studies.

Harry will be the one that’s leading the Bible study, and we will just sit back and learn and take notes and ask questions about things. He always encourages us to ask questions about anything. You know not to be afraid to ask questions about things in the Bible.

In addition, every Friday night, the leader of the fellowship organized a worship service.

Another benefit of joining the Christian Fellowship was that members had a study group that met daily. This group was another source of help and support for Quinton. “I have a study group with my Christian friends, so we all do our homework together. So they help sometimes.” A couple of other people in the group also had learning disabilities.

Most of the time we just come together to work. It’s always good to deal with some friends in college who have a common interest and can talk and study together. Even if you’re not studying the same class or subject, just to be in the same room with someone else who’s studying helps a lot, because if you’re in a room by yourself and you’re studying, it’s an easy chance you can go “ZZZ”.

Quinton went on to talk about meeting locations and how this group helped him. They rotated locations, but they usually met at one of the members’ homes. Even though Quinton did not have a laptop computer, some of the members had either laptop or desktop computers, so there was usually a computer wherever they met that Quinton could use if he needed to. Quinton stated that he was also able to get others to look over his material sometimes, and that extra scrutiny was a big help. Often they would have a Bible study as well as a time to study material from their classes.

I asked Quinton if his church or his religion had helped him to become or to be more self-determining, and he answered in the affirmative. He said that when he had considered quitting, they had encouraged him to continue. The fellowship had acted in place of his family. “I thought about quitting, but they taught me not to because my mom was not here with me in college so she really could not tell me to stick with it.” They had

offered him support when he felt overwhelmed. “They told me that it’s okay. Everybody has faults; everybody has problems. We can help you.”

In addition to helping him with schoolwork and other personal problems, they also provided him with transportation back and forth from home to the college. He lived a distance from the school and did not have a car. Someone always seemed to be going his way, so he always had a ride when he needed it.

Quinton related that his friends were important to him and that they offered him support because he could go to them and talk about his problems. Not only did he talk about his problems, but he was also a good listener, and he felt that he often helped others with the challenges they faced. In addition, he also said that his friends provided him with opportunities to unwind because they sometimes went out together.

Quinton certainly exhibited a great deal of dedication and belief in the principles of the fellowship. He had mentioned that he was on a fast during one of our early interviews. He had been on it for a week, and he was going to end it late the night of our interview. He had not eaten any solid food for the entire time, although he had been drinking liquids such as juice, tea, water, and a small amount of milk. He explained that he was fasting because the Bible mentions fasting and prayer as a way of dealing with issues that are worrisome. He was not worried for himself but for the freshmen entering the college through Project Open Door. “It is not for me, but for the new freshmen that will come in. So I’m mostly praying for them.” He and another friend from the Fellowship had decided to undertake the fast. He said that it had been a while since he had fasted, and he had learned to appreciate food. He said that he did not usually eat ham, but he had been craving ham and Korean Food. He said that his friend who had

been fasting with him was visiting his grandmother in Oregon, and she had put a cherry pie in front of him as soon as he arrived. Quinton said that his friend had to run out of the room to maintain his fast.

Based on Quinton's reported experiences in the fellowship, I asked if he had thought about becoming a minister. He responded that he had given it some thought, but he had decided that he was not quite ready for that step. "My aunt's a minister, and my great aunt before her was a minister. I have a long line of aunts who were ministers, so I thought about it. Right now, I know I just want to be a student of computers." He would have to take courses in theology, Christianity, and sociology, and he was not willing to do that at this time. Nevertheless, Quinton expressed the knowledge that he could certainly change his mind about his future.

Work and Paying Tuition

In addition to attending the community college, Quinton had just gotten a job selling shoes at the mall near the college. One of his friends from the fellowship had recommended him for the job, and he was able to fit that into his schedule of classes and studying. At the time of the interview, he was staying at a friend's home during the week. He had to report to work at Project Open Door at 8:00 in the morning, but before he went to work, he went to church with his friends. He would go to church, go to work at the college, go to class, go to work at the shoe store, study with his friends in the fellowship, and then go to his friend's home to sleep. Quinton was only home on weekends, but he was making some money to help finance his college career

He needed to make some money because he had failed English two times. He was taking remediation classes, and he had not been able to make enough progress to

move up to the next level. The financial aide officer said that they would not pay for English any more, and if he wanted to take it, he would have to pay for it himself. Both his mother and his aunt were helping him financially, and his aunt had encouraged him to get a job that would reimburse him for his educational expenses. He had worked in several jobs that offered that benefit, but he did not like any of them. He worked for fast food companies, hotels, and private mail companies, but he did not like dealing with the public because he had encountered offensive and discourteous behavior. His current job at the retail store was not too bad because he liked his co-workers and the customers were not rude to him.

He had already signed up for two classes in the fall: Business 101 and Microsoft Office User I. He wanted to sign up for a math course, but he had to take the math placement test before he could do that. For that reason, he had signed up for a math review course for the summer to prepare him to do well on the placement test.

Quinton talked about the way he intended to finance his college career. “So, I plan on being old and gray owing a couple billion dollars to a university.” He joked about winning the lottery, but then he went on to talk about his other educational experiences. “I’ve been going to expensive schools almost all my life, so it’s not really a big thing. You know how much it costs per student to go to Tucker Johnson per semester?” He went on to say that it cost 65 thousand dollars and up. He added that the 65 thousand dollars was for a regular student with learning disabilities. “Now if you have a physical handicap, you’re looking at about 100 thousand.”

He said that he had overheard the principal and a teacher talking about it one day, so that was how he knew that information. His tuition bill for middle and high school

had been paid by the city and the state. Now, however, Quinton, his mother, and his aunt were paying his tuition bills. He did not seem too concerned about owing a sizable debt when he graduated. “I mean, why should it bother me, because you’re going to make more in the long run. You are going to pay that off, plus live, you know, so might as well go for it all.”

Instruction from Home, Project Open Door, and Tucker Johnson

His home life taught Quinton that he should never give up, but he had to gain the necessary skills to make his dreams come true. Project Open Door and Tucker Johnson had taught him how to realize those dreams, and now it was up to him to continue to gain the skills that would make the dreams a reality.

There are certain things you learn at home; what you want to do and not to give up. You’ve got to learn how to get it first, and that’s one of the ways to go to get to it. First, is to finish school. Don’t cut anything short. Do all that you can. From there, there are no limits you know.

Reflections

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) concepts regarding communication between settings as valuable for the individual are illustrated throughout Quinton’s story. Quinton’s ecological surroundings grew in scope as he grew and matured, and his family kept those lines of communication open with each succeeding setting. Quinton’s mother had been a powerful force in his life because she would not take no for an answer. She wanted her son to succeed, and she did everything in her power to make it happen.

Quinton's experiences in elementary school were frustrating. He felt that he had never been challenged academically, and passing him on from grade to grade regardless of his mastery of the subject matter did not help him. Had it not been for the testing that his mother arranged for him, his learning disability might have been entirely overlooked, and he would have simply become another statistic of failure.

Were it not for Quinton's mother, it is doubtful that Quinton would have been facing the same outcomes that now appeared before him. She taught him how to persist and that fighting for what one wanted was admirable. The lesson in his family of never settling for less had made an enormous impression on him. Quinton took advantage of help from both his family and his friends. In addition, he also made good use of the lessons in self-advocacy that he learned in Project Open Door and the assistive technology accommodations that enabled him to succeed academically. There was no doubt that Quinton was a young man with self-determination who happened to have a learning disability. However, if the communications between Quinton's ecological settings had not taken place, his future would look very different today.

Quinton's life story was different from Mindy's, and he illustrated the path that he took toward self-determination. In the next section, we explore the life story of the final participant, Rana, as she related her development of self-determination.

Rana's Story — An Introduction

I met Rana at a church/community center in her neighborhood. We agreed to meet there because it was convenient for her and enabled her to be close to her daughter. When I arrived at the center, I could not find anyone at all in the building, even though I could hear children playing somewhere in the distance. I searched the building, and I

finally found someone on a telephone in a small office off the main hall. I only saw the person's back, but I thought I was looking at a man. The hair was cut close to the back of the head, and the body gave the appearance of someone big and powerful. Then the person turned around, and I realized that he was a she. I asked her if she were Rana and she nodded. The hair that framed her handsome face was a little longer than it was in the back, but it was very straight. She was a big-bosomed woman, rather large and powerful looking.

I introduced myself, and we found an empty room where we could meet in private. Our first meeting lasted 2 hours. Each subsequent meeting lasted about the same amount of time. I got to know her, and I also got to know her daughter, who apparently had some of the same learning challenges as her mother. Rana was generous in her time and in her descriptions concerning her educational growth and development.

Rana shared with me that she was dyslexic and had experienced difficulty with reading nearly all of her life. She agreed to allow me to see her documentation, but that never happened. However, the story she related and the information I received from her counselor at the community college left no doubt that she was a young woman with a learning disability who demonstrated many of the elements of self-determination.

In this section I recount Rana's story in relation to her family and her education. In addition, Rana's daughter, Helen, was a major part of her story. Also, Rana was older than the other two participants, and she was dealing with some other factors that any adult her age would have to face. Some of these issues were a direct result of her self-determination or were illustrations of the extent to which she had developed that trait, so I included them. Other events she described really did not have anything to do with her

learning disability but nevertheless demonstrated her development of self-determination, so I included them, too.

Home and Family Life

Following Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspective, we began our interviews by talking about her family. When Rana and I began discussing her home life, she told me about her grandparents before she mentioned her parents. Rana said that her mother was not a bad mother, but she just was not around much when Rana was younger. Apparently, her mother was still in college when Rana was a young child. They all lived with Rana's grandparents, and eventually her grandfather built the house that would be Rana's childhood home. "I only remember my childhood from 5 years old up. I don't remember before that so I don't know if maybe those bonding years or those nurturing years were spent with just my grandparents."

After they moved out of her grandparent's home, Rana's mother often punished Rana by sending her to her grandparents. "The only reason why it was a punishment is because it would be like nine o'clock at night. It's dark, and there are noises, and the animal noises, and you're scared and I'm scared of the dark." Her grandparents would always let her in, and Rana found this home to be a safe haven. "The second I got to my grandmother's — bang, bang, bang! 'Let me in, let me in' 'cause I'd be so scared. I guess I just always viewed them as my support system." Because Rana's parents apparently failed to provide her with the kind of emotional sustenance she needed, she found that love and support from another source, her grandparents. Even as a young child, she had to learn to fend for herself emotionally.

Rana described herself as a child of a divorce. Her mother and stepfather lived on property owned by her grandparents. “I had a step-father. I still do — he’s kind of more like my dad than my dad was.” She described her relationship with her mother as being rocky at times: “and I just could never do homework with her....We’d just butt heads. Other than that, I guess she was a pretty good parent. It’s just that for my entire life, I’ve viewed her more as an older sister.” Her stepfather took over the role of disciplinarian and also spent time with Rana helping her with her homework. “I looked up to him, even if I didn’t want to admit it, my whole teenage years. When I went off on my own, I looked up to him so much. So I guess he was a very good parent, too.”

She had a very difficult relationship with her father when she was a child. “I just learned how to deal with my dad recently, like a couple of years ago, because he suffers from mental illness. He had a hard time loving me, because he didn’t know how to love himself.” Rana saw him every other weekend and on vacations. Rana described the relationship as difficult simply because her father had personal problems of his own. “It wasn’t that he was bad or even nasty to me or anything, he just really didn’t understand how to be around me. I guess his self-esteem was so low that he was just afraid to approach me.”

Rana’s description of her family was complicated. Rana’s mother and father had two daughters, Rana and her younger sister Katie. Then Rana’s mom divorced Rana’s father. “My dad got married to a woman who couldn’t have children, and when he married her she was quite a bit older than him and she had adopted two kids. I had a sister Robin that’s like 38 and I had a brother Chris who’s probably in his thirties, too. I haven’t seen Chris in a while.” Later, Rana’s mom remarried, and she and Rana’s

stepfather had two more children, Laura and David. “So, you know I’m kind of one of four because I only saw them every other weekend and my sister Robin was already out of the nest.” After this description of her family, she made a point to say that no one else in the family had any noticeable learning problems, although some of her siblings did experience problems of a different nature from time to time.

Rana related several stories about her siblings, but the one that had the most relevance to her own development concerned her sister, Katie. Rana stated that her sister never really felt that anyone loved her. “I found my place with my grandparents, and I guess she didn’t go to my dad’s house enough. She was very close to my dad and my dad was very close to her.” Rana needed somebody, and her grandparents filled the void that apparently existed in her life.

Rana described her sister’s relationship with their father as being closer than the relationship she experienced. “My sister used to self-inflict wounds on her and say that I did it, and I’d get beat at my dad’s house.” At the time, Rana was 7 and her sister was 5, and her sister would scratch herself and her father would punish Rana. She especially remembered a time when this happened on her birthday, and she was supposed to go out to dinner with her father. “Instead my punishment at my dad’s house was I had to stay home with my stepmother, and my dad and my sister went out on my birthday for my birthday dinner and I didn’t get to go. And they gave all of my birthday presents to my sister.”

She remembered one of the presents from that birthday in great detail. “I remember one thing in particular. It was this comb, and it was very colorful and it had a unicorn on it and that was my comb. That was one of my birthday presents.” That comb

was given to Rana's sister instead, and she claimed that she never got over that. Rana viewed this incident as a lesson of strength. "I was constantly having to be prepared to be strong, and I guess for some reason I never broke."

Rana had developed an important trait out of necessity. She had learned to take care of her own emotional needs. This strength she developed was initially not a result of her learning disability, but it helped her later in life through the difficult times that were related to her learning challenges.

Rana reported that she was either punished unjustly, or she was not punished effectively at all. Rana also described herself as having been able to get out of her punishments. Either she could make a joke to distract her mother, or her mother simply did not follow through. "It was all comic relief. Then I would get out of my punishment, it was all over, I would just make them laugh and that was it. I never got punished."

As she got older, she became more defiant. On one occasion, she decided that she would spend the night at a friend's home, and the friend happened to be a boy. She recounted the fact that she had been allowed to do that in the past with no repercussions, but suddenly the rules seemed to have changed for her. Her mother would no longer allow her to spend time at the homes of her friends who were boys. She defied her mother and stayed away for a whole weekend. Her mother knew where she was, but she did not go to pick her up. When Rana came home, she was supposed to be punished, but that did not happen. "I came home, and she said I wasn't allowed to go get my learner's permit, and I went and got it anyway."

Rana and Her Daughter

When Rana was 16, she got married and had a child by the time she was 17 years old. Helen, Rana's daughter, had learning difficulties similar to Rana's since she started school. Rana's relationship with her daughter eclipsed any other relationship she reported having, with the exception of that of her grandfather and her mother. Helen had not had an easy time of it, but Rana had tried to find a good school for Helen much the same way Rana's mother had tried to find a good school for her.

Regrettably, Helen's difficulty was compounded when she was 7 years old because of an encounter with a dog. Helen's father had picked her up and taken her to his parent's home without telling Rana what he was doing. Previously, Rana had objected to Helen's being there because she felt it was a bad neighborhood and a bad environment for her daughter. The grandparents also had a dog Rana was concerned about. "There's a big dog that lived in the backyard that I didn't think was ever going to hurt her, but I thought it would jump up on her and scratch her up a little bit."

Unfortunately, the dog had been attacked a few weeks before by a pit bull and had not been reliably responding to people. Helen went outside to play with the dog, and her grandparents decided they would all go to the park. They asked Helen to bring in the dog, and her gesture to grab him by the collar provoked an attack. "The dog freaked out and attacked my daughter, tore her nose off, cut her across her face, broke her jaw, scratched her throat, scratched her scalp and did all sorts of other stuff. He almost killed her."

This accident was in the news, and Helen was supposed to get some type of financial compensation, but at the time of the interviews Rana was still waiting to learn

when she would receive it. Rana was close to Helen's grandparents and decided not to sue them and sued the insurance company instead. Rana's lawyer had delayed payment because her ex-husband had not been paying her child support at that time. He had been several thousand dollars in arrears, and the attorney was afraid that if Helen received the money in a trust fund controlled by Rana, her ex-husband might decide to stop child support altogether.

Helen's trust fund from the settlement from the dog attack should have amounted to somewhere between \$400,000 and \$600,000. Rana hoped to take that money and buy a home in a county with an educational system that would address Helen's learning problems. "My lawyer said in 6 months I'll have the money, and I can leave this house and look for another one and move somewhere else and try to find a better place for my daughter."

Conflict, Disappointment, and Self-determination

This money had become a major source of conflict between Rana and her mother. "My mother's all pissed off about it because she thinks that I'm going to swindle away Helen's money by getting another house, but I'm trying to get Helen out of the city and this environment into a better school district." Rana owned a house at the time of the interviews, but she planned to rent out that house for income because it was going up in value. She believed that if she kept it for a while longer, she might get more for it when she finally decided to sell. When she did sell the old house, Rana wanted to be able to reimburse Helen for the house she wanted to buy now. In this instance, Rana described her ability to make reasonable adult decisions for herself and her daughter despite the objections of her mother.

Rana's mother often told her that she could handle the challenges Rana was facing, but Rana had some serious doubts that her mom could really handle them.

I just know in my childhood experiences...her teaching me how to read or teaching me how to do things...she really didn't do that, or do so well with that. I really don't think she can do that with my daughter, either.

Rana experienced the same type of tug-of-war between her mother and herself that Rana's mother must have faced with Rana's grandparents over Rana. Rana described her mother as having been present in her life, but she did not give her very much positive attention. "My mother was around, but she didn't take any interest. I mean she took interest but she really didn't take any interest." Any time there was an argument or disagreement, her mother's solution was to send her to her grandmother's house. "It wasn't like I'm going to help try to solve this problem even if I have to yell at you or something. She couldn't even do that. She couldn't even yell at me." Rana feels that because her mother could not discipline her, she has had a difficult time disciplining Helen. "I mean my sister and I realized that she couldn't punish us. That's why I have a hard time punishing my daughter because I don't know what that's like."

Rana is now an adult and is on her own. Her siblings for the most part are also on their own, but the relationship with their mother has continued. Rana's siblings told her that her mother was never home and was never available to them. "I just know that she never ever had time for me. I would call her to tell her how my day was, and she's like, 'Can I call you back later' and she would not call me back or anything." Her brothers and sisters complained of the same problem "She was just too busy for us, and I think I

really do need my mother right now. I don't have her input. I only have her telling me what's wrong with what I'm doing.”

In the literature of self-determination, the individual is not expected to be totally independent. A person with self-determination knows that it is acceptable to ask for help and can do so when the need arises (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Rana stated that there were times when she felt she needed her mother to be there for her. However, when she asked her mom for help, her mother's reply had been to “move up to New England.” Rana's reply to that invitation was “no.”

I said no because I think I know this much of myself to be perfectly honest. If I have a chance to breathe or sleep or freedom to do whatever I want to do I will take it and I will run with it and I will not stop and I will never succeed.

Rana was motivated to succeed because she had to. If she no longer had to take care of Helen and herself, she was afraid that her motivation to succeed might have disappeared, and her opportunity to do something with her life would have been lost.

Rana went on to explain that when she moved out on her own, her family and friends switched roles: Her friends became her family, and her family became her friends. She felt that at this point in her life she received much more support from her friends than she did from her mother.

She said that even though that might have sounded selfish, there had been times when she had gone to her mother for financial aid, and her mother had refused to help.

I couldn't feed my daughter, and I was really scared. I've called my mother up and I've said, “Mom can you send me twenty dollars so I can get a couple of

packages of soup, but I do not have any food to feed her. I need help.” And she’s like, “Why don’t you call on your friends?”

Rana was reluctant to ask her friends for financial aid because many of them were also having financial challenges. Many were paying tuition or were just starting their careers. Her mother did provide summers for Helen in New England, but Rana felt that her mother should have been able to spare some money occasionally to help Rana if she ran short of funds. Rana expressed wonder that her mother could not spare just \$20.

When Rana had needed money and her mother had refused to give her assistance, she had gone to her father for help. She stated that her father was having a hard time financially himself, but he would frequently send her \$20 worth of food in the 24-hour mail. “That was where I learned to appreciate my father. Because he had Parkinson’s disease, he could not work now.” Somehow, he always seemed to manage to help her, even though it was hard for him. She struggled with the guilt of asking him for help and the pain of having her mother “yelling at me or cursing me out for \$20.”

Rana sometimes turned to her 80-year-old grandmother for help. Her grandfather had died the previous year. She missed him greatly. “It’s like my next tattoo. A little fly, because it reminds me of my grandfather and frogs and catching bull frogs and the first fish.” She and her grandfather shared a mutually supportive relationship, but Rana and her mother apparently battled for his affection. “He was going to give me everything, and it’s a heavy burden to carry on you. ’Cause my grandfather saw so much more in me than my mother. My mother was a very big disappointment to my grandfather, and I wasn’t and that’s not my fault.” When her grandfather passed away, Rana told her mother that she could have everything if it would bring her grandfather

back. Apparently this issue had not been resolved satisfactorily at the time of the interviews.

Rana had occasionally gone to her grandmother for help, but if her mother found out, there was always an argument. Rana had asked her grandmother to keep any large amounts of money that she had coming to her and save it for Helen; however she was willing to accept smaller amounts when she was in need. “And if I need money, like \$20 or \$30...maybe you could just give me the \$20 or \$30 that I might need.”

Rana described times when she has had to take control of her life and times when she has allowed others to help her. If her ex-husband did not pay child support, or her tenants did not pay the rent, she might need money to make the mortgage payment. “I’m not trying to take any money from anybody — it’s just there have been times, I mean...there have been times when I’ve needed it, and I couldn’t do anything about it because I’ve been bailed out on by...tenants.” Some of her tenants have helped her, and others still owe her money. Nevertheless, Rana learned to ask for help, even though her mother did not always respond in a positive manner. Rana learned how to work around those situations to produce a positive outcome.

Rana was not trying to use any one in her life. She was trying to deal with a difficult situation in a logical manner. She was trying to go to school, and she needed to be home when Helen came home because Helen’s emotional state made it almost impossible to find affordable daycare that could meet her needs. Rana had decided to live on as little as possible until Helen was better or Rana was able to finish school, get a job, and provide daycare appropriate for her daughter. In the meantime, Rana did struggle financially and did have to ask for help when it was reasonable to do so.

Ideal Home Life

Rana's home life and family background appeared to be one of challenge and difficulty. Rana appeared to harbor a great deal of anger toward her mother and the circumstances of her formative years. Rana had been born with a learning disability into a family that appeared to present a confusing environment for her. She had her grandfather, who seemed to be both a stabilizing and nurturing force in her life, and a mother who was distant and nonsupportive. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, Rana's dyad had been Rana and her mother, but he went on to describe situations with a three-party system in which the third party could affect the other two. The effect could be positive or negative, depending on the type of influence the third party had on the activities of the other two (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Rana seemed to love her grandfather more than anyone else as a child, and her mother must have been aware of that. I sensed that there might have been some jealousy on the part of the mother regarding the relationship Rana and her grandfather shared. From Rana's accounts of her childhood, it was her grandfather who had been there for her emotionally. At the time of the interviews, Rana was trying to provide a good home for her daughter, and she used her grandfather as a role model to help her with Helen.

I asked Rana to describe her idea of an ideal home situation. Rana framed her answer in terms of her learning disability.

To help me, as far as my learning disability, I would probably not do homework at home. My homework would probably have to be done with a tutor every single day. And my home life would be my home life, and I'd run free and I'd catch

frogs and ...I'd do this and I'd do that and I'd leave the teaching to people that are trained in teaching.

In terms of her education, Rana felt that her parents were not equipped to instruct her at home. She felt that parents tended to push children too much, but a professional tutor did not “bully.” “They (tutors) cared, they wanted to help the kid. They wanted to do that, and they were getting paid to do that, but they were also not going to push the kid beyond their boundaries.”

Rana felt that teachers should be given a supplemental salary for spending an hour or two a day to help with homework. Rana believed that as a child, she might not have appreciated it at the time, but in retrospect she thought it might have done a lot to benefit her home life.

I mean my ideal home life I would have wanted as a child, although I wouldn't have known it because I would have probably been kicking and screaming because I didn't want to go to a tutor...but I would have somebody to do homework with, so I'm not ready to kill my mother.

Rana began talking about her own parents and her life as a child and slipped into describing her relationship to her daughter and her homework. She stated that parents get frustrated and sometimes end up doing homework for their children. She said that sometimes this happened with Helen.

Because children “are pulling out their hair, screaming at the top of their lungs, flailing their arms, and you've given out every single punishment that you can think of, and you're just trying your best to just not spank them because they have just been rotten

that day. They're wonderful kids, they're just being rotten when it comes to homework, just completely rotten.”

Rana felt that recently Helen had gotten better about doing homework because Rana had established a strict schedule. Rana was trying to help Helen in a way her family had been able to do for her. Rana not only had to have good self-awareness about herself to remember what had not worked for her as a child, but she also had to know her daughter and what would work for her. “I had to make up a point system, and she knows now if she doesn't meet that expectation, she doesn't get anything, and she gets things taken away, and she has not had a tantrum since I did this.” In addition, Helen received one hour a week tutoring services from a teacher who provided this help free of charge. Nevertheless, Rana was still reluctant to work with Helen on her homework, and she would rather have had a professional do it on a permanent basis. Rana had learned from the past of her own family, and she was trying to create a more positive present for her daughter and herself.

Rana's Education

Rana had attended eight schools, including the community college she now attended. Rana had been removed from these schools but did not fully understand why beyond realizing that she had not been doing well. As a child, not one person discussed with her the fact that she had some type of learning disability, and no one ever discussed with her the impact that might have on the rest of her life. She began in a private school, but her parents moved her into another school with a special program. “Because St. Ronald's parallel program was not catered just necessarily for dyslexic students, it's catered for ADD kids, and they took all the kids and put them all in a group and labeled

them as being ‘whatever’.” She repeated first grade and then went on to second grade at that same school.

During the time she was at St. Ronald’s, Rana remembered students laughing at her because of her difficulty in reading. This left a lasting impression on her. “I still can’t read out loud because I still remember people laughing at me. I used to stand up, like at school, at St. Ronald’s, in the parallel program, and the kids would laugh at me.” However, even though she had begun to have doubts about her ability to learn, she still had a desire to succeed. “I knew that even though I had these things that held me back, I wanted to be an archaeologist.”

She continued to have difficulty with reading, and she described one of her approaches to handling the mysterious process of making sense out of printed material.

When it came to big words I guess I had to pace myself. I could read big words, but little tiny words, like “is” and “are” and “the” — I would screw them up! I would see a small word and I would say, “Oh yes, I have to rush to read it, because it’s so small, so miniscule, so remedial.”

Woodley

She had not been making adequate progress at St. Ronald’s, and her mother moved her from St. Ronald’s to Woodley, where she remained until after sixth grade. Woodley was an expensive school, and her mother paid for it herself. “She was actually paying Woodley when I was in high school. I’m one of six kids, but I’m one of four of hers. Everybody went to private school, pretty much.” Woodley seemed to meet her needs, and after Rana appeared to be doing better, she was placed in another private school that was less expensive than Woodley.

Even though Rana did not see her mother as always being supportive, her mother did make an effort to find an appropriate educational placement for Rana. Here was another example of Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspective of the value of communication between settings. Rana's mother was aware of what was happening to her daughter and tried to take steps to rectify the situation for Rana.

Woodley had a sizeable impact on her in ways other than just instruction of basic academic skills. They did bungee jumping and other challenging exercises that tested students' ability to deal with tough situations. "I guess that made me learn more, too. I guess I learned to take risks and stuff, and I learned to be a little bit less fearful I guess." Here, in very graphic terms, Rana described influences that helped her develop her ability to be self-determining. Being able to take risks and to be less fearful are important elements in the development of all people and allow an individual to set challenging goals. This attitude also helped her with her daughter because she was willing to take risks for her welfare as well.

She had other pleasant memories from Woodley that helped to illustrate her development of self-determination. They made go-carts out of lawn mower motors and drove them around the school grounds. "But I mean, it's like it was a wonderful place. It was a pretty good place. A lot of hands-on activities." Rana described a system that Woodley used that she liked. "You earned points, and once you got a certain amount of points in a jar, they'd take you out to lunch. They'd take you to the new shopping mall for lunch." She was willing to work for those opportunities, and she grew in the process.

In Rana's narrative of her family life, she described her mother as being reluctant to help her in areas regarding money. This appeared to be a pattern that began when

Rana was a child that continued into her adulthood. Rana described some situations at school that shed some light on the actions of Rana's mother and that still affected Rana deeply. Her lunches at the shopping mall with the school were the only time Rana got to go to the mall. Rana's mom would not take her there because she thought it was too expensive. "We were very simple about money. My mother just put me in markdowns and stuff like that because that was not important. She'd spend money on school. She'd spend money on important things." Rana said that she never had expensive clothes or shoes.

Her mother's practice of not buying Rana expensive clothes left another impression: "I think it made me not want to go to school sometimes, so I guess it did affect my development. It's, you know, if I got picked on too much, I didn't want to go to school." Even so, she added that despite the fact that she did not have expensive clothing, she did have an education. She also described other childhood privileges. "I had camp, and I had vacations in Maine, month-long vacations in New England, bed-and-breakfasts."

Rana talked about some good memories she had from school. One memory was about her first date and the way some of her friends tried to help her in her preparations. The girls in "M group" decided they were going to make her over because she was planning to go on her first date. She had brought an outfit to wear, and her friends helped her with it. "I came in one outfit or whatever and they brought outfits to school, and they put makeup on me, and they made me up for my date." She said that the teachers did not even recognize her because she looked so different.

She also talked about some of her other feelings regarding school. “I still didn’t get invited to certain things or get to do certain things, you know, ’cause girls are like catty and stuff and really mean.” She stated that she only had two or three friends the entire time she was at Woodley.

The schools Rana’s mother sent her to were private schools where the children wore name brand clothes that her mother could not afford. Even though as an adult she knew that clothes were not important, the contrast between the values of her home and the values of the students at school bothered her then. “But it was important to me because I wanted people to like me, and they didn’t like me. When you’re little, you want people to like you even if it means you have to act like everybody else.”

Rana felt that the way she dressed was not the only reason people did not like her. “I liked bugs. The girls didn’t like bugs. I wore ugly, nerdy glasses. I looked weird. I wore boy’s clothing; I came to school dirty sometimes. My shoes were all ripped up sometimes.” The school she attended cost between \$17,000 and \$20,000 a year. The other students wore clean and expensive clothing. “That wasn’t me, and my mother didn’t dress me that way.”

She continued to share other memories. A girl gave a party on the Eastern Shore, and the parents of the children who had been invited carpoled to get all the children there. “I just remember being in that car, and I kind of remember the singer. Steve Winwood was big then and whenever I hear this certain song on the radio I still actually have to stop and listen.” That song always reminded her of a positive experience in her childhood.

Rana had another pleasant memory to recount. She lived with her parents and grandparents on 26 acres. There was abundant room to have a big noisy party, so Rana asked her parents to give her a party with a band for her birthday. “I didn’t get any presents. I had a band, and I had a party, you know. I just wanted everyone else to accept me.” This feeling is not unique to a child with a learning disability. All the children in her school had a disability of one type or another, but all children want to be accepted by their peers. Rana was no different in this respect.

In recounting pleasant recollections of her elementary school experience, Rana had a memory of a special teacher she had when she was at St. Ronald’s “The one person that I know for sure that really stood out, that really helped me, was a woman named Mrs. O’Hearn. She was my tutor at St. Ronald’s when I was in first grade.” Rana described her as a tall boyish-looking woman with short black hair. “I’ll probably remember her for the rest of my life. I don’t know exactly what she did; it was just the fact that she was loving and nurturing, and when we were done tutoring, she had presents.” Rana stated that the presents were not big gifts, but that did not matter to her. “It was just like pencils, but when you’re little, it’s ‘Wow’ — it’s the world.”

Rana’s High School Experience

The rest of Rana’s experiences in elementary and middle school were relatively uneventful; however, Rana stated that she had blocked out many of her memories of her high school years, especially her experiences at Littleton Private School. “I guess because I had such a miserable experience. It was unbelievable. The principal apologized to my family and me for some of the things that he said about me.” Somehow Rana had gotten what she termed a weird reputation at the school, and it seemed to color

her progress there. “I wasn’t like a kid on drugs or a kid in turmoil or anything like that, but he labeled me as both a kid in turmoil and a kid on drugs. I never really got detention there, or anything, but I got labeled.”

That label, though unspoken, was keenly felt. In elementary school, Rana had felt embarrassed because of her reading. Even though no one had told her that she had a disability, she knew something made her different from the others. When she attended Woodley, her disability was not a liability because everyone there had some type of learning challenge; however, the way she dressed made her appear and feel different. In high school, she encountered another situation where she became “the other.” Here her ecological surroundings certainly left strong impressions on her. She seemed to rise above these challenges and to move on with her life.

Almost all individuals confront times in their lives when they feel less than or different. Although it is true that having a disability is a complicating factor, many students with disabilities seem to fit in and do well in social situations. At no time did Rana ever express the desire to quit or give up on her dreams. For all the discomfort in her ecological surroundings, she still managed to maintain a positive outlook.

It is also important to note that the principal apologized to the family. They were still involved with her progress, and they were willing to pull her out of that school also because it was not working for her. Again, her mother communicated with the school setting to help her daughter, and the impact was positive because Rana was removed from an uncomfortable and nonproductive setting.

She left that school and went to a school for pregnant girls because by this time she was married and expecting her daughter. Rana was 16 years old, and she was

essentially on her own after she started attending this school. Her parents moved to New England, and Rana's husband was not much older than she. Rana struggled in this high school because she did not have the services she needed to succeed. She requested testing, but the principal replied, "Well, you're not two grades below what you're supposed to be; you're actually above the average of most of the kids in the school. And there are kids in the school that are way below you." Rana argued that she still had a learning disability, and she needed help. "That still doesn't change the fact that I can succeed a lot better if I have these resources or this help." Unfortunately, Rana never received the academic help she needed.

Here was an example where Rana had exercised self-advocacy skills. Her self-knowledge helped her formulate and communicate the requests she needed to make to succeed in that school. The fact that her request was not granted did not diminish the fact that she took the action to ask for what she needed.

Rana described her time in this school as being very challenging because she had a learning disability, and she was unable to get the accommodations she needed to be academically successful. However, Rana did receive help in other ways.

I know my principal did a lot for me. It wasn't academically. She was my principal. Like at Christmas, there were 5 or 10 students — they didn't have to have perfect grades or attendance. They just had to, like, excel somehow. And those students, she gave them \$100 cash. Yes, and I was one of them.

The student body was predominantly African-American girls, and there were many different events in the African-American community to which Rana got invited. "They would have dinners, and I got invited to a bunch of those, too, but that wasn't an

academic thing. I just stood out. I made my presence known.” Rana felt that even though she struggled in high school, she did come out all right in the end.

Rana’s mother had worked hard to find schools that met her needs. Unfortunately, Rana felt that her mother’s efforts to find better academic situations for her had some unintended negative consequences. She felt that being moved from school to school greatly hindered her social skills. “I have a deep rooted fear of people not being my friends because I know it had something to do with my education. I had these deep inherent fears of not having friends because the second I would start meshing in a school and have friends, I was torn out of the school and never saw these people again.” She would be moved to another school, and then she would have to start all over again with new friends and new social situations.

Moving from one school to another was unsettling enough, but Rana felt she lost the opportunity to really belong to a particular school. “I never went through a school to the end. This is like the only school that I’ve gone through, and I’m going through it to the end, and that’s rough for me just thinking about that. I know it seems trivial and minute and whatever, but I can’t say that I’m an alumni to anything. I can’t say that I really belong to a school.” Rana went on to lament the fact that others went back to school reunions to see old friends, but she did not have that to look forward to. She was not treated like an alumna, and she interpreted that as a loss in her life. “A lot of people go back to the school that they went to and people remember. Well, people remember me because I made a point to make sure that people remembered me, but I don’t get letters from the alumni association because I never completed Woodley.”

Rana felt that moving from school to school had quite an impact on her. She wanted a permanent place for herself, and when she was 17 years old she inherited some money from a trust fund that enabled her to purchase a house. “I wanted a home. I wanted security, and I guess...that’s why I got married young, too. I guess I wanted a home, I wanted to belong to something, and somebody that couldn’t get rid of me.” She saw the desire to be in a situation in which she could not easily leave to have both negative and positive aspects in relationships.

College

Rana had a very positive opinion of college as a student with a learning disability. At the time of our interview, she stated that this was the first semester in a while that she had encountered some difficulty with an instructor. Nevertheless, Rana felt that college had been an important element in her development of self-determination as a student with learning disabilities. College gave her the ability to actually choose what she wanted to take and what would be best for her to do for herself. “Whereas, all my life I wasn’t able to make a choice. I could actually choose (in college) what I wanted to do, so I guess school helped me — college helped me.” She viewed math and English as difficult for her, so she chose to take courses about which she felt more confident, and she would take the other classes in her own time.

Math was the most challenging for her. She said that she was required to take Algebra II and geometry and stopped taking math after that. She graduated from high school after taking geometry, so she did not have the opportunity to take any more math. In 1996, when she entered the community college, she took one math class, and she had not taken anything else related to math.

“I’m Like a Normal Student”

An important part of Rana’s self-determination skills appeared to be her self-awareness of what motivated her as a learner. Rana described the things that motivated her educationally. “It’s like things I was ‘into’ that I wanted to learn more about. I know with me, even now, I do pretty well in school. It’s a little hard but I do pretty well in school.” She stated that if the subject was something that she was not interested in, then she did not put that much effort into it. “Even now, if it’s something I’m not interested in, I’m like a normal student. I don’t really pick it up or try to put any effort into it.” Now that she was getting ready to graduate, she was working harder. She was spending a great deal of time on her English assignments, which was a new experience for her. She really did see herself as a normal student with some special challenges that she had learned how to handle.

When she was taking classes in forensics and criminal justice, she was strongly motivated to do well and learn everything she could. She said that because she had such a strong interest in this area and a desire to learn the material, she would read it over many times until she had it memorized.

I would read, and I don’t have very good reading comprehension. Because I wanted to learn so badly, I would read the same chapter six or seven times over, just so I would remember it. And it had nothing to do with whether I was going to have a test on it or not, I just had the will to want to know the information and be able to comprehend it.

When Rana graduated from the community college, she intended to transfer to a local college to complete her degree in forensic pathology. She did not have a time frame

for the completion of her degree in the community college because she was responsible for the care of her daughter. Until her daughter was able to stay home alone, Rana's schedule was beyond her control. She planned to take as many classes as she could until her daughter got better and was able to overcome her own learning disability. Rana felt that after Helen got better, she could give herself some type of time frame. At any event, she realized that she had many more years of school ahead of her before she could realize her goal.

Accommodations

Rana expressed a strong motivation to learn and to succeed. That motivation is important for all students: All students who are successful in school have to learn their own best approaches to studying and learning. Students with disabilities have that same challenge, and sometimes it takes time and a variety of experiences before students with disabilities learn what works for them. Rana learned some techniques at Woodley, and doubtless she learned more as she progressed in school. She could identify the kinds of accommodations that would help her be a successful learner.

At the time of our interviews, Rana was working on a project for a class. She was strongly motivated to pass this class because she was so close to graduation; nevertheless, she expressed frustration at not being able to get the kind of accommodations she needed. She knew that she could do the work if she could just get the accommodations she needed; however, she got tired and frustrated at having to work so hard to explain what she required. Even though she got frustrated, she was still determined to stay in the program to be able to accomplish the things she wanted to do with her life.

Rana did not have access at home to a computer and she had to go to the college or to the community center in order to use one. In addition, she needed a computer that had a voice activated program which she stated was not even available at the college. She felt that having access to a voice activated computer would have greatly contributed to her success.

Accommodations have become an important part of the environment for a person with any disability. Accommodations for individuals with learning disabilities include a variety of devices and techniques; however, the most important aspect of any accommodation is that it must be accessible. Rana did not have what she needed. The fact that she understood what she needed illustrated her self-awareness, and the fact that she asked for what she needed illustrated her self-advocacy skills. Nonetheless, the accommodations needed to be available when they were required.

When she was in high school, she had been able to advocate for herself; however, the principal would not allow the accommodations to be made because she did not have the appropriate documentation. Now she had the documentation, but she did not have the accommodation because the equipment she needed was unavailable. Nevertheless, she was still advocating for herself, and she demonstrated the self-awareness to know what was necessary for her success.

Best School

Rana and I talked about the kind of school that she thought would have provided the best school situation for her. “The best school situation, it would probably be a lot like Woodley, where I went to school, where it’s more of a one-on-one type atmosphere; however, financially it would be free to students by a grant or something.” Rana believed

that many schools could be like Woodley if they just changed their programs. The characteristics she liked most about Woodley were “a lot of hands-on learning, a lot of outdoor learning, so that kids’ minds would grow, and they wouldn’t even realize it.”

She felt that the perfect school would be hands-on from kindergarten through eighth grade and then would offer a smaller high school environment. “I think if interventions were done early, you really wouldn’t need it for high school, but I know there are probably students that might need it through high school.” For students who continued to need interventions, another school should be available. Rana thought that Woodley was actually trying to develop a program specifically for students in high school who had learning disabilities. “I heard there was some funding going on with that, so. I don’t know if that’s actually happened yet, but I think, for me, I think I struggled.”

Rana continued in her description of a perfect high school for students still struggling when they reached high school.

I would say the high school environment would probably be like 60 to 100 students and it wouldn’t be done by ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth grade. It would be more of a 4-hour a day tutoring type program where kids would learn at their own pace.

She said that students should be required to meet state standards for high school graduation “but it would be more on their pace, because it would be one-on-one, and they really wouldn’t need to be in school a full day or anything like that.” Rana felt, however, that most students with learning disabilities should be able to go on and succeed in high school without a great deal of support. “If you have been going to a school that has

catered to teaching you to overcome your learning disability, I think by high school you should grasp it, it's like a sink-or-swim type thing.”

As a person with learning disabilities, Rana believed that “you can't baby these kids forever. You can't give them help, I mean eventually you have to throw them out to the wolves a little bit or else they're not even going to survive in daily life.” Rana believed that many of her problems came from the fact that she might have been given too much assistance when she should have been challenged more. “I mean, I think I should have been able to spell better. I think that they shouldn't have pushed my math skills, like really under the table, I think they should have really kept us learning on the correct page and stuff like that.” She believed that keeping children in a special education setting for their whole academic life was a disservice.

So, I think we really need to teach learning skills because if you get a child with dyslexia or a learning disability in a special school, like a tank, like in a fish tank their entire lives, they are never going to learn anything else outside of that. So — trying to get them out of that fish bowl is important.

For this reason she felt that small schools with a variety of options would be the best learning situation for students with learning disabilities.

Rana has done a great deal of fighting on her daughter's behalf. She has been trying to find a school like Woodley for Helen that Rana could afford. Rana went on to compare her own experience at Woodley with what she is facing for Helen.

I think that the United States is pretty much failing a lot of kids that don't necessarily need to fail. And, in turn, they're failing. They need to make programs that these kids can qualify for. People like me that should be on

welfare, but aren't. They should make schools so that our kids, people that don't have money, (can qualify for financial assistance so) our kids don't fall through the cracks.

Rana also expressed the opinion that schools designed to help students with learning disabilities should be easier to find. "They should have more schools that cater to kids with learning disabilities or make it a lot easier for parents to get information on how to obtain an IEP, because all this stuff is stuff that I stumbled upon." Rana happened to call Woodley on behalf of her daughter and managed to obtain information about where she could get Helen tested for free.

The Education of Rana's Daughter

The discussion of the perfect school was not just idle chatter for Rana. Helen had been having a very difficult time in school, just as Rana had when she was a child. Helen had become a central figure in Rana's assertion of her self-determination skills. Rana's relationship with her daughter had been a major motivating force in her life since her daughter's birth. Just as Rana's mother fought to find the right educational setting for Rana, Rana fought for Helen. Whether Rana realized it or not, her mother had taught her the value of fighting for what she needed, and she demonstrated those lessons of self-advocacy each time she took another step on Helen's behalf.

Every decision she made regarding Helen was a measure of what she had learned from her own upbringing and what she had internalized from the lessons life had taught her. She made the decisions —when to go out or where Helen should go to school — based on what best served them both.

Helen had a variety of serious problems, and Rana sometimes questioned how best to help her daughter and keep herself intact. “I get scared sometimes with my daughter. Do I devote most of my time on the learning disability or do I devote most of my time on the fact that she’s got these issues with mental stuff?” She did not feel that she had learned how to balance her daughter’s needs and her own.

I think that if a child is failing and it’s not because they’re being silly or being hyperactive, then there’s definitely a problem there. The school should be more sympathetic in trying to get to the bottom of what the problem is, whether the child has a bad home life, or the child has ADD or some other label that they use now. I think that it should be easier to obtain an IEP.

Rana felt that Helen had been falling through the cracks despite all the fighting she had done to secure services for her daughter. Rana had been fighting for her daughter since she was in kindergarten or first grade. The school had agreed to give Helen an IEP, but none was written. A year later the school did finally draft an IEP. “My daughter is slipping through the cracks, even though she’s getting services — only because I fought for them.” Rana complained, and Helen did receive some services to address her disability. “The school’s already been in default with what they’re supposed to do with her and her learning disability, but she’s been awarded extra time. I’ve had to rearrange my schedule to have a time and place for her to meet with a speech pathologist.”

Rana wanted to be able to reassure her daughter that she would be able to realize her dreams. She believed that she could reassure her daughter as long as Helen continued to grow and learn the way she was supposed to. “And as long as she’s not failing herself. That’s the thing. A lot of us fail ourselves. It’s so hard.”

Helen had not been successful in the public school where she had been placed at the time of the study. Someone suggested to Rana that Helen be moved into a self-contained class. Rana strongly opposed this suggestion. “I don’t really want to put my daughter in with a bunch of kids that have different learning disabilities because that’s not going to really teach her about life.” Rana was afraid that placing her in a room full of children with different disabilities would hurt Helen’s self-esteem. “She would feel like a moron because there are different kids with different problems. I mean, she shouldn’t be in an environment where all the kids have different problems. How could you learn like that?”

Rana felt that school administrators wanted to place Helen in a program with students whose disabilities were much more severe than Helen’s. Rana felt that Helen might have begun to see herself as a child with more serious disabilities. “Everybody learns differently, but she might think that because somebody with Down’s syndrome learned at a little bit slower pace than she would, she thinks somebody had already labeled her with that.” Rana had experienced being labeled, and she did not want that to happen to her daughter.

Rana sought a school that would teach her daughter in a way that would work for her. Rana had done some research into reading methods, and she believed she knew what would work for her daughter. The school Helen attended at the time of the study did not use that method, and Rana was looking for schools that would. Helen had a settlement coming to her, and as soon as it was received, Rana planned to move to a district that did use those reading methods. “You know, I think that’s what makes me angry. My mother was going about it blindly, and she hit the jackpot. I’m frustrated at the fact that I know

what will help my daughter, but I can't obtain it because I don't have the millions of dollars now." Rana believed that all schools should offer the reading programs that work for children.

Rana described a program she thought would work for her daughter. She had used the same type of program when she was at Woodley, and it had worked for her. This program would have involved a slow repetitious pace that would have helped her to gain confidence in her abilities. "You felt so confident in what you were doing that it was like, 'Wow, I can do this'."

Other Adult Outcomes

The literature of self-determination stresses the fact that individuals who have self-determination are more successful in adult outcomes. Rana's narrative illustrated that she was, on the whole, very successful in the areas of postsecondary education, her ability to support herself without working full time, relationships, and her own self-awareness. However, she had some serious challenges regarding employment. Her learning disability did seem to interfere with her successful completion of tasks related to employment at times, but when she found the right circumstances, she was able to do well.

One of the adult outcomes stressed in the literature is employment. Rana had some anxiety about working. She recalled having a job that involved working on the computer and being slower than the other workers because the job also involved some reading skills. She said her boss would be behind her telling her to keep up the pace. She felt that someone putting pressure on her only made her slower.

It's the anxiety of people standing behind me or people looking over my shoulder or people expecting me to do something quickly. Just saying, "Quickly!" scares me. If you don't say it to me, I'm fine.

She also reported being refused jobs because of her disability. "Actually, I had people that wouldn't hire me because I had dyslexia. Because they thought I was retarded or something." Conversely, she did not want help on the job because she was afraid of what people might have thought. She did not want to be regarded as retarded, so she refused available help. "And I say, 'No, you're going to make me struggle.' Because now I'm thinking, 'Oh, what are you thinking of me, having a learning disability.'" To avoid problems with confusion regarding her disability, she disclosed it to her employer. "Any place I would go, I told them that I did, because I don't want anybody to think that there's no reason for her to be doing this. Like she's stupid, or slow or something."

Nevertheless, not all of Rana's employment experiences were negative. Rana's goal had been to work in forensic pathology. She was able to successfully complete an internship with the Winchester City Crime Lab. "A couple of years back, I interned with Winchester City Crime Lab and did that for about 6 months and they begged and pleaded for me to stay there." She did not stay there, however, because they required a bachelor's degree in biology, and they did not offer a competitive salary structure. Nevertheless, her goal was to work in the field of forensics. "I've always had an interest in how people die or how animals die. What happens, and how it happens, and like that. I know I'm morbid, but that's what I've been philosophically interested in, probably ever since I was 10 or so."

Rana was not working at the time of the interviews because her daughter needed her full attention. Following Helen's injuries from the dog attack, she was very dependent on Rana and became anxious in the presence of strangers. "I'm not working right now, and it's not that I don't want to work, and it's not because I can't work; I don't have the capability to work." After the dog injury, Helen went into a psychiatric hospital and now needed Rana's attention.

Rana had to be there for Helen when she came home from school, so it was difficult for her to get a typical 9 to 5 job. She had very few people she could turn to for help in providing reliable daycare for Helen. "I'm not able to work. I don't have anybody who can watch her, or anybody that I can trust or that she would feel comfortable with."

At the time of the interview, Helen had not yet received the financial settlement from the dog attack, but when she received it, Rana hoped to get a better house and have her boyfriend and his son move in with them. This would provide some support as she tried to care for her daughter, and it would also allow her to have someone on hand to watch Helen so Rana could work. "My boyfriend and his son have been with her for 3 years, and then she'll have a support system again. I could go work, either night or day." At the time of the interviews, her life was much less orderly than what she just described.

"I Just Have To Have Chaos"

Because Rana could not maintain regular employment at the time of the interviews, she had to do something else to pay her expenses. This next section shows an example of how Rana seized upon a logical solution. She used her current resources to

generate some of the income she needed and had illustrated her will to be both self-determining and an effective self-advocate.

Rana has made many decisions in her life as a person who has the skills of self-determination, and an important decision she made when she was 17 years old was to buy a house. Rana's neighborhood was a dichotomy of clashing cultures. One block over from where she lived, drugs and prostitution marked the street. Rana described her own block as so safe that it was not uncommon for people to leave their doors unlocked "But my house looks like the crummiest house on the street, pretty much because I don't have the money to buy new windows. My windows are getting ready to fall out of my house." When she bought the house, she paid \$48,000, but she never had the money to do any type of repairs.

Rana had several tenants living in her house to help her meet expenses. Some had not always paid her, and others were happy just to have a place to live and always paid on time. They rented rooms from her and provided her with the money she needed to pay her bills. She had learned to deal with some difficult personalities. One of her tenants was messy, but Rana had handled it: "I guess that's what I have to deal with, because if that's the worst of my problems as far as a roommate goes, then so be it. I don't really care about that mess." In other respects, they got along well, and this roommate helped Rana out when she needed money. Rana had learned how to set good boundaries with her. She took control of herself, and she gave control to other people when she needed to and it was reasonable for both of them.

At the time of the study, Rana made \$750 a month from her tenants. The rent covered her bills. "So, I have enough change to go get some bread and stuff and feed

Helen. I've just enough money that I can pay all my bills, or at least hope to." Rana complained that her tenants constantly left the lights on, and paying her electric bill was her greatest challenge. "I'm dealing with a 20-year-old, a 21-year-old and a 19-year-old in my house. You know — and the electricity is constantly running."

She complained that they went to sleep with the television on all night, and they left the lights on all night as well. When she was out of town for 2 weeks, her bill came to \$168. She said that for her this was a considerable amount, and that her bill for just Helen and her was only about \$46 a month.

Rana saw the challenges she faced with her tenants and her daughter as positive forces in her life. She had been able to handle the situations with her tenants and at the same time earned enough money to support both Helen and herself.

So, I think what keeps me going is there's something constantly happening. I constantly have to fix it, so I guess I never have time to try to be lazy or never have time to not work or never have time to stop trying to reach my goal, because I guess I just always have to worry about it. I just have to have chaos.

Perhaps that was why she had been able to remain married as long as she did. Her marriage had not been an easy one, and she finally decided to get out. The next section gives an account of that part of her life.

Battering Incident and Self-advocacy

Rana married when she was 16, but a few years ago she obtained a divorce from her husband. She described some of the incidents that led up to the final split. Her husband had been applying to a college, and Rana helped him with the application process. "I spent my hard-earned time in between classes to fill out his application. My

ex-husband, when I met him, couldn't even call the pizza deliveryman." Rana described him as being timid about the world. Her husband's father was supposed to send in the check with the application, but he did not. "His dad didn't make the payments, and he blew up and he threatened to kill himself and me." Rana tried to console him, and at that point, he completely lost his temper. "He decided to take out a very sharp Japanese sword and said, 'If you and Helen don't stay downstairs, I'm going to gut you both like fish.'"

When this happened, she called the police, and he was sent to jail. He faced 15 years in jail, so Rana used \$5000 of her own money and got him released. From that time on the relationship changed. "But he never forgave me, but he never touched me again."

Rana had to make the difficult decision to end the marriage. She felt a great release when she finally decided to end the relationship. Her friends all knew what was happening, but neither of their families knew. Rana tried to help him, but she was unsuccessful. Her friends told her that she was good for him, but they felt it would take a few years for him to grow into a decent human being. They told her that she had been so much better than he had. "I guess his biggest fear was that I was going to excel more than he was going to excel, and that he needed to find somebody that was right on his level, which he did." She felt that kicking him out might have helped make him a better person. "After I kicked him out and told him this was over; it made him become a better person. So, I couldn't save him for myself, but I think to a large extent I saved him for him." Her support system in the form of her friends helped her make a very difficult decision, but she was finally able to end a destructive relationship. This was an area of self-determination that the other two participants in this study had not yet faced.

Rana's Boyfriend

Another adult outcome is successful social interactions. In addition, the literature mentions the importance of friends and significant others in providing support in developing and sustaining self-determination. When she divorced her husband, she met someone else who seemed a better match for her. Rana had been in a relationship with her boyfriend for about 3 years. As in most relationships, there had been good times and challenging times. "You know there were times when he didn't want to talk to me about some things that were going on in his head, these were times before he admitted a lot of things to me." She would not let him push her away, however. She told him that if he got involved with her that he would be stuck with her.

She described a time when he did not call her for a day or two, so she sought him out. Rana knew that he was troubled by something, but she did not know what it was. She continued to try to contact him until he finally confided in her. She was not concerned about the problem that he had been having, but she was concerned with the development of their relationship and their ability to communicate with each other. She said that whenever there was a problem between them she refused to part with him until they resolved their differences.

Because I'm not going to get out of this car or I'm not going to leave this house, I'm not going to move from this situation until I know that you are okay with me and I'm okay with you. That's the way I am. I guess that's self-determination, I don't know.

She also admitted to being aggressive in terms of refusing to allow him to disappear from her life for periods of time. "About the stalker? Yeah, I did that. I did that, I did that

two or three times.” This was a great example of the way she approached relationships in her life. She appeared to take relationships very seriously and did whatever it took to maintain them.

Rana felt that her boyfriend had a problem with communication, and she believed that the people in his life who had rejected him had a problem with acceptance. She described herself as an open person who could gain the confidence of others so that open communication was possible. She wanted communication to grow between them because she always liked to know what was going to happen next. “I am an accepting person. I like to communicate.”

Her boyfriend had been an important person in her life for 3 years, and she had been willing to do anything to continue the relationship. He had been a considerable source of support, which is important to most individuals regardless of whether they have a disability. Even though the literature of self-determination stresses the importance of a significant other in developing self-determination, her primary reason to be self-determining was her daughter. Her boyfriend supported her by helping her to maintain her level of self-determination and by his caring and interest in what she was doing.

Rana's Description of Her Sexuality

Self-awareness is another important element in self-determination. The literature of self-determination is not confined to persons with disabilities, and it is not confined to only certain areas of a person's life but addresses the total human being. Bronfenbrenner (1979) also looked at a person's total environment as he or she progressed, and the progress an individual made was a product of that environment. Rana addressed the subject of her sexuality as an element of her self-determination. She had decided who

she was and was open and frank about her sexuality. She apparently had given it much thought, and she appeared to be very comfortable with who she was. Rana described her sexuality in terms that had no relationship to her learning disability. “I can remember ever since I was very little I was very boyish, and it went beyond tomboyism. I wished that I was a guy, but society deemed me as being female.” She realized that if she were ever going to make friends, she was going to have to conform a little to what society expected a girl to be. When she hit puberty, she had to start wearing a bra because she described herself as being big chested, and for a while she took on the role of a young woman because she wanted to fit in and be liked. “I dressed appropriate to that because — I don’t want to label myself but I guess if somebody was going to put a label on me I guess I would be bisexual.”

She said that she had not really been into men and she even preferred calling herself pansexual because she was not sure whether she was gay, straight, or bi. She stated that at times she had thought of herself as a man. “The strong male relationships I’ve had as far as on the outer core of what they look like have been men that have been transgender.”

Rana’s mother was concerned that Helen might be affected by Rana’s sexual identity. Rana said she was not going to hide her sexuality from Helen. However, she felt that she was discrete. “Obviously I wouldn’t do anything in front of her, but I’ve never been shy about the person that I am. My daughter knows that I am bisexual, and she’s real close with my boyfriend.” However, Helen did not realize that Rana’s boyfriend dressed up in women’s clothes. Helen did know that her mother and her

mother's friends were involved in the Renaissance Festival, and dressing up in costumes was presented to Helen in terms of artistic expression.

Reflections

Not every event in Rana's life had been colored by her ability to be self-determining nor had every aspect of her life been touched by her learning disability. However, it is clear that her educational progress and her employment were affected. In addition, the ability to deal with what was happening in her daughter's educational development was certainly affected by Rana's past experiences. Even though Rana and her mother did not always agree, her mother set a good example for Rana to follow in the efforts she made to secure the best education for Rana. Rana had, in turn, endeavored to do whatever she could to help find the best educational setting for Helen. Rana demonstrated the ability to be a self-advocate educationally for both herself and her daughter. She also demonstrated the ability to be an advocate in her interactions with her tenants and in her personal relationships.

Rana had a positive outlook regarding her learning disability. "I think I probably would have progressed even more than I had now if I didn't try to hide behind my learning disability in the beginning, but I think I've done pretty well. Yeah, I think I've done pretty well."

Further Reflections

These young people shared their life stories in a frank and honest manner, and the events were filtered, magnified, and diminished by time, memory, and perceptions, both theirs and mine. In many ways, they were ordinary stories told about ordinary lives,

much like any other you would find. They had never read any of the literature of self-determination, and they probably had never even given much, if any, thought to the subject. But when I talked to them they appeared to exhibit the characteristics of self-determining individuals. They felt that they were the causal agents for their lives. These young people had experienced challenges in their lives, but they seemed to have a belief in their ability to make good lives for themselves. They seemed to be self-aware, and based on that awareness, they made decisions, set goals, attained those goals, advocated for themselves and others, and demonstrated an internal locus of control.

In addition, their stories demonstrated Bronfenbrenner's theories of the power that their ecological surroundings had on their lives. Family, friends, education, religion, and accommodations had profound effects on their lives as they recounted them. Family seemed to have the greatest effect, and when the family made efforts to establish lines of communication among the various settings in which the participants moved, the results were positive.

It is also important to remember that each of the participants was identified as having some type of learning disability. The added feature that these were individuals with learning disabilities affected them by presenting another challenge they had to meet. It is a testimony to their perseverance and self-determination that they managed to identify and understand the impact their particular learning disability had on their lives. In doing so, they learned strategies and identified accommodations that helped them succeed. In the next chapter, I complete a comparison of their life experiences as they developed into self-determining adults.

Chapter 5: Points of Comparison

Opinions Reflected in Narrative Inquiry

Before I began the interview process, I identified some concepts I wanted to explore with each participant. I felt that these concepts were important to understanding the forces that shaped their development of self-determination. I also felt it was important to be able to compare the differences and similarities that would naturally arise from the individual answers. This section will explore the differences and similarities in the answers that Mindy, Quinton, and Rana gave regarding those predetermined concepts.

The Will To Want To Go On

The first focus point I wanted to address was the definition each participant had concerning self-determination. I did not want to give them a definition; rather, I wanted them to give me their perceptions about the term. Rana spoke of self-determination in terms of lessons she had internalized from childhood. “To me, I guess, self-determination is the will to want to go on, like the will to want to succeed...I wanted to be somebody. I wanted to not give up.” She struggled academically in school, and she was teased about her reading, which led to feelings of insecurity about her learning.

Because she did not succeed in conventional schools, she moved from school to school as she was growing up. Consequently, she often felt like an outsider. The opinion that other people had of her played a big role in her perceptions of herself. “I didn’t want anybody to ever think I was stupid because I was told I was stupid many times, and then I didn’t drop out and those people did. I guess that’s what self-determination would be for me.”

Mindy had another perspective on self-determination. She was very concerned with being responsible for her own actions, and she believed that her life decisions rested on her shoulders. Mindy responded by saying

I think self-determination is you set goals for yourself, and you don’t set them unrealistically. You set them to make them challenging, but if you are paralyzed you don’t say I’m going to be doing gymnastics. Instead, you might try to take a step today or something like that. You set realistic goals, and then you work towards those goals.

Quinton followed the same line of reasoning as Mindy. He stated that “You have to set goals for yourself. You have to assess how you’re going to reach those goals and between assessing and between the goals you know you have to strive.” All of them viewed self-determination as a means of achieving success for their lives through goal setting and as never giving up until the goal is reached. At this point, Rana was the only one who mentioned having to prove to others that she had the ability to accomplish her goals. Quinton and Mindy seemed to be more motivated by their own internal dreams than by the external opinion of others.

I Can Do This

We spoke about formal instruction for self-determination, but neither Rana nor Mindy had ever received any structured lessons on the subject in school. Instead, Rana spoke of self-determination in terms of lessons internalized during childhood. “I think it’s something that’s in you. You know, I don’t know if it’s my parents wanting me to succeed and that was stored in me when I was little, but I never really had anybody come to me and tell me that I am good at this, other than my parents. I think that was more learned from them.”

Mindy also seemed to attribute her self-determination to the expectations of her parents. “I think a lot of it...would have to be with my parents, my family. I feel very much like we push each other to the limit. We always took the next step.” She went on to talk about the fact that she took Advanced Placement classes and also took classes at the community college in her senior year. “In my senior year of high school, it was not, ‘you are going to take easy classes.’ It was instead, ‘you are going to be taking AP classes.’ You know it was no question. I did that because that was what was expected.”

Conversely, Quinton reported that he did receive instruction in self-determination. “Yes, I received instruction on self-determination, mostly advocating for yourself.” He received instruction in self-determination through the Junior ROTC in high school and through Project Open Door in college. Because of this instruction, Quinton had developed the belief that goal setting, challenge, and discipline are the important ingredients in self-determination. Quinton was oriented to the importance of internal motivation rather than motivation from external forces. “I would also say because self-

determination is basically you yourself, you know that's the reason they call it self-determination so you have to put forth the effort.”

When he graduated from high school, he applied to a state agency for instruction in his field, but his request was denied. His experience with that state agency served as a catalyst to spur him on to succeed. “You must be able to say I can do this regardless if someone comes out and says; no, you can't. Say, ‘I can do this.’ I mean, what are your goals, what are your future plans?” He felt that to reach his goals, he had to have self-determination. “Self-determination, you have got to have willingness and discipline to get there.”

So of the three, Quinton was the only one who received formal instruction in self-determination. The other two participants attributed their self-determination primarily to their families. All seemed to feel that there is an internal motivation encouraged at times by external forces, such as parents, but each person must rise to the challenges that they encounter. At the time of the interviews, both Quinton and Rana seemed to show evidence that they were also responding to a need to prove their abilities as part of their personal challenge.

The responses of all three participants also demonstrated support for Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical perspective that the ecological surroundings play a profound role in development, beginning with the home and spreading to other environments. Even though Quinton had formal instruction in self-determination, he attributed his basic motivation to the influences of his home.

I Think That Falls Under Your Part

Rana did not report having formal instruction of any type in self-determination; however, Mindy reported some informal instruction in her church about being responsible for herself and making her own decisions. “Youth groups...with Mr. Joseph...you know it’s our choices...we make our choices, like I said, with everything, what you are going to do in life, you take responsibility.”

Quinton had another stance toward instruction and self-determination. The formal instruction he had received enabled him to learn the steps he had to take to begin the journey toward success. “I don’t think that anybody can receive instruction in that (being a person with self-determination). I think that falls under your part.” He felt that if there was something an individual wanted, it was up to him or her to go out and get it. “Most likely, there’s no way for someone to train someone in self-determination, but you can train yourself to have self-determination because it’s all on yourself.” Even though he felt that instruction on internalizing self-determination was not possible, he did feel that some instruction on how to get started was possible. “I think maybe someone can receive tips on how to spark self-determination, but in an overall effect that’s on you.” He felt that there were many ways to begin moving toward self-determination. But it was up to the individual to follow through with it. “I really do think there’s ways of instructing people just to start it.”

Not Settling for Less and Always Wanting More

Because neither Rana nor Mindy received any formal instruction in self-determination, I wanted to know what they felt had helped them become self-determining. Rana's response was simple: “My grandfather’s interest in me.” He appears

to have had a profound influence on her throughout her formative years. She felt closer to her grandparents than she did to her parents, and in her narrative of her life she talked fondly of her relationship with them, but she felt especially close to her grandfather.

In the same vein, Mindy reported that her family pushed her and made her assume responsibility for her own actions. “My parents made my choices my responsibility. I make a stupid choice, and I pay for it. I make a good choice, then I can reap the benefits. I mean with my parents, you take responsibility for your actions. So, that’s pretty much what it was.” Mindy stated many times that taking responsibility was something her grandfather had taught her mother, and something her parents had, in turn, reinforced throughout her life.

Even though Quinton had received formal lessons in self-determination, he felt that an individual needed something from within to make the lessons effective. I wanted to know where he felt he had gained the will to put those lessons into actions. Quinton stated that both his grandmother and his mother had taught him important lessons in this area. “Basically I learned self-determination by not settling for less and always wanting more.”

They each reported that someone in their lives had faith in them or showed love and encouragement toward them. Mindy again stressed the importance to her of being responsible for her own actions, even as she mentioned her parents. The faith and love of others appears to be a powerful aspect of self-determination for these participants.

You Know, There’s No Christmas

In addition, to discussing the instruction they may have had, we talked about other influences that might have helped them in their development of self-determination.

Besides the strong support she received from her grandparents as a child, Rana felt that her relationship with her daughter played an enormous role in her feelings of self-determination. Because Rana was a single parent, she felt that her daughter's progress depended on Rana's ability to help her grow. One of Rana's major fears was that Helen would surpass Rana in her ability to read and spell, and then Rana would not be able to help her any more. Another important consideration for Rana was that she would be able to provide the role modeling for Helen that would help her daughter go on and succeed on her own. "I guess my daughter helps me to be a self-determining person, because I have to be a role model to her. I guess my self-determination is that I have to keep on progressing and try to stay ahead of her when it comes to spelling or something close to that. I guess it's mostly my daughter."

In addition, Rana's friends had also played an active role in her life by helping her with her own schoolwork so she could keep on in school. "And I guess that I have friends that were a strong support system. I guess my friends did push me. I guess they were kind of role models for self-determination."

Mindy had another important motivation in her life that helped her in her development of self-determination. Although Mindy attributed her development of self-determination to both her parents, she also felt that her religion was a dominant force in her life." Well, my family, of course. Religiously, I think that helps a lot. Because it's...I guess it sounds silly but I was raised in a religious family, and even if I am by myself I know I'm not really by myself. I know I have my family behind me, but I also know I have God behind me."

Quinton gave his mother credit for teaching him about self-determination in her fight to get him into the special school he needed in middle and high school. “You know there’s no Christmas, there’s no birthday parties that’s going to make up for what she’s done for me to get me into that school.” He said that his mother was his first role model for self-determination “I saw it from her first, and I think that’s probably where I learned it a lot probably...enough.” He also felt his grandmother had a big role in helping him to become self-determining. “My grandmother taught me a lot of valuable lessons in life, you know, and she always taught me to set goals for yourself because you lose a lot of discipline for yourself if you don’t set goals for yourself.” Quinton went on to add another dimension to his definition of learning self-determination.

(Learning self-determination)...can’t just be one thing — it’s a combination of things...background, who you are as a person, who your parents raised you to be. I can probably say there is one force, and that’s where you live, your environment, your home, who raised you, or where are you are being raised. You know it all starts there. It all has to start there. I’d probably say what I learned at home, and what my mom taught me about school and business and how the world works mostly is important. I also think that religion is a very, very important part of who you are; who you claim yourself to be.

Mindy mentioned religion as important, and Quinton also included the influence of religion as an important force in his life and in his development of self-determination. Rana never mentioned religion as related to self-determination.

These narratives seem to lend strong support to the idea that the development of self-determination is strongly influenced by the home environment, but other factors,

such as religion, also appeared to have some effect on the development of self-determination. Bronfenbrenner (1979) would have supported their assessment that their support came first from the home. He would not have discounted the impact of religion, but would have included it in the ecological surroundings of the individual. In the case of Mindy and Quinton, there is evidence that there was strong communication between the home and religious settings and that communication lent support to their development in this area.

Helped Me With Self-esteem...College Did

Successfully achieving adult outcomes is a fundamental concern for many people. Being able to have some control over the choices one makes, being able to set one's own goals, and being able to attain one's personal dreams are often viewed as important measures of adult success. Education was stressed not only as a personal goal for each participant, but also as a pathway to achieving other personal goals. I wanted to know if, indeed, their education enabled them to build the kind of existence they wanted for themselves at this point in their lives.

Rana had struggled with school for much of her life, but interestingly, she gave college credit for her feelings of increasing self-esteem. She wanted to learn as much as she could, especially in her criminal justice classes so that, in her words, "I would seem really smart." In addition, for the first time, she experienced a measure of academic autonomy, which was an empowering event in her life. "I think that school really helped me with self-esteem...college did....When I got to college, it was like, "Oh my God, I get to do what I want to do! I get to take classes that I want to take." And I guess that is what helped me in self-determination. I was able to make the choice."

Mindy felt that she had developed self-determination and that some aspects of her educational experience had been helpful to her. “Yeah, because if I didn’t have self-determination I would not be this far.” The only kind of effective guidance she reported having at school was from her teachers. “The teachers would do things, like actually once you hit middle school and high school, the teachers had more responsibility with helping you to choose your path and set you towards that path.” She felt that she could go to them to discuss future plans. “You go to your teacher and talk about...goals.” She also sought advice from her teachers regarding the best schools to attend. “Is this a good college for this major, or talk to your history teachers to see if this is a good college for history, or is this a good college for biology. That would be about it.”

At the time of our interviews, Mindy was ready to go on to a four-year college, and she felt proud that she had worked hard to get there. She felt that many students who come to community college think it will be an easy ride because it is not a four-year school or a private college. “They just come here and expect everything to be handed to them, and a lot of kids drop out between the fall and spring semester.”

Quinton had a difficult time answering the question whether education had helped him build the kind of existence he wanted for himself at this point. Although he felt that his instruction in Project Open Door had helped him in many ways, he was unsure about the value of his education thus far in helping him succeed: “My education, boy this is hard. I have built a life for myself, but that’s a tough question.”

Rana and Mindy shared the feeling that their education had been of some help to them. Quinton’s difficulty in dealing with this question may illustrate the resentment he

talked about in his life story regarding the lack of progress he experienced in elementary school.

I Want To Do What I Want To Do

Many factors can influence outcomes for individuals who exhibit self-determination. From their viewpoints, I wanted to know what had helped and hindered them most as they strove to realize their dreams. Rana felt that the strategies she learned at Woodley were what helped her most to realize her dream of going into forensic pathology. “I think I would have to give Woodley full credit for that...I learned strategies through Woodley on how to cope with those disabilities and those problems.” Those strategies helped Rana unlock the obscure code of reading and approach new learning situations with a positive attitude.

Rana felt that her biggest problem in advancing toward her dream was being a single parent with a young daughter who needed a great deal of emotional support. “I’m sure I’ll get closer to that (her dream of working in forensics) once my daughter hits 12 or so, when she can stay at home a little bit more by herself. I’m a little protective, too.” Her family now lives in New England, so she relies on her friends to help her out. “Friends, who are scattered all over the place. My family lives 14 hours away, and it’s just me and my daughter and a dozen more people. “

When Mindy and I first started to discuss what had been her greatest help and hindrance she reiterated that her family had been a great help and said that nothing had hindered her. However, she quickly changed her mind. “ I think actually that’s a lie. I think money hinders me a lot because it’s silly, but I mean I can’t stay in this state, I can’t go to college here anymore.” Both she and her brother were going to college and the

financial burden on her parents was overwhelming. “I mean, it’s just too expensive here because it’s cheaper for me and my brother to go to another state and pay out of state fees. So, I mean that’s probably been the biggest thing that’s hindered me.”

Quinton felt that the biggest help he had in obtaining his dream was the support he received from his mother. “I would probably say that obtaining the dream possibly with my mom saying that whatever you do, I’ll be with you one hundred percent.” He also felt that he received a great deal of support from other members of his family and from his friends. “My family, there’s a lot of emotional support with my family, a lot of emotional support from my friends. They’re with me all the time. So what helps me a lot is mostly outside support; a lot from friends and family.”

The thing that hindered Quinton the most was the memory of being told by the State Rehabilitative Services (SRS) that he could not make it in college, especially when he confronted a challenging test or assignment. “I would probably say sometimes when I’m having a hard time studying, or I’m having a hard time with a test, then when SRS says I’ll never be able to make it in college, or when anyone says I’m not going to be able to make it in college, that probably hinders me a lot.” However, Quinton has found a way to deal with these moments of doubt. “But at that time, it really doesn’t matter to me because I want to do what I want to do.”

What They Can Do — Nurture — and What They Cannot Do — Teach

All three participants had been able to achieve their goal of going to college, but I was curious to see what more they felt the educational system could have given them. It was evident from their accounts that each had difficult challenges to overcome at some point during their time in school.

Rana felt that she could have been given more help and support in high school. “More in high school, I guess, because in middle school they pretty much had it basically under control, and when they didn’t, my mother just pulled me out of school.” She never did get the support she felt she needed in high school and ended up taking a shortcut to graduation. By having some course work waived, she graduated early.

Mindy felt that her worst educational experience was in elementary school, and that she could have been given better care in her early years of school. She actually had two problems that made the whole experience difficult for her. The first was that she was routinely pulled out of classes for remediation and support, but no one ever actually explained to her what her problem was. She felt mystified by the school system and labeled by her peers.

I think the worst thing was elementary school...I’m like in second and first grade and I’m being pulled out of class and I mean, honestly, I know that something’s wrong. Pull me out of class to do stuff like read when, yes, I know how to read. I’m being pulled out just to read, and I am being separated. I’m being identified because you know how kids are. We were the stupid kids.

Mindy’s other challenge was being identified as having Attention Deficit Disorder and being put on medication to help her with that problem. “I think that in elementary school, they could have done a lot better. Instead of trying to push drugs on us.” Mindy was placed on a medication to help her cope better, but from her description, it did not sound as if she had been given the appropriate dose. “I was put on medication, and it was just not good for me because I almost became zombie-like, and the school wanted me to stay on Ritalin, and my teacher told my parents that, you know, like she’s not

functioning, she's just sitting there. That's because it was such a strong dose that I wasn't functioning. I was not loud and obnoxious. I was just sitting there and doing nothing." The effect of the medication exacted a huge emotional and educational toll because she fought a losing battle to stay awake and complete her work.

Quinton gave a compelling account of what he felt he needed from the school system: more about his field of study. "My field of study is computers, so you need to know like a lot of math and a lot of reading, and I feel that I should have learned a lot more math and...a lot more reading." He also felt that the school system could have offered better assessments to determine the strengths and weaknesses of students. "I feel the education system needs to definitely assess ... children's 'can'ts' and 'cans' so you know basically what they can do, what they can't do."

He made an insightful statement in response to the question of what more the educational system could have done for him. "What they can do...nurture and what they cannot...do teach." Quinton failed some subjects in middle school, but he had been passed along from grade to grade with no visible consequence for his lack of progress or success. Instead of failing a grade, he was moved on up to the next level. "I look at it now, it's like if I was held back I probably would have made a change. I'd probably put more of an effort in my schoolwork. I probably would have done every thing I could to put more of an effort in my schoolwork, at least try my best. But, I was never held back."

I Had the Good Teachers

I wanted to know if they felt that they had been given the instruction necessary to enable them to make the choices required to get them to where they wanted to be.

Developing the ability to make good choices is a challenge we all face. These young people confronted and dealt with that challenge in different ways.

Rana did not experience much success in school before going to Woodley. Consequently, not only did she feel bad about school, but she also felt bad about her own ability to learn or be successful. Whatever educational choices she had made before going to Woodley had not been positive for her. Nevertheless, while attending Woodley, she learned that she had the ability to succeed and make educational choices that were positive and beneficial to her own growth and development. Therefore, Rana attributed her instruction in how to make good choices to Woodley. “I think that Woodley helped me with that.” Most of the instruction she received in English and reading was done one-on-one. “Anything that had to do with English, at Woodley, other than a regular English class, like learning how to read, reading comprehension, all that stuff; all of that was done in a small group of either one-on-one or two-on-one personnel.”

Mindy’s answer involved not only her educational experience but also the role her parents played. “I think so...I think I’m doing pretty good...I don’t want to say trained, but directed, you know what I’m saying.” She felt that direction came from her parents, who expected her to do the right thing. She also had good educational instruction from her teachers, especially in middle school. “Because I had the good teachers and that made it really good for me...it helped me mentally.”

On the other hand, Quinton seemed to feel that his college program, Project Open Door, had provided him with the instruction he needed to make good choices. “I think the instruction I needed to get to be where I want to be would be right now. I had got a

lot from Project Open Door. They taught me how to advocate for myself and where resources are and what type of resources I can receive.”

It is important to note that teachers often do teach goal setting and attainment, decision-making and choice making, but not always in formal ways labeled with those headings. Allowing a child to choose a topic about which to write or to select a book to read or discussing goals for grades or for the future are all types of instruction for self-determination not labeled as such. Students do not always recognize the multiple lessons they are taught in classes because they are encouraged to focus on the objective of the lesson or the unit of curriculum instruction.

I Am a Loud Mouth and I Talk

Self-advocacy is an important aspect of self-determination. I wanted to know to what degree the participants felt they had acquired that skill, so I asked them if they had learned to be their own best advocate. Rana was the first to answer that question. She had watched her mother struggle to find the right educational setting for her. She later had to apply the skills she had learned from that observation to get what she needed for herself while she was in high school. At the time of our interviews, she found that she had to advocate for her daughter’s educational development. Rana felt that she learned to be her own best advocate out of necessity, but at the time of the interviews she also had to consider how to best help her daughter. “Because somebody has to be. Somebody has to be my advocate. And I’ve got to be her advocate, because if she sees me give up, she’s going to give up, and I don’t want her to do that.”

Mindy’s challenges were somewhat different. She felt that college had given her the opportunity to gain control of her own life, but the support she had gained from those

around her enabled her to take charge and do what she needed to do “Yeah. I noticed one thing about this college; you are in charge of your life. You study when you have to; you do your own work. You are in charge of your life. Welcome to reality.” Mindy felt that she had a support group that helped her to be her own advocate. “I just think I see a support group. Is that weird? I mean, I don’t have one person. I do a lot of it myself, I’ll admit it, but my friends, my family, my church, that’s my support group, it’s not just one person.”

In contrast, Quinton had been taught how to advocate for himself, and he had been able to put that instruction into practice. “I would probably say yes because I am a loud mouth and I talk. Once you start advocating for yourself, and once you learn how to do it effectively...you can’t shut up, you really can’t; but once you learn how, you have to advocate for yourself.”

Necessity, support from family and friends, and instruction enabled each of them to find a unique way to self-advocacy. The overriding fact was that they did feel that they were their own best advocates and could enter into the give and take of negotiating results in their own best interests.

I Think I Know What I Want

The ability to set goals and attain those goals is an important component of self-determination. I asked Rana, Mindy, and Quinton if they felt they had the skills they needed to set their own goals and the problem solving ability to reach them.

Rana responded that she felt she had the skills to set and meet her own goals. “I don’t think I have all of them.” She described herself as being a little immature at times. “I know that students like to put things off in college, just because they can, and that

would be the ‘normal’ part of me.” Nevertheless, she felt that she needed to be better than a “normal” student. “I know that I have to exceed that, just so I can act like a normal student.”

Additionally, Rana felt that she possessed many of the skills she needed to reach the goals she had set. “But I think that I could still improve on them. I think that’s true of everybody.” The thing she felt she needed to improve most was her fear of reading. “But I’ll tell you, every day of my life it comes up in everything that I do. Whether I’m in a job or whatever, reading is a huge part of a normal person’s life, and I think that’s something that I need to overcome, somehow. I’m almost 26 years old, and I still haven’t overcome that.”

Mindy’s first response to the question regarding goals and goal setting was, “Yeah, I think so.” I asked her if she would elaborate on her answer. She went on that she felt she had the skills to set her own goals because “I think I know what I want. I think I know what I need to do to get what I want.” Mindy explained how she had made her decision to be a teacher. “I thought realistically.” Even though she would love to travel throughout Europe, she knew that the idea of eternal travel was not possible. “What’s the likelihood that you’re actually going to make a living doing that? I like history, I like children, why not just teach? It’s not as exciting as going to Europe. It’s just realistic. You have to think realistically.”

Realism seemed to be a part of Quinton’s goal-setting techniques as well. “I feel I have the skills I need to set my goals,” was the way Quinton responded to the question regarding goals and goal setting. “You sit down and think about what I need to do this. I need to do that, and take it one step at a time. You know, you reach that goal before you

know it.” Quinton’s goal was to go to community college. “You know my goal was to get here, and I basically said okay this is my goal, these are the problems I have; I need to go find out what I can and cannot do.” Those were the steps Quinton described that got him to where he wanted to be.

Goal setting and goal attainment seemed to be a skill they had all mastered, and the proof was in the fact that they all felt that they had made the decisions that led them where they were. They all expressed an ability to realistically evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses to develop a plan that would work for them.

It Is Basically How Honest You Are with Yourself

I identified self-awareness and self-knowledge as essential elements of self-determination. I wanted to know if the participants believed they had the self-awareness and self-knowledge to enable them to make the best choices for themselves.

When I asked Rana how well she understood herself, she gave a reserved answer. She replied that she somewhat had the self-awareness and understanding to make choices for herself. She qualified the answer by saying that people make mistakes. “But I think that I have the ability to make positive decisions. To make decisions that will benefit me.” I asked her to tell me where she had gotten that ability, and she replied that she learned it from her family, her peers, and people around her. “I think it’s something that you learn from others. If there’s nobody there, you’ll never learn it.”

Mindy’s answer differed from Rana’s in that she did not mention role models as important in her development of this skill, even though in the past she had mentioned how important her family was. Mindy replied that she did have the ability to make good choices for herself. “Yeah. I think I know underneath it all what I want and who I am.”

She has a good sense of who she is: “I’m not stupid, but I’m not an Ivy League person. I don’t want to put myself in situations where I know that I’m pressured to do something that I don’t want to do.” She felt that if she did put herself in a situation that simply was too much for her, she would handle it in her own way. “If I do put myself in that situation, I’m going to find a way to get through it or get out.”

On the other hand, Quinton felt that he had a lot of self-awareness, but not enough. “It is basically how honest you are with yourself.” Quinton used reading as an example. He knew that he had difficulty reading, but he also knew that he had good comprehension skills. Because he knew he could not do all the reading he needed to do for himself, he had to ask for help so he could succeed. “That is basically self-awareness, and when you say I know I can’t do this but this is what I can do to get around that. Then you are being in tune with yourself.”

But It Was Those Kinds of Things That Pushed Me

Even though the participants frequently mentioned the importance of their families in their ability to be self-determining, I wanted to know more about how families influenced an individual’s ability to become self-determining. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory stressed the importance of the ecological surroundings, beginning with the family. For this reason, I asked each of them to describe the relationship that most helped them to be self-determining.

Rana eagerly described her relationship with her grandfather. She had a close relationship with him, and she saw him as a strong force in her own journey toward self-determination. “My grandfather would take me on outings, and we’d see words.” Her grandfather taught her how to spell words like color by tapping her on the head as he

spelled the word. “And then when I’d see something red, like a sign, I wanted to know what that sign said because obviously it didn’t say ‘R.E.D.’ And he’d teach me ‘STOP.’ So then I had to learn that! I guess it was just like....But it was those kinds of things that pushed me.” He took her with him when he went fishing, and he eventually taught her how to fish. Then, of course, she wanted to know how to spell the word *fish*. “So he told me how to spell fish, and that way I could recognize it. That is how he kind of got me into books.”

He took her places, and he told her stories as they went on their way. “And he was telling me all these stories, and I wanted to hear them again. And he was like, ‘Well, I’ll give you this book, and I’ll help you with it. But you can’t spend all your time here; you’ve got to go home.’” Rana wanted to hear the stories again, but because she did not live with her grandfather, she had to take the books home and try to read them for herself. “That’s how I jumped and moved and progressed and kept on moving forward.”

Mindy’s described her family as pushing her to be independent by forcing her to take responsibility for her own actions. “I think it’s something like with my dad, he doesn’t like people who are very timid.” She described being taken to the grocery store with her father and being given a choice about what she wanted to buy for herself as a treat. “We were allowed to get...like one of those golden books or we could get one snack or something, but with him, this was when we were little, if we didn’t make a choice, we didn’t get anything.” If she did make a choice, she was not allowed to change her mind. She could get the thing that she chose, but she did not get a second chance if she decided she wanted something different. “In my family, you make your choice, and

you stick with it.” This was a powerful theme throughout her story. This incident seems to illustrate the lengths her family went to ensure that she learned this skill.

For Quinton, the most powerful force in his life had been his mother. Quinton’s mother was a role model for him in terms of self-determination. She was resolute in discovering why he was not achieving at the same levels in reading as his peers were. Once she got an answer to her questions, she fought to get him into a school that could meet his needs. “Yeah, I’d probably say my mom’s been the most helpful to me. Some of my family members have been helpful to me. The counselors here have been helpful to me. I would probably say my friends that I met here are helpful to me. It’s been a lot of help.” Quinton felt that his family, especially his mother, had done the most for him in getting him into the college setting. “And keeping me here, yeah, keeping me here, that is between both my family and my friends, but I call my friends my family, too.”

Impact of Friends

People other than family have been identified as having a major impact on the ability of individuals with disabilities to develop self-determination skills. I asked the participants if their friends had helped them to become self-determining. In her answer, Rana explained that she felt that her family and friends had reversed themselves. “Well, my friends are my family, and my family are my friends.” She related that although she had gotten support from her family in the past, she now relied more on her peers. “Put positive people in your life.” When she moved out on her own, her parents moved away. She had to construct a new support system for herself. “I moved out on my own, my family became my friends or were put on the back burner, and my friends became my family. And even though my new family, my friends, are spread all over the United

States, I still feel the same way, because...I guess I get more from them than I did from my mother.”

Mindy also explained that she had many friends. Some were closer to her than others, but she broke the relationships down into different categories. “I have quite a few good friends, and I have probably about two best friends and a lot of acquaintances.” She explained further how her friends have helped her in her own self-advocacy. “Sometimes you’ll be complaining or you’ll be going off...or doing something stupid. They are not going to let me get away with it...My friends aren’t the kind where, you know, we’re always like you are so beautiful or you are so great. We are very honest with each other.” Mindy felt that her friends were a major part of her life, and because they were so important to her, she put a great deal of energy into maintaining her friendships. “I work really hard at friendships. I really do, I work really, really hard because that’s the backbone for my life. My friends, we’re very close.”

Quinton described his friends as people he can talk to about his problems and who, in turn, share their concerns with him. They also spend time with him, and together they can relax and unwind in mutually enjoyed experiences.

He expressed the sentiment that his friends were like his family, and that whereas his family had done a lot to get him to college, his friends had done a lot to keep him there. “I also choose friends who have the same goals as I do, so they sort of help me out a little bit. I have friends who want to graduate from college, you know, I have friends who want to go on to graduate from college with some of the hardest degrees in the world to get.” He saw his major in computer science as not being as challenging as some of the courses his friends were in. He seemed to find this difference a positive and enriching

experience for him. He viewed his friends as “friends to the end.” He felt that they helped each other by not allowing each other to settle for less than their best. “They are going to help me. They are going to push me forward and not settle for anything less, and I’m going to push them to go forward and not go for anything less.” He described an incident in which he had earned a C on a paper, and his friend asked him if he were willing to settle for that. He thought about it, and the next time, he earned an A. He also challenged his friends to do better, and they also seem to rise to the occasion. He pushed one friend so hard that his friend earned an A from a professor known for never giving A’s.

It’s Going To Help You Become Who You Are

Religion is not mentioned in the literature as a major factor in the development of self-determination for individuals with disabilities; however, both Mindy and Quinton mentioned it. Rana was interested in paganism, although her mother was studying to be a minister. Rana seemed to have a love-hate relationship with her mother. Her interest in paganism may have been a way to separate herself from her mother or it may be a way to get her mother’s attention.

On the other hand, Mindy expressed the belief that religion played an important part in the lives of people. In her estimation, it was not important what religion you were because all religions provide some direction for life. She felt that religion had an enormous impact on her and her ability to be self-determining. “There’s ... no mediator, so whatever you do, you know you can’t blame it on someone else. Your actions are your responsibility.”

Mindy felt that her religion helped prevent her from doing what she termed “stupid things” because she was responsible for her own actions. “So, no matter what you do, you can run and hide from the government, you can run and hide from your mom and dad, but you can’t run and hide from God.”

She felt that her religion had also helped her develop her value system. She had learned to keep the importance of money and the worth of other humans in a balanced perspective.

I also think my religion has made me be very humble because in this world where money buys everything, when you die, you are all equal. It doesn’t matter how much money you had. It doesn’t matter what race you are. You are all the same.

Quinton also felt that his religion was a powerful force in his life that helped him to make effective use of self-determination.

You learn from your religion about how the world works, and that’s the religion you live in. That’s what you want to follow regardless of anything. Your religion will definitely help you, whatever your religion is. You can be Buddhist or whatever. It’s going to help you become who you are, because your religion is a part of you whether you like it or not.

Education

Education is greatly emphasized in the literature regarding the development of self-determination for individuals with disabilities. I wanted Rana, Mindy, and Quinton to discuss their own experiences in the educational process as it related to their development of self-determination.

I Don't Think They Allowed Her To Make Any Decisions

Rana had difficulty when she first began elementary school. Her mother moved her to a school that finally met her needs. “They taught me shortcuts.” She went on to explain some of the shortcuts she had learned. “If you have a book, you don’t have to read every word in the book to get the gist of the book....and study skills...learning what your weaknesses and strengths are. I learned very young that I was auditory, that if I just sat there and listened, I didn’t really have to take notes.”

Rana described some of the techniques that Woodley used to help her learn to read. They taught her games that she still remembers and has even taught to her daughter. Woodley helped her understand that her best learning style was in the auditory realm, and she combined the learning games and the knowledge of her learning style to help her improve her reading. “And, as remedial as they are, I still use little things like that. It’s really weird; I have to, because I’m auditory, but if I want to actually know what I’m reading, I have to read out loud. And I would have never known that unless Woodley told me that I was auditory. I would have just kept on reading it to myself and seeing all those words and having them jump off the page, and never really getting it.”

Rana felt that one of her greatest academic strengths had been math. For a time at Woodley, she did higher-level math such as algebra, but she stopped math to concentrate on her reading, and she no longer remembers much about it. “I was doing...mathematics close to that (algebra) in my fourth grade, and then I just completely slipped. I mean I don’t remember how to do anything as far as math goes.”

Rana expressed the belief that Woodley made most of the educational decisions for her while she was there. “I don’t remember my mother being consulted about

anything. I don't remember any meetings. I don't remember a lot of my childhood, but I'm sure they consulted her about certain things, but I don't think they allowed her to make any decisions."

Woodley provided risk-taking activities for students. "I learned to take risks and stuff and I learned to be like I guess a little bit less fearful I guess." They built small cars that they were actually allowed to drive. They completed rope courses and other moderate-risk activities.

Rana described her experience at Woodley very positively. She said that they never let her give up. "They never let me give up on myself and I guess...I learned that I couldn't give up on myself." She stated that sometimes she had to take a break from school, and her grandfather even came and got her when she felt too stressed. At other times she would be told "You know, go get a Kleenex, go blow your nose, take a break, and we're going to come back to it." Those procedures helped her continue with learning. "I guess I never got to the breaking point where I was going to get so overly frustrated with myself that I was going to stop."

However, she did get overwhelmed at times. She talked about a teacher who initially made her cry but who later became her favorite teacher at Woodley because he challenged her. She felt he was hard on her in the beginning because he would not let her give him a wrong answer. She stated that he would help her with the answer, but he would not let her give up, "He was so proud when I succeeded, he was so proud, and he made sure to call on me again, and again, and again, and I was so proud to be able to answer the question."

Rana stated that she was made fun of once in elementary school because of her reading, but this happened before she was transferred to Woodley. That experience resulted in her extreme dislike of reading aloud to anyone except her daughter. However, Woodley provided her with a measure of anonymity in regard to her progress in reading. “There wasn’t any time for anybody to really make fun of me. If I had problems in my English class, they didn’t involve any other student. It was one-on-one.”

On the other hand, Mindy hated elementary school. She felt that they did too much handholding. She also said, “I think they thought they were doing stuff to help me, but they really weren’t. Does that make sense? They thought that this was the way it was suppose to be done. But it wasn’t.”

She continued to talk about the way she remembered her experiences in elementary school as a student with a learning disability. “A lot of these kids are being taken out of class. We knew that we had a learning problem, and every one of the kids that had a learning disability was in the lower reading groups, lower math groups.” It was not until she was older that the implications of that fact really sank in. “I didn’t think much about it then, but when I hit high school, and I was learning that Woodrow Wilson had a PhD, but he was also dyslexic. It doesn’t make us stupid.”

She felt that many of the students got labeled, and the label followed them all the way through school. Those students eventually lived up to the expectation imposed by the various labels. “I think some of the parents of these kids took it as ‘I can’t control the kid because they have ADD.’ You can control kids even if they have ADD. Or is my kid stupid because they’re dyslexic? They are not stupid. They were just dyslexic.”

Mindy had both ADD and a learning disability, and she felt that she never had any effective help with the learning disability. “I never had any help with the dyslexia. I taught myself, even to this day.” When she took economics, she had difficulty distinguishing between the p, q over b. “I’d sit there ten minutes just looking at one problem because it takes me that long to figure out where the p is and where the q is.” The only help Mindy ever received to help her deal with her ADD was the medication she had to take as a child. Additionally, she did not understand why she did not receive more help for her identified learning disability.

Mindy did get help with her reading. She mentioned that two of her elementary teachers stayed after school and worked with her. She felt that the program she was in was not helpful, but the teachers were. “I think a lot of the people that were the people who were in charge of the program didn’t know anything about us...they just kind of like threw stuff together and said ‘here go through with it,’ but the teachers knew us, you know what I mean?”

No one ever told Mindy that she had a learning disability, and for a while she could only guess about why she was being taken out of her classes periodically. The first time she was taken out of class was particularly difficult for her. “I cried the first time, because I thought I was doing something wrong.” According to Mindy, it was not until the fourth grade that she finally began to understand that she had a learning disability and that it was the reason she was removed from class. By this time they had placed her on medication for ADD, and her grades actually fell because she could not stay awake to do her homework. Additionally, Mindy received no instruction in self-determination in elementary school. “I had guidance counselors. Well, I guess I know we had a guidance

counselor in elementary school that would come in, and she would talk to the class about setting goals and stuff like that, but in first grade we weren't really paying attention."

Mindy felt that the elementary school program should have dealt more with the individual disabilities of the students. She felt that the students needed not only to learn that the disability would be with them for the rest of their lives, but also to learn the techniques that work for them. As she stated, "what they did is they generalized it all, and they shoved you in one class together, but you could have someone in there who had a problem with one thing, and there was someone who had something totally different, so the same method was not going to work with them."

Mindy expressed the opinion that in elementary school, the programs were so generalized that no one really benefited. The teacher might be teaching strategies "but it doesn't work for me, and the one that might work for me, but not for him so you are pretty much wasting a class period for him when it's really helping me or you are wasting my time when it's helping him, and I think it's just very generalized."

She worked on skills enhancement in the smaller pullout sessions; however, she did not feel that she learned anything during these sessions. In the second and third grades, the students had one teacher for three students, but as they went up in grade, the ratio changed to one teacher for ten students. Mindy felt that the ratio of one to ten was not effective. "So, it's hard for her...to deal with ten special little...problems."

Mindy was not told what her disability was, and because she was not given information about what was wrong, she began not to care. "Not telling me made me not care. You know that's how I feel, if you don't want to tell me, fine, let's move on. It is

no longer important.” She felt that instead of waiting for the right time to tell her about her disability, she should have been told when she was very young.

Although Quinton was in public school throughout elementary school, when he entered middle school he was placed in a private school that dealt exclusively with students with a variety of disabilities. “My history in school, well, it was a sort of a transfer from schools because at first I started off in public elementary school and going through elementary school then I never really...passed any classes but I was moved to the next grade.” During the time he was in public elementary school, he felt strongly that none of his educational challenges were effectively addressed. When he reached fifth grade, he transferred to a private school.

The contrast is striking between the educational opportunities in the various elementary schools that were described by the participants. Rana had to be moved from school to school before she found a program that was effective for her. What she found was a private school designed to teach children with disabilities, and her mother paid for this school herself. Mindy reported having some remediation in the public school, but from her own accounts, the techniques were ineffective for her. Quinton had no effective help until he was removed entirely from public school instruction and placed in a school for students with disabilities.

They Did Help Me...with My Disability

Middle school was the next step. When Rana appeared to be doing well at Woodley, Rana’s mother pulled her out and placed her in Richfield, a small private school for general education students; however, the school also offered some special education inclusion classes for students with disabilities. She received special education

services in one of her classes, but she decided that she no longer needed direct services. She went to her mother and told her that she would handle problems herself if any arose. She went directly to the teachers herself and stated her needs: “Well, I have a hard time, but I can guarantee that I’ll do twice as good if you just read the questions to me and let me answer the questions verbally, and you write them down. So I did.” At this point, she was already demonstrating self-determination skills.

Rana had difficulty with math at Richfield, and she was placed in a math class based on her skill level rather than an age-based placement. She was bothered that some students in the class were her younger sister’s age. “I guess I was like I was in one of the lower math classes after I got out of Woodley and I was going to Richfield...it was like fifth grade through eighth grade, you know, that’s the way they set up the math, and I wanted to say that I really didn’t care that there were kids my sister’s age in my class, but I...did.”

Rana appeared to have some positive academic experiences in middle school. When she was interested in something, she reported that she would work hard to find out more, and she felt that she did well on anything that she really loved. She saved two reports she wrote in middle school, and she gave one of these reports to her college instructor for his evaluation. “I gave it to my teacher in college to look over, and he said it would still be an A even though I wrote it in eighth grade.” Even though things have undoubtedly changed since she wrote the paper, it must have been very well done if the instructor felt it still deserved an A. This illustrates how strongly she was interested in the subject and also shows that when she was interested in a subject, she focused her energies on learning all she could.

Mindy's experience in middle school was also a positive one. She got help when she needed it, but she did not feel singled out. In addition, she felt that she had great teachers in middle school. "I think, like, when I hit, like, middle school I had some of the best teachers that I've ever had." She felt that they had an interesting program and memorable fieldtrips "We'd go watch plays, and we'd go to dinner theaters. We did little things like that, and we did really little fun things."

Although she was pulled out from time to time, it was not a constant occurrence, and she felt that she got the help she needed when she needed it. "No, well the thing about middle school was that the help was there when we needed it." In addition, she also remembered attending her IEP meetings, but she did not find them to be stressful. "I do remember when I was in a meeting that after asking the questions, if I was getting, you know, really irritated or bored with it, I would be allowed to have a little break where I could go get something to drink, like some water or something, and come back."

Mindy felt that she had help in developing strategies to deal with her disabilities. "They did help me...with my disability, I mean, they probably weren't experts, but they gave me ideas, you know what I mean, gave me ideas on how to do stuff. You know, went a little more into depth." These were not special education teachers, but she speculated that they probably had some type of instruction in dealing with students with disabilities. "You know, I'm pretty sure they had to take a class on disabilities and stuff in the classroom, but, you know, their main thing was, like, math or science. They were not special education teachers."

She felt that although she had been in the lowest group in elementary school, she did not see herself as being in the lowest group in middle school. The county had a

program called Horizon Program, and students in that group were characterized as the lowest group. Those students had been identified as in danger of failing, and they were placed in this special program. “They were stereotyped as much as anyone else. But they were the lowest group in the middle school, so I was no longer in the lower group.”

Mindy earned straight A’s in middle school. She felt that she had a chance for advancement during that time. Students were moved from one group or class to another based on ability rather than on stereotyped labels. “Even if you were stereotyped like some of the kids who were from Horizon Program, they were able to come up into the high group. There was more of a chance that you could break out of the group.”

Mindy felt that one of the major differences between elementary school and middle school was the way they handled students with different abilities. In elementary school, students were segregated into different groups within their own class. “Where in middle school maybe you were put in different groups, but those groups moved with you from the classroom, and you didn’t have to look at the people who were different from you. Now, in that classroom in middle school you were all the same. Not necessarily the same but generally you were at the same level.”

Mindy expressed some clear and definite feelings about school and teachers. “School didn’t help me, teachers did. Like teachers really did help me, individual teachers really do make a difference. The school system, I honestly don’t think they did. Actually, the best teachers I had were in middle school.”

Conversely, Quinton had little to say about middle school. He was transferred to a private school in his early middle-school years and went through middle and high school at the same institution. However, he did talk about the challenges he had in passing the

State Functional Tests. “Writing test I passed. I had a lot of trouble with the writing test, so I didn’t pass it till like when I got to high school. The math test I passed my senior year in middle school...That was a good, good math teacher back in the middle school.”

The experiences were fairly positive for all three of the participants in middle school. By that time, they knew that they had some educational challenges, but they appeared to be more positive about school. No one mentioned any specific activities to help them be more self-determining.

High School Experiences

Finally, graduation seemed to be in sight, just a few more years to go, and the educational process would make a permanent and welcome change. All they had to do was survive high school. Rana went to a small private school for her first year of high school. She was taught at the regular grade level, and everyone was roughly the same age, but she was not successful there and eventually left that school. Her second year of high school presented her with a different set of problems. “I became a teen parent, and that’s pretty much what made me have to really work and not hide behind my learning disability.” The school she attended was not geared to address the problems of students with learning disabilities exclusively. “It wasn’t a regular school, but it wasn’t for learning disabled kids. That was the first time I ever went to a public school, and that was a school for unwed mothers or something like that, but I was married.”

Rana started out having some problems, so she talked to her teachers and asked them to make modifications for her. “Look, I’m obviously not doing very well, as you can see. Why don’t we test this by not taking off points for me not spelling correctly, or if you give me a computer so that I can do a spell check. I can’t guarantee that all of the

words are going to be spelled correctly, even after using the spell check.” But she convinced them to help her, and according to her, all except one teacher one made these modifications for her.

Happily, Rana was successful until the vice principal learned of the accommodations and directed the teachers to refrain from making them. Rana had not come to the school with an IEP because she had been in private school. “I only hit a wall after the vice principal of the school found out that the teachers were giving me special resources, and my documentation hadn’t been up-to-date at that point.”

By this time, Rana was living on her own, and she did not know how to get the services she needed. “During the third year of high school, I lost my services. Not like services that were supposed to be given me through an IEP, but services that were given to me because I spoke up and I said, ‘Look, I can do that.’”

Unfortunately, Rana needed testing accommodations to be successful, but the teachers could no longer make the changes that had been so helpful to her in the past. “I guess the only thing would be reformulating my tests...They had to be changed. It couldn’t require a whole lot of writing. Because by the time I’d start writing it down, I’d forget the answer. I needed to have triggers to trigger the answer. I guess that’s really the only thing that teachers did, as far as helping me.” The teachers were not allowed to help her, and she began to falter.

Rana began to feel that she could not be successful in that school, so she did some research on her own and discovered that she only had to take one more class to graduate. It appeared that Rana was already a good self-advocate because she contacted a friend of her mother’s who worked in another school and asked for her help. The friend told Rana

that because she only needed one class, she could be exempt from 12th grade. “I didn’t have to take a GED or anything. I got my high school diploma like anybody else. I got it from Highlander, and I never attended that school, ever.”

Although Mindy gave high school mixed reviews, she did manage to be successful in that setting. However, Mindy had mixed feelings about her teachers in high school. “I hit high school I had every extreme. I had some really good teachers then I had some really bad teachers.” Nevertheless, she did feel that the teachers tried to give her good advice about college.

Mindy attended a large high school, and she did not feel that she had what she termed a lot of handholding in high school. She felt that the fact that she was pretty much on her own in high school was an advantage to her “because I didn’t have that hand holding through middle school and high school. I had a little bit in elementary school, a lot of it actually being pulled out of class, but I didn’t have that big...I don’t want to call it social shock when I came to college.”

Regrettably, Mindy felt that she did not get very much help from the guidance counselors in high school. “High school...you get like ten minutes with them, and that’s it. You ask them a question, and they say yeah or neigh, and that’s it.” She felt that the guidance counselors did not even know her name, and worse, one counselor discouraged her from attending a four-year college. She internalized his advice to mean that she did not have the ability to succeed. However, she went on and proved that she did.

Even though Quinton’s experience in a private high school for students with disabilities was different from the experiences of Rana and Mindy, he still was able to graduate. “Yes, I graduated from Tucker Johnson from middle school and high school.

High school I got...a city...a Manchester City diploma from Tucker Johnson and a Tucker Johnson diploma.” He met the requirements for graduation. Not only did Quinton pass the practical state tests in middle and high school, but he was also required to take state tests to assess his learning in certain core courses. His scores on these tests did not affect his ability to graduate. Even though he successfully graduated, he still felt that if he had been held back in elementary school, he would have changed, and he could have continued in the public school. He liked the private special school that he attended, but there appeared to be some lingering regrets that he had been unsuccessful in public school.

Unquestionably, Quinton has difficulty with reading. He felt that if he had been taught properly in elementary and middle school, he might not be having the problems he was having as a college student. However, he felt that he did get technology instruction in high school that enabled him to overcome his reading challenges. “By now...I just sit down and I read the textbooks with a computer and mostly just do my work with a computer as to how the other high school told me how to.”

Fortunately, he was able to take computer instruction in high school, but he also successfully took a variety of other courses as well. “I think in high school I tried to learn a little bit of carpentry and a little bit of plumbing around the house, just do house maintenance stuff. I like to learn about that, too. I like to mostly just do stuff for my own, like if I had to do plumbing by myself, I could learn how to do that, you know.”

A referral to the State Rehabilitation Services was made for him while he was at Tucker Johnson. That referral seemed to produce a motivating experience in his life. They examined his test scores and recommended that he not go to college. “They

basically wanted to settle me on, like, hands-on engineering or, like, auto mechanics or, like, food service, you know what I'm saying, I'm, like, I'm not settling for that, you know, and I felt like...I was determined to prove them wrong.”

Regrettably, he interpreted their recommendation to mean he had no chance to succeed at his dream career of working in computers. He felt strongly that they had no right to tell him what he could do or not do. “No, you don't tell me that. That's just like, that's like telling a brick wall to move. It's not going to happen. You ... don't come up to me and say what I can and cannot do.” This became a defining moment for him because he was not willing to accept their recommendations. “I think that you know what self-determination is also if you're going to settle for that, then settle for that, but self-determination for me, you know, is basically my focus point.”

All three of the participants graduated from high school. Rana encountered difficulty in high school and had to use her self-advocacy skills to finish. Mindy was able to be successful with few accommodations. She was even able to complete some AP courses and had concurrent enrollment in the community college while in high school. However, she felt that her ability to succeed was challenged by her high school counselor, and she felt she had something to prove. Quinton received instruction that enhanced his technical skills, and this instruction was instrumental in his ability to be successful later in college.

Quinton was the only one who reported working with the SRS, but he did not find that experience helpful. It is a common practice for students with disabilities to be referred to that agency. However, his encounter with SRS was the catalyst that caused him to explore and eventually attend the community college. All three participants had at

some point faced questions about their ability to succeed. Instead of allowing this doubt concerning their abilities to defeat them, they used it as another motivator to succeed.

College — A Life Changing Experience

Obtaining postsecondary education is one of the positive adult outcomes that the literature refers to for all students, and each of the participants reported on his or her community-college experience. I devote more detail to this section for two reasons: On the one hand, being able to attend and be successful in the community college setting is truly an adult outcome that many would recognize as a positive goal that these participants had already achieved. I wanted to allow them to share their experiences after they had arrived. Their experiences are like those of any student in some respects and different in others. In addition, their experiences as students with disabilities are like and different from each other. It is important not only to understand the factors that brought them to that place in their lives, but also to understand their experiences after they got to the community college.

The other important part of this topic is that they shared that being in community college enhanced their development of self-determination, and it is critical to understand the elements of the community college experience that helped them grow in this area. Bronfenbrenner stated that the ecological environment is not bound in time. Instead, he stated, “an ecological transition occurs throughout the life span” (p. 26). The participants made the transition from high school to community college, and some would argue that they also made the transition from child to adult. But the community college experience pushed them to continue their journey of self-determination.

That's Just How the Dyslexic Mind Works

Rana has been attending community college since 1996. “I’ve been at Winchester for a long time. I’ve been at Winchester since ’96. The reason why I’ve been there so long wasn’t because of failing classes or anything like that, it was just the fact that I was married, and now I’m not, and I’m a single parent, and I have to take care of a child with special needs.” She had to learn how to pace herself and finally found that she could take 4 classes per semester. “I didn’t go during the summer, of course. And I didn’t go during the winter because of my brakes. So I guess that’s why I’ve been in college so long.”

She had failed only one class, an English class, but after that experience, she had decided not to take any more English classes for several years. She also had to drop an anthropology class because she feared that she might fail that one, too. “But I’ve only failed one class at Winchester.”

Rana entered college without current documentation from her high school identifying the type of disability she had. She went to an expert in dyslexia who had worked with her at the private high school she attended before going to public school. He wrote a document stating that she had a learning disability in reading, and she was granted support services by the community college.

Upon entering the community college, she had to take the placement test for reading, math, and English. Her scores on reading and English surprised her. “It’s really weird because with that, I scored very low on English, like English 052 when I started at Winchester, but I was almost exempt from reading.” Reading had always been her greatest challenge in school, but when she took the placement tests her results were better than she had expected. “It was just kind of funny; I entered reading at Reading 101

which was really weird because it's, because I guess that's just how the dyslexic mind works.”

At the time of the interviews, Rana needed to take four or five math classes and statistics to graduate. However, she perceived this as a problem. She had not taken math in a while, and in the year before graduation from high school she had not taken any math at all because she had met the graduation requirement. “I haven't taken math since '96 or '97.” She felt that she might need a tutor to help her prepare for the next course. In addition, she had to retake the math placement test. “I also wanted to get a tutor to tutor me in math. I'm up for renewal in taking math placement tests, so I'm going to try to get myself to where I only have to take one or two remedial math classes before taking my 101, my statistics. I wish you could get exempt from math! But you just can't.” She stated that it should only take her another three semesters to graduate if she takes two courses a semester.

Rana was concerned about taking the placement test because she needed a calculator to complete math problems, especially problems involving long division. At the time we were meeting, she was not allowed to use a calculator during the placement tests, and she felt that would be a significant problem for her.

Rana felt that she could probably do well in statistics if she could get there. She thought that she could handle algebra but “I can't, like, show my work, that kind of thing, I would have to use a calculator so when I take my placement test then I'm not going to place very high because I can't use a special calculator unless I get that accommodation set into my placement test.” She was going to try and secure the calculator accommodation to help her when she took the placement tests.

She described the procedure she had to follow to secure the accommodation she needed. “I would probably...go to Marlene (the assisting teacher through student services) and she would...probably refer me over to the special education department. I’d have to ask them if they would write me a note for that accommodation.” However, she was also concerned about having to read any of the problems. Although the prospect of having to read applied math problems worried her, she was reluctant to ask for that accommodation for the math test. “But if I have that accommodation, I’d have to use that accommodation in all classes...So, I just, you know, scrape by with it. I’ll try to do it to the best of my ability.”

Despite having some challenges in the community college, Rana expressed admiration for a professor she had there. “But I have had very positive role models in college. My academic advisor in criminal justice, Dr. Seymour, kind of took me under his wing.” She earned either A’s or B’s in his class. “And Dr. Seymour was a stickler, real structured. You miss one day, you could lose a letter grade. He’d start out with a class of 30 and by the end of the semester; there would be only 15 students. I’d be one of them. Just ready to learn another day.”

Rana felt that Dr. Seymour had been a great help in teaching her about self-determination because he had offered her both challenge and respect when she rose to his standards. However, at the time of our interview she no longer felt she was finding the challenge and respect that she had once had. “I don’t think I have the bonds with my teachers that I’ve had in the past. I think they’ve just been teaching a class, and that’s about it. I’m just another name, just another face. I usually tried to make sure that they

remembered my name and my face. But I think for quite a few semesters, I don't think that I've been really anybody but a name in the classroom."

Rana continued to talk about her experiences in college. Although she struggled in high school, she felt that college was an entirely different situation. "I think once you get to college, I think it's pretty much if there are any problems whatsoever...most colleges know how to address these problems pretty well. It's pretty head-on about those situations." When she had difficulty, she could go to the Student Support Center for help. She had used the services provided by the counselor from time to time. She described the help as more of a support process. "She just looked over my work, made sure if there was anything...that needed to be proofread over what the spell checker didn't catch." Rana felt that proofreading was one of the most valuable services the counselor offered. Rana described another way Marlene helped her: "She would get me going, like she would get me started, and she didn't even do it like intentionally, it was like she would...start on something and I would just be like, 'how do you do that?' and she would say 'oh, well, I think it was this way' and I'm like 'oh, oh, oh okay, I got it under control.'"

Sometimes Rana also used her counselor to motivate her to work. "Every time I went to ask her a question, I just needed a starter. You know I needed her to light the fire, which would be me, and then I burned from there." Rana was concerned that she did not misuse the service that Marlene provided. Even though Marlene did not set any particular expectations on the help she offered, "I felt bad if I didn't meet my own expectation for what I had figured on doing."

To have her accommodations for her classes, Rana had to alert each of her professors on the first day of every class. The counseling center provided her with a letter for each of her professors explaining the accommodations she was entitled to receive. She did get extended time. “It took me, it takes me two times longer or three times longer to complete certain tests or even understand questions if I have to do a lot of...reading...on a test.” Sometimes she had to ask for questions to be repeated. “I’m not...trying to act stupid in front of you. I’m just, sometimes I might have to ask you the same questions two or three times sometimes to figure out what it means, or maybe I might need you to explain it to me.”

She also was allowed to use a spell-checking device, although she also asked that spelling not be held against her. She recognized that spelling was a particular problem for her. She requested her professors to “not mark me off for every spelling error that I made because I’m not always going to be able to get to the computer lab to do a spell check, or even if I do a spell checker because I don’t know how to spell a certain words correctly, I’m not going to know how to figure out how to get them spelled correctly.” In addition, she was also entitled to a note taker, but she said she either got the notes from the instructor or she simply copied notes from a friend in class later.

She had some challenging experiences, but she had managed to handle them successfully. Rana described a situation in which her advisor strongly suggested that she take an earth science class instead of the biology class she wanted to take. She took the course, but the instructor claimed that she had not alerted him to her need for accommodations, and he was reluctant to make any changes for her. She fought him on this issue. According to her, she had a 4.0 going into that class. “That was like one of

the only times that the teacher that I had didn't take into consideration the fact that I had a learning disability. I actually passed, but I ended up having to be an advocate for three other students in his class who failed that were special education."

Rana described herself as being successful in school. "I know with me, even now, I do pretty well in school. It's a little hard, but I do pretty well in school." She also saw herself as pretty much a regular student who reacts like other students in similar situations. "Even now, if it's something I'm not interested in, I'm like a normal student. I don't really pick it up or try to put any effort into it, although now I'm getting ready to graduate, so I'm forcing myself into it." She was taking a course that required her to put forth more effort than usual. "I'm really spending a lot of time on my English homework, which I never really did."

When we began our interviews, she was having some difficulty with the current course she was taking; however, she stated that this was the first semester in a while in which she had experienced any difficulty. She had been given an assignment the previous week and the finished product, which included a paper and an oral report, was due in a little over a week. She planned on spending time with Marlene, the assisting teacher, to get help. "I rarely work with her, but this class I kind of pretty much would come to her every class, actually every class, and kind of, like, check to...make sure...what I was doing was okay." She had planned for the following day to go to the counselor and "I'm going to show up and I'm going to sit there with Marlene...all day because I'm just going put away everything else that I'm suppose to do tomorrow and just do that."

Rana had difficulty finding information even with Marlene's help. Other students in the class were proceeding and even had begun to give their oral reports. "It was hard

to compile stuff, and I wanted to get a taste of what the other kids were doing for their papers.” She did feel that hearing what the other students presented helped her to focus on her own topic.

In one of our sessions, Rana complained about her instructor and the course in general. “The problem is she’s teaching at like a grad-school level, cause she just got out of graduate school, and like Marlene said, the papers that are supposed to be done in most English 239 classes are suppose to be on cultures, but this is different, it’s a business writing class.”

Rana said that Marlene was threatening to charge her for help with completing the works cited page. She felt that she really only needed help in distinguishing the journals from the other material. Rana recognized that it was a detail-oriented job. “I guess it’s meticulous for everybody, considering Marlene didn’t want to really help me with it, but she knew...that’s what I needed help with just figuring out whether it’s a journal or whatever.” Rana felt that she could probably copy the format from her book for the references, and that is what she planned to do.

The best resource that Rana had for typing was to go to the YWCA to use their computers. Unfortunately, she typed slowly, and the Y was not always open when she could get away to type. In addition, she felt that a special software program might have made the typing easier as well. “I probably would have had it done like a week ago, but I’m a little bit slower at getting things typed....If they had the software up and running at Winchester, like reader software or voice recognition software, then it probably would have helped me a lot.”

Rana felt that she had learned a lot from the class, but she also felt frustrated because she did not feel that the instructor was aware of her disability. “I feel as though, that she’s not really rating me on the fact that I have a learning disability, which I guess is good, but it’s also bad.” Even though Rana did not believe that she was failing the class, she did not feel that the instructor was giving her any considerations based on her disability. Rana wanted to be told if she was doing something consistently wrong; however, she wanted the instructor to understand that she was not being deliberately careless about her work. Finally, Rana was able to communicate her frustration to her instructor. “I’m not slacking off. You know, I’m not doing this on purpose. Why were you writing it down like I’m doing it on purpose? I don’t know about my mistakes until you know.”

In our last session, Rana described what happened when she finally did complete her paper and was able to give her oral presentation. Rana followed that required format for her report, but she chose to write about a student with a learning disability, and she was actually able to read the report to the class. “And I think there were people who were very empowered by the fact that I read my report and that...I was going to make damn sure to put in about my learning disabilities.” Rana said that she was not concerned that it was not exactly a business report but was determined to do it her way. “I didn’t fall under that category, I wasn’t going to do that, and it was my report and I was going to make it my own, and I was going to own it.” Rana had not gotten her grade yet for the course, but she appeared rather unconcerned with that issue. She was proud that she had finished the report, and she felt that she had broadly met the instructor’s requirements while also putting her personal stamp on her work.

You're on Your Own in College

Mindy's experience in the community college had been a positive one, but she felt her success in college actually began in high school. The large high school she attended offered her anonymity in terms of her learning disability. No one hovered over her, and she felt independent. "I didn't have that hand holding through middle school and high school. I had a little bit in elementary school, a lot of it actually being pulled out of class and all, but I didn't have that big culture — I don't know I don't want to call it social — shock when I came to college."

In addition, Mindy's parents played a part in preparing her for college by refraining from interfering with her ability to do her schoolwork on her own. She talked about the role she had seen other parents play in her friend's homework and major projects. "They'll practically rewrite the paper for the kid, and the kid's getting A's, and when they hit college then why am I getting D's or I used to get A's or why am I getting C's because...once you hit college that help's not going to be there." In addition, she felt college itself helped push her into independence. "I think...it's going to sound silly but...you're on your own when you're in college."

I asked Mindy to identify her learning style, and her reply was that it depended on the subject. She said that in math or science she usually needed pictures and diagrams to help her understand what was going on. However, in history and English courses, she usually could do well by just listening to what was being presented. "If it is like a history class or an English class, I can usually get by with listening and hearing, but I also like to see things. When it comes to science and math, there's no way I can get by with just listening."

Additionally, she informed me that she generally did her homework in college and that she was successful academically. “Yeah, I mean, I wanted to go to college, I mean, even if it was just for, I mean, I wanted to be a teacher, but, I mean, I was going to get my AA, because there’s not much you can do with a high school diploma anymore.”

Unquestionably, Mindy felt that the attitude of colleges toward students with disabilities was considerably different from the attitudes she encountered in elementary, middle, and high school. “I think in college people are more accepted for what they can do than what they can’t do, but very much for what they can do.” Colleges do not seem to have to deal with as many students with disabilities as in the traditional public school, and colleges have more freedom to deal with students in a serious, yet more relaxed manner. “Especially in college, I don’t think they really care. They don’t really deal with it that much, and the reason I think they treat them (students with disabilities) more equal is because it’s not always in their face.” In her opinion, the help is available if you need it. “Help is there but it’s not in the class, in your face. You know what I mean?” In college, it is the student’s responsibility to get help if and when he or she needs it. She felt that attitude contributed toward a greater feeling of independence.

At the beginning of each new semester, Mindy and her friends had difficulty finding parking spaces. However, as the semester progressed, more and more parking spaces became available as people dropped out. I asked her why she never dropped out. Her reply was, “Because I had no need to....the work was not per se challenging, but it was challenging enough. I scheduled my time, and it was never an option to drop out.” She also stated that if she left school she would not have been allowed to remain in her parent’s home. “I couldn’t stay home. I wouldn’t have that nice little cushy bedroom.

My parents said if I'm not in college then I have a month to find a good job and move out."

The community college Mindy attended offered support services to students who had disabilities. Mindy explained the process of securing the accommodations when they were needed. "They just gave me a paper that I gave to my professors that said that I required extended time in the testing center or in class on exams, and I chose to use it or not use it."

Nevertheless, Mindy did not need to use her services often. "I did use my extended time like once, and that was for anthropology class. I just needed a little bit more time to finish writing an essay, and that was it." She also stated that use of extended time did depend on the class. "Cause certain classes I can get through without even having to use it, like a lot of English and right brain stuff, but when it comes to math and science, I sometimes need that extended time just to get my thoughts together."

The concept of anonymity for students who needed accommodations was important to Mindy. "We just hand him a green paper and that's the only way...that they know." The college seemed to do a good job of maintaining the confidentiality of those students who needed services.

At this college, even those who maybe needed extended time or something, I didn't know who they were in the class, but I'm pretty sure I had a class with someone that needed that. That's a good thing; I think...we're not doing the prejudging.

At the time of the interviews, Mindy had already been accepted to a college in New England. Nevertheless, she felt some reservation about going to a new school

because it was going to feel like entering the new situation as a freshman. “I’m going to be like a freshman going in there, but I’m not going to be a freshman. I’m going in there...taking level three hundred and two hundred classes, and it’s just a different experience. It’s just going to be a lot harder.” She felt that everyone else would know each other, and she would be walking in as a stranger.

In addition, Mindy was concerned that the level of the work could be more challenging. So not only would she be going into a new social situation, but she was also entering a potentially more demanding academic situation as well. “I’m coming in by myself, and the class work is going to be harder — it’s going to be a two hundred class. You can’t expect the work to be the same as a one hundred class. So, it’s going to be harder both ways, but I’ll just make do.”

At the time of our meetings, Mindy had not identified herself to her new college as a student with learning disabilities. She was reluctant to identify herself as a student with a disability because she was afraid that she would be accepted as a symbol rather than a person. She did not want to be seen as a disability code, but rather as the person she believes herself to be. “I applied without saying that I had any disabilities because I wanted to get in because of me. I didn’t want them to take me in as, oh, I think we can use her as a statistic.”

Even so, Mindy was concerned that she might need additional help in this larger four-year university. “I think I might...have to identify myself because I don’t know what to expect from them. I don’t know how to expect the work.” She has done some research on the services they offer students with handicapping conditions, and she is pleased with what she discovered. They have a diversified program geared toward the

individual. “I also liked how they give more individual support. Actually, they have a really good program.”

College Is a Metaphor for Business Transaction

When Quinton was seventeen years old, SRS told him he was too old to be taught how to read. Instead, they suggested that he be trained in either food service or auto mechanics. He decided on the spot that those options were not for him. “You know, I do that for, like, side work, so I’m not going to do that for the rest of my life.” He and his mom left the SRS offices and discussed his options. His mom suggested that he look at the support services at the community college. “My mom said, ‘well, you need to take a look at the disability services available at colleges.’ I took a look at all disability services offered to me, and Williams it was the closest one to me that offered the most, so I came here.”

Quinton contacted Project Open Door during the summer, and the Student Support Services department began working with him after he entered. “The Student Support takes you when you come into the college. Project Open Door only gets you from high school until you come to college.”

Quinton took four classes in his first semester at Williams; however, he felt that he should have taken a smaller number of classes. “You really shouldn’t, if you are a student with disabilities you should probably take it easy and not take so many classes to start out with. Unfortunately I didn’t pass the English class nor did I fail my English class.” He was forced to repeat the English class. He was also able to take two computer classes and one fitness class.

I asked Quinton if he had worked during his first year at Williams. “No, last year, unfortunately at first there were no jobs available, and then the financial aid didn’t have more money for work support for anybody, even though I was in job support before, they didn’t have any money to pay me for that. So, that was kind of a bummer.” Not working gave Quinton more time to study, and in retrospect he felt that it was probably in his best interest that he did not have a job. “I probably shouldn’t have worked because in the fall, I was doing barely good. Spring, I was doing okay good, but I still feel as though I could do better.”

He was planning to get a job for next year. During the summer I was interviewing him, he was working on campus, and he also had a retail job at the shopping center nearby. I asked him if working next year might interfere with his studies. Quinton had a plan to make everything work together. “Well, I figure...when I finish making my fall schedule, the days that I have classes I will be off and I’ll just study that whole day, and the days I don’t have classes I’ll work and go home and study.” If that does not work for him, then he planned to get a job on campus so he could have more flexibility in his study time.

Quinton went through the Project Open Door course the summer before he actually began taking courses at Williams. The next year, he was hired to be a mentor to the new students just entering the program. I asked him to tell me a little about the program and to explain his role as mentor. Quinton applied for the job as a mentor, and he described the process. “Lots of interviews, there were not that many, two or three, that’s all. I am the up and coming.” He felt that many good people were working as

mentors. They all have to have a disability, and they all have to have gone through the program previously.

One of the first things Quinton discussed was how to be a good self-advocate. Project Open Door trained the students to talk to professors. “You have got to be able to communicate; to be able to talk, you know, and advocate for yourself. I think it’s knowing what you need, how to deliver it properly, and also how to receive feedback on what you think the professor can actually do.” He felt that he had enough confidence to talk to professors now, and he had the skills he needed to be able to advocate for himself. He explained that college is not high school, and professors are not going to come to you if you are having a problem in class. It was your job to go to them. “When I have problems with a class, I have enough confidence to...walk up and talk to the teacher and tell him or her ‘I have a problem can you help me?’”

Quinton was taught to go to the professors after class to discuss his needs; however, he preferred to go the day before the class begins to talk with his professors. “I tell them that I’m a student with a disability. This is what I need to get through your class. Will you work with me? If the professor says yes, then that’s a good class. If the professor says no, I get a withdrawal slip.” Quinton had never had a professor say no to him, but he had heard of some who did not like to work with students with disabilities.

Project Open Door students took several courses during the summer session. They took some study skills courses to help prepare them for college. “So, the studies skills class taught a quick way to skim through the reading material, and it taught you how to prepare for your classes.” Additionally, students were taught to study two hours for every one hour they spent in class, and they were given pointers on how to structure

their study time to properly prepare for classes. “They were taught how to read the material ahead of time, and how to make a schedule. You know...if you don’t have a schedule, then you know you are really at a loss at college, and these are the some of the things that we taught them.”

In addition, they took some math and writing courses in which they could earn college credits. “After that, there was a publishing class which showed you how to do small essays and small papers....The writing class and the publishing class overlapped each other, but it’s best to get a double dosage of it.” Project Open Door also provided job shadowing for students contemplating a variety of careers. Not only did students actually go to a job to see what it is really like, but also, in some cases, people in the field came to the college to talk about their positions.

Quinton said that he told the students that he was mentoring them the same way he was taught. “Yeah, because really in college, this is when a life changing experience happens, you know. That’s what I learned, you know, what you do here now is going to have an everlasting affect on you in the future.” The students asked him if he worked as hard here as he did in high school, and his reply was that there are different battles to fight in college.

He asked them, “be quiet for a second, you hear anything?” They invariably replied that they do not. “No, they don’t care if you go to class or not. So college to me is instead of it being a school, it’s more like a business transaction.” He went on to tell them that if they fail, they have wasted their own money.

Yeah, you pay for the classes whether you fail or not. You're still paying for that class, and you have to watch out. If you fail, you got the short end of the deal, if you didn't watch out for your investment.

He felt that they needed a different attitude toward college than they had toward high school. "See, if you put it in that state of mind, some of the kids get really confident, and some of them get worried like they should be." He felt that some people go around telling them that college is nothing but a school. If that happens they might deal with college the same way as high school.

There were times that the job of mentor was demanding, "because...you're students who are forced to come, you know, so if you're forced to go some place are you going to really want to be there? No." He found that other times it was not so bad because some students wanted to be there and were interested in what he had to say.

Quinton used the term *humblized* as a metaphor for learning that you have failings, and in his opinion, until you learn that you do have some weaknesses, you will have a hard time.

The ones who are going to fall on hard times are the ones who are so high up right now, they haven't been humblized yet. My first semester, that humbled me a lot; brought me down because I thought that if you study and you do what you need to do before class, you can get by the class. No.

He expressed the opinion that you have to be able to go the extra step and go beyond what you used to do to stay on top. "So fall semester I was humbled. I was humblized. Most horrible class, so yeah, some of them will have to be humblized going into the college." He felt that getting that one bad grade had a humanizing effect on us

all. “But everybody, everybody falls. Everybody gets that one bad grade, you know. That’s what makes us human, you know. If you don’t get that one bad grade, then are you really human?”

Quinton talked about how important his education was to him. “I want to graduate so badly. So, I could take it to the State Department of Student Disabilities and just say...I graduated, I graduated, I graduated you know.” Even though Quinton’s greatest wish appeared at that moment to be to graduate from college, he seemed to have a very realistic attitude toward his life. “Lots of things get in the way. I mean, who’s to say I’m not going to graduate on time or who’s going to say that I’m not going to actually finish, you know. I might change my mind, and say I want to go off and do this you know...if as long as that’s what you want to do...hey, you know.”

Quinton joined a Christian fellowship group during his first year at the community college, and he found the support of his friends to be an enormous help. “Working with my friend, yes, my friend he sort of looks after all the college students in the Christian Fellowship, he really motivates us. He really wanted us to do better in college all the time.” When he was working with his friends, he had access to a desktop computer, but the most important aspect of the fellowship was the access he appeared to have to unlimited help and support.

Level Playing Field

As I talked to the participants, each shared his or her experiences regarding the use and availability of accommodations. At the time of our interviews, Rana was working on a project for a class she was taking. She expressed frustration at not being able to get the help. She knew that she could do the work if she could just get the

accommodations she needed to make it a level playing field for her; however, she got tired and frustrated at having to explain what she needed. Even though she got frustrated, she was determined to stay in the program and do what she needed to do.

On the other hand, Mindy did not feel that she needed any accommodations except extended time. Although she did not use that accommodation very much at the community college she attended, she did expect to use it in her new college placement.

Conversely, Quinton used a computer extensively as an academic support. “Basically when I need to read my textbook or my homework, I use the software called Readwell, and I scan in the textbooks or I scan in any text.” He uses another program to help him with his writing. “Also, when I write my papers and my documents I use a program that can read everything I might that I type.” He had not started using a voice recognition program yet; however, the school will soon provide that for him. He does not have these programs on his home computer, but he hoped to have two of them before long. “Soon I will be buying Dragon and a Readwell 2000 for home use. I’m working two jobs to get it right now.”

Accommodations seemed to be an issue of concern for all three of them. Although Quinton and Rana did not appear uncomfortable in asking for accommodations, Mindy was. She had not even wanted to identify herself as a student with disabilities when she applied to the college in New England. She appreciated the anonymity that the community college had practiced when students requested accommodations. She was hoping for that same anonymity at the new college. On the other hand, Rana and Quinton used accommodations extensively, and their problem was not always having access to the accommodations they needed.

Reflections

Without a doubt, the narratives of these college students with learning disabilities who had received special education services in high school demonstrate that they were able to describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining. Their descriptions of their lives illustrated some key influences on the development of their self-determination skills. Bronfenbrenner's concept of the individual nested into ecological surroundings was clearly illustrated in the narratives of the participant's development as individuals with self-determination. It was evident that communication among the settings took place in many instances as each part of their ecological environments combined to nurture them in their pursuit of their dreams. Self-determination grew out of positive ecological surroundings, and their development of self-determination was a powerful ally in the positive outcomes of their efforts.

The narratives of the participants stressed the importance of family for each of them, but it is important to note that the participants reported that none of their families ever received support or instruction in how to effectively deal with the identified disabilities of their children. Although each family dealt with these challenges differently, each family produced children who were self-determining and able to deal effectively with their disabilities.

The participants learned self-determination in homes where parents had never been taught the elements of self-determination, either. Nevertheless, their parents or grandparents knew intuitively what to do to help their children, and the advocacy skills of the parents served as models for their children to follow. These young people seemed to be more like their peers than they are different. The label of learning disability has not

stopped them from achieving their dreams, and each of them had certainly demonstrated self-determination.

Another theme that ran through each story was a common complaint about their education: They all expressed regret at not being challenged enough. Rana was angry that she had not been challenged in math; Mindy was upset that she had not received good instruction in written-language skills; and Quinton felt that he should have received better instruction in reading and that he never should have simply been passed on from grade to grade. The consequences from this lack of challenge left a scar that will take time and effort to heal.

All three encountered serious difficulties in the K–12 educational setting and suffered painful assaults to their self-esteem due to a lack of academic progress as indicated by conventional measures of success. They felt labeled and blamed for a lack of success that was not an intentional result of their actions, but was a failure on the part of the educational system to deal effectively with their particular learning styles. However, they had learned in school how to compensate for their disabilities, and the availability of accommodations was a powerful tool that allowed them to succeed academically. The accommodations were not always available, which had the potential to cause some significant consequences on their ability to succeed.

College appeared to be a more positive experience than high school for all of them. Each of them reported experiencing some opportunity for self-determination in college. The ability to make choices regarding courses was one tool mentioned. Being able to set goals for themselves and having the ability to work for those goals was another powerful motivator. They learned how to navigate within the college culture so they

could be successful there, and they demonstrated successful self-determination by achieving adult outcomes in postsecondary education, work, and assimilation into the college community.

Their narratives demonstrate that they became the causal agents in their lives. Even though they all reported that their families were their primary support systems when they were younger, they all stressed that as they grew older, their friends had taken on an equal role as an important support system in their lives. Their friends supported their efforts to learn and to grow, just as they supported the efforts of their friends to do the same. Nevertheless, they exercised various forms of decision-making skills in their lives: They could ask for advice and help from others, but they felt that the ultimate responsibility for the outcome of their decisions was their own.

They all seemed to have developed self-awareness skills that helped them make choices and decisions that were effective for them. Furthermore, all the participants demonstrated goal-setting and goal-attaining skills as they made plans for their futures. They demonstrated a sense of internal locus of control in that their plans were hopeful and optimistic for the future. They appeared to believe that they were the ones who controlled their own destinies. In the final chapter, I will discuss the findings and the new concept that grew out of the research. In addition, I will review the implications for practice and policy.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Discussion

Individuals with disabilities have not always had the right to a free and appropriate education. It has only been since the landmark case of *Brown v the Board of Education* in 1954 that all children have had the right to be educated in a fair and equitable manner. Nevertheless, it took additional legislation to ensure that students with disabilities had the same rights to education as their peers without disabilities.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s had a profound effect on the way persons with disabilities were treated in the United States. Up until fairly recently, individuals with disabilities were kept hidden away in institutions or kept at home. They had few rights, and decisions both great and small were routinely made for them. As other segments of our society gained rights previously denied them, a movement formed to allow persons with disabilities to come out of the shadows and join the greater society. Individuals with disabilities gradually entered the mainstream of society, and it became apparent that they needed help in their transition into the world at large.

New rights for individuals affected schools because the right to an education had to be addressed. IDEA and subsequent amendments mandated that schools provide transition services to students with disabilities and also demanded that student be included in their IEP meetings when transition services were addressed. Although transition services were mandated in IDEA, instruction in self-determination was not; however, the IEP process provided a platform to address self-determination in special education. Curricula emerged to instruct students with disabilities in choice making,

decision-making, goal-setting and goal attainment, and self-awareness (Durlak, et al., 1994; Field & Hoffman, 1996; Grigal, et al., 2001; Phillips, 1990; Pocock et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998).

Much of the literature to date has examined the importance of self-determination and educational outcomes for students with disabilities (Agran, 1997; Durlak et al., 1994; Field, 1996; Field & Hoffman, 1996; Field, et al., 2003; Grigal et al., 2001; Nevin et al., 2002; Phillips, 1990; Pocock et al., 2002; Trainor, 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 1998). My study addressed the question: How did college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in school describe the influences on their capacity to be self-determining? The sub-questions addressed the perceptions that the participants held regarding their definitions of self-determination, the influences that affected their ability to be self-determining, and where they were now in their lives regarding this concept.

My research allowed the voices of students with learning disabilities to be heard on the topic of self-determination. I used narrative inquiry because I wanted to focus on the theme of self-determination as it affected community college students with learning disabilities. I felt that if I chose participants with learning disabilities from a community college, the fact that they were successful in the community college setting would act as a proxy for self-determination. I wanted them to share their own experiences in developing self-determination to add to the research on what was effective in helping youth with learning disabilities become self-determining. Much of the literature that measures the success of programs designed to instruct students in self-determination had been quantitative (Algozzine et al., 2001; Wood et al., 1999; Zhang, 2001), but I felt that we

had to hear from the students themselves to develop a clear understanding of their journey into self-determination.

In this chapter I discuss the findings in relation to the literature of self-determination. I draw conclusions from the discussion and address the impact of instruction for self-determination.

The Literature of Self-determination Reflected in the Life Stories

According to Freeman (2004), “life narratives deal with subjective meanings; they are the individuals’ perceptions of their past, their interpretive renditions of the past from the standpoint of the present” (p. 69). It is doubtful that, with the exception of Quinton, anyone ever discussed the concept of self-determination with the participants. Yet they were able to give definitions of what they felt self-determination was, and they were able to show examples in their lives that attested to their own development of self-determination skills. Only when Mindy and I talked about her IEP did I feel that my presence made any real difference in their stories. I clarified some information about her IEP that no one had ever discussed with her before. I asked the participants questions to begin the process, but they had stories to tell in relation to self-determination, and they told them. However, I know that just as they told their stories through their own particular lens, I heard and reported their responses through my particular lenses as well.

I asked the questions, and I constructed the narratives highlighting the events they shared with me. The three participants whose life stories I told in Chapter 4 related their stories from their own perspectives as self-determining young adults with learning disabilities. They began their stories in terms of self-determination because that was the focus of the questions initially presented to them, and they described their lives in terms

of their development of self-determination. Unwittingly, much of what they shared served as a commentary on what the literature emphasizes as important regarding self-determination. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework of Bronfenbrenner and Wehmeyer shaped how I reported the participant's stories.

Abery and Zalac (1996), Abery et al., (1995), Abery and Stancliff (1996), Bronfenbrenner (1979), Baumrind (1967, 1971, 1973, 1991), Cook et al. (1996), Field (1996), and Zhang et al. (2005) all emphasized the importance of family in the development of an individual. The family is important for youth with and without disabilities; however, the presence of a disability did seem to intensify the family's involvement. Parents have to seek out the best education for their children, which most parents do. On the other hand, the parents of youth with disabilities have to navigate within the special education framework of presenting problems, assessments, identification, IEP meetings, special education services, and accommodations — and in some cases ensuring that services would be rendered after high school ended.

My research confirmed the importance of the family in the development of self-determination for community college students with learning disabilities. Evidence of this was found in the stories of the participants —they all stressed the importance of family in helping them form and pursue their life goals. They stated often that instruction from outside sources was helpful, but that self-determination was something learned first at home. Outside instruction only helped to reinforce lessons learned first from family and later from friends.

My three participants experienced difficulty in school and all witnessed their parents trying to address their problems. Two of the parents had to remove their children

from their schools because of lack of success. In addition, all three participants were taught strategies to help them deal with their disabilities, and they would not have gained that knowledge if their parents had not obtained the best educational placement for them.

Additionally, communication between the family and educational settings seemed to play an important role in their academic development. Their families knew when the participants were making academic progress and when they were not, and they often intervened to increase the effectiveness of the educational process. This family support greatly contributed to their development of self-determining skills.

Indeed, all stressed the importance of their families in their development of self-determination. The participants spoke of the opportunities they were given to make choices and decisions for themselves, and they also spoke of family members as role models as they learned how to become self-determining. The mothers of two participants fought to secure an appropriate education for them, and those participants learned how to fight for themselves by watching their mothers struggle for them.

In addition, the participants shared stories about how family members provided emotional support and guidance as they were growing up. Not only did some parents provide nurturing and assistance, but grandparents also played a major role for the participants. The love and caring that they received as young children from their grandparents taught them to value themselves and provided them with a rich source of strength and wisdom as they were growing up.

Never settling for less was a message stressed by parents and grandparents alike, and it became one of the metaphors for self-determination my participants used when describing their own development. Simply stated, it meant that the participants noted that

self-determination meant to them that they needed to have dreams, to pursue those dreams, and to never give up.

Having a learning disability meant that they had to learn to live with the feeling of being labeled. The label indicated to them that they were in some way less able than or different from their peers; nevertheless, they had to learn to fight that belief. At the same time, they had to learn to deal with the frustration of not being able to perform in the same manner as those around them, and they had to learn how to perform in ways that would be satisfactory to the authorities who evaluated their progress. They had to learn to ask for help when they needed it, and they had to learn what to do when their requests for help were denied. They had to learn to deal with lowered expectations when their own expectations were high, and they had to learn to refrain from doubting themselves when school and state agency authorities doubted them.

In the stories related by the participants, their family members —parents or grandparents — provided unflinching support and belief in their abilities to succeed. Their parents went one step further and kept the lines of communication open with the schools to ensure that their children got as much support as possible. Parental support and training became a secret weapon of defense against the pain of their concealed frustrations.

Friends

Ryan and Deci (2000), who dealt with the development of self-determination in general, mentioned the effects of personal relationships on the development of self-determination in students with disabilities. Field and Hoffman (1996, 2002) reinforced that concept in their work with middle and high school students. Field (1996), Bashir et

al. (2000), Field et al. (2003), and Mooney and Cole (2000) researched college students with learning disabilities. All found that relationships were either the biggest barrier or the biggest help to individuals with learning disabilities forming self-determination skills.

My study supports these findings. The participants all stressed the importance of friends in their ability to be self-determining. They each expressed a strong desire to maintain friendships, and they mentioned their family as friends and their friends as family.

Although Ryan and Deci (2000) found that friends can be a motivator for anyone's development of self-determination, my participants reported that friends helped them deal with the specific challenges of having a learning disability by serving as role models in determining the best course of action. In fact, they were motivated to do better by their friends, and in two cases they were given educational support in the form of proofreading and advice. In some cases, friends may not have even been aware that the participants had a learning disability but simply affirmed their value by accepting them as they were.

Friendships went beyond affecting them educationally and touched many aspects of their lives. Although Quinton did not have a strong father figure, he had many male friends and many male role models from his church fellowship group. Another example was the support Rana received from her friends in the care of her daughter. The support of their friends profoundly affected all parts of the participants' lives, including their educational progress.

Field et al. (2003) reported that friends often act as resources for information and provide encouragement when college students with learning disabilities get discouraged

about their work. The participants in this study reported that their friends also provided strong support by giving them honest feedback about themselves. Their friends also encouraged them when they felt low or thought about giving up.

Impact of Instruction for Self-determination

Self-determination has been described as an educational outcome (Blum et al. 2002; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Pocock et al., 2002; Wehmeyer, 1996; Wehmeyer et al., 1998). Students who are self-determining are more successful in adult outcomes than those who are not self-determining (Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 1998). Wehmeyer et al. (1998) frequently emphasized the importance of the IEP process as an effective vehicle for teaching self-determination skills. The IEP process gives students an opportunity to learn to assert his or her desires and beliefs in an authentic situation. It serves as a means to allow students to exercise their authority over their own life, and it also provides an opportunity for realistic growth of self-esteem.

Nevin et al. (2002) stated that the trend cited by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998) could be altered if teachers were given effective instruction in the area of self-determination. Nevin et al. (2002) reported on a teacher preparation program that emphasized the development of teachers in the instruction of self-determination skills. Nevin et al. (2002) and Thoma et al. (2002) supported the finding that teachers benefited from a combination of in-the-field work and direct formal instruction in teaching self-determination. However, it was not enough to tell teachers that students with disabilities needed instruction in self-determination. In my study, it seemed that parents lobbied for this type of instruction.

My findings confirm that special education teachers may need to do a better job in teaching self-determination skills more directly. One participant was taught in elementary school about the accommodations she needed to be successful. These skills were taught in the context of a school specifically for students with disabilities; however she was not directly taught lessons formally labeled as instruction in self-determination. Another participant may also have been taught strategies for academic success in elementary school in her pullout classes, but she was not taught the self-determination skills she felt were needed for her to be successful in adult outcomes.

Quinton did not report being taught academic strategies until he entered the middle school for students with disabilities. He did, however, receive instruction in strategies for self-determination in college through a program specifically designed to help students with disabilities learn strategies that would help them be successful in college. None of the participants had any instruction about how to participate in the IEP process. Although nearly all teachers instruct students in some form of decision-making or goal setting, there are programs that teach these skills in a more structured manner. Quinton did receive some formal lessons after he left the school system. Rana and Mindy did not, but they were nonetheless able to make decisions and set goals for themselves.

My findings suggest that the most effective training they received in the area of self-determination was given at home and in the informal lessons all students learn about themselves in school. They learned that they had to take responsibility for their decisions. They learned that they should never give up or settle for less than they felt was important. They demonstrated their knowledge of the lesson that hard work was not a deterrent to their dreams. The lesson they all reported learning informally from school

was that even though they were not dumb, the labels they carried made it necessary for them to prove their worth to the world.

Self-determination Infused into All Classes

With the increasing emphasis on measuring the achievement of students according to rigorous standards, it may be difficult for teachers to find time to teach self-determination skills (Abery & Stancliff, 1996; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002). Infusion of self-determination skills into the curriculum of a number of general education subjects proved to be an effective method of imparting the skills that self-determining adults needed in our society (Blum et al., 2002; Browder et al., 2001; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2000; Field & Hoffman, 2002).

My participants did experience some opportunities to make decisions regarding their education. Rana exercised her decision-making and self-advocacy skills when she managed her accommodations in middle school, when she asked for accommodations in high school, and when she decided to pursue graduation on her own. Quinton and Mindy exercised their own decision-making skills by choosing classes they took in high school. All of the participants appeared to do well without formal instruction, but the addition of formal instruction in self-determination for Quinton seemed to have a significant affect on his ability to be successful in college. Perhaps offering a formal curriculum in self-determination to students in secondary school would be beneficial.

Accommodations

Accommodations are designed to make education a level playing field for students with disabilities. Accommodations vary, depending on the nature and severity of a student's disability (Annette, personal communication, April 26, 2004; Field et al.,

2003). However, generally accommodations for students with learning disabilities include extended time for tests and assignments, the use of calculators, note takers, computers equipped with voice recognition programs and scanners that allow the text to be read aloud to students, alternative examinations, and other accommodations specific to an individual (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Merchant and Gajar (1997) found that even when students were knowledgeable about their rights and the implications of their disabilities, they were not always comfortable in talking to a teacher or professor about the accommodation they may have required. For this reason, instructors may not always be aware of the need to make accommodations or they may not know that accommodations are necessary for some individuals.

Field et al. (2003) expressed the viewpoint that accommodations, where appropriate, should be available to all students, not just those with identified disabilities. In my study, only one of the participants asked for accommodations occasionally. Although she claimed that she did not need accommodations, she may have been reluctant to make the request. She mentioned that she “passed” for someone without a disability, and she may not have wanted to reveal her need to anyone. The other two participants seemed comfortable asking for what they needed to help them be successful; however, they did not always have access to the equipment they needed to complete their work efficiently or effectively.

If accommodations were a commonplace occurrence without stigma attached, more students might come forward to claim what they need. Mindy did not want to be singled out even though she might have benefited from the help. Unfortunately, there is a view among some faculty in higher education that the accommodations provided to

students with learning disabilities give these students an unfair advantage (Annette, personal communication, April 26, 2004).

Two participants needed assistive technology not consistently available to them. Colleges do not have to provide everything a student received in high school, but it would have been helpful to the success of the students with disabilities if the assistive technology had been in place for them. The expense of the technology is worth the investment in the future of young people who had the potential of contributing to our world if given the chance. In some cases companies might donate this equipment, but there should be at least one computer that is equipped to provide the special support that a limited number of students need.

Religion

Religion is an area unmentioned in the research, but two of the participants reported it as a strong influence in their ability to be self-determining. Religion might not be mentioned in the literature because it is a subject not normally taught in public schools, and therefore it was not considered as a factor by researchers. But researchers did not mention religion as a factor in family life either, and it is unclear why. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to explore this factor further.

Mindy and Quinton both reported an interrelationship between their friends and their religion, and this interconnectedness seemed to strengthen the influence that both their friends and religion played in their development of self-determination. In addition, religion gave the participants an understanding of the responsibility they had for their own actions and provided them with other role models. Having a strong faith may have made it easier for them to accept and deal with their disabilities, and it certainly provided

them with another support group. Although neither of them mentioned this specifically, an emphasis of self-acceptance is stressed in many religious circles, and this might have helped them in their own acceptance of themselves and their disabilities.

Rana did not mention religion except to state that her mother was studying to be a minister and that Rana had decided that she might be a pagan. Given the relationship Rana had with her mother, it would not be surprising that she would try to be as different from her as possible. In the next section, I discuss the research questions and the answers the participants provided.

Elements of Self-determination

In Chapter 2 eight elements of self-determination were identified. It was important to see how these elements were demonstrated in the lives of the participants. In this section I will focus on the participants' relationship to these elements.

Goal setting and Goal Attainment

The first two elements that were mentioned were goal setting and goal attainment. All of the participants had set goals for themselves and had attained some of the goals while they had plans to accomplish others. They all had identified going to community college as an important goal in their lives and they had all reached that goal. Rana had a goal of finishing the community college and furthering her education in the field of forensic science. She also had identified a goal for her daughter to find an educational setting that would work for her. Mindy had completed community college and was moving on to a four-year school to complete preparations for a career in teaching. Quinton's goal was to get to the community college, which he had done. His goals at the time of the interviews were to complete his bachelor's degree in computers and to work

in that field. Each one had been able to set goals for themselves and had attained at least some of what they wanted to do.

Self-advocacy

The third element was self-advocacy. All of the participants expressed the opinion that they had good self-advocacy skills, and they demonstrated those skills throughout the stories they told. They had learned these skills from watching other members of their families or had been taught the skills as important factors in taking responsibility for their own decisions. Quinton and Rana had both learned self-advocacy skills by watching their mothers advocate for them. They, in turn, had to advocate for themselves. Rana had to fight for herself in order to get the accommodations she needed in high school, and she had to fight for her daughter to get what her daughter needed as a student with learning disabilities.

Quinton had to advocate for himself after he made a decision not to accept the options that the state offered him. Project Open Door taught him advocacy skills that he could now apply in a college setting, and he was able to teach those skills to others. Mindy refused to continue to take medication that had been prescribed to her to help her in school, and as a result she began to succeed. Once they were in college, the participants became their own advocates, and each of them demonstrated the ability to advocate for what they felt was important for them.

Self-Understanding

The fourth element of self-determination was self-understanding. The three participants expressed self-understanding through out their renditions of their stories. They had to know themselves first before they could set realistic goals and they had to be able to apply that knowledge of self in order to determine the best way for them to

achieve their goals. They all seemed to have acquired this self-knowledge in a variety of ways; from family, from friends, and from their educational settings. They reported that their families and friends often gave them feedback regarding their behavior, and their educational settings also provided them with both positive and negative information about themselves.

Their family and friends seemed to be very open in providing feedback about the participants. That feedback helped them in developing their own sense of self. As a result, they became more aware of who they were, and they began to understand how their actions appeared to others. Mindy, Rana, and Quinton all reported receiving information from their family and friends that helped them to eventually be able to monitor and assess their own behavior and growth.

The educational feedback was probably just as significant to them as was the feedback from other sources because what they learned in school was that they were different. At first that difference was a negative because it singled them out as being less capable than their peers. Once each of them found more accepting situations, they began to be able to understand that difference better, and to realize that they were not less than their peers, only different. It took help from home and from friends to help them gain a balance and perspective about who they really were and what they needed to succeed both academically and in life.

Self-efficacy

The next element is self-efficacy. All of the participants expressed the belief in themselves that they could meet their own goals. Their statements were tempered with the understanding that sometimes life could hold unexpected surprises for them. Quinton

stated that he might have to change his goals at some point but that he would continue to try nevertheless. Rana had more confidence in her ability to complete her own goals than in being able to affect a change in her daughter's educational placement, nevertheless she had a plan to move to another county that she felt would make a difference for her daughter. Mindy believed that as long as she was realistic in determining her goals, then she had the ability to reach the goals that she had set.

Self-observation and Self-evaluation

Both self-observation and self-evaluation are closely related to self-understanding; however, without the ability to observe the effect that one's behavior has, and without developing a means of evaluating that behavior, self-understanding can be very limited. Quinton described the effect his mentoring had on those around him and the effect that his behavior had on some of his friends. Rana described her desire to be a role model for her daughter and the effect she felt she was having on her daughter. In addition, Mindy described the interactions with her friends as providing positive influence on those around her. All the participants described the growth and changes that they had in relation to their progress in school. They knew what they had to do and how to do what it took to be successful. All of them were still struggling with some challenge in the academic setting, but they all had plans based on their own self-observation and self-evaluation to deal with the challenges that lay ahead.

Choice-making

The final element was choice-making. They all exercised the ability to make choices in one way or another. Rana made a choice to try to graduate from high school when she could not get the accommodations that she needed. Quinton made a choice to go to college after being told that he could not get into the program that was offered by

the state. Mindy chose her career, and the college that she wanted to attend. They were all doing what they chose to do and they seemed to be able to continue making those choices for themselves.

Summary of Elements

After listening to the participants' experiences, it became evident to me that self-advocacy, self-efficacy, self-understanding, choice-making, goal setting, and goal attainment, were the most significant aspects of self-determination for them. However, after completing this research, I have identified areas for further research.

It would be interesting to explore the differences between self-efficacy and locus of control. In addition, there appears to be a difference between choice-making and decision-making. Self-efficacy involves feeling that one can control one's own behavior to control outcomes (Bandura, 1977). On the other hand, locus of control implies feeling that one has control over one's life and can therefore control outcomes (Wehmeyer, 1996). The participants expressed strong convictions that they could control outcomes. Even though Rana and Quinton both had difficulty in college, they both expressed the conviction that they would reach their goals. Mindy did not report struggling in college, but she had a view of her intended profession that would require her to overcome the environment that she would be entering. Nevertheless she felt that she was able to meet the challenges that lay ahead.

Choice making is generally associated with deciding between two or more alternatives and is based more on preference than on reasoning, logic and awareness of consequences. Wehmeyer (1998) suggested that decision making, while closely related to choice making, included problem solving, weighing alternatives and considering the consequences. The participants appeared to be able to resolve difficulties, consider

alternatives and examine consequences as they made the choices that were before them. Their reasons for deciding to go to community college were an example of their decision-making ability. They each could articulate fairly complex explanations for wanting to be in college that went far beyond simply choosing between two alternatives.

Finally my findings suggest that an additional element of self determination should be examined in further research. There is a need to examine in further study how the idea of “not settling” for what exists, that my participants referenced. Quinton coined this term and it best summarized the belief that one did not just accept whatever happened, but instead one continued to work for the things that one wanted. It meant not giving up when things got tough, but continuing to work until the goal was attained. All of the participants demonstrated this element in their lives. Rana had been attending community college for a number of years and she knew that she still had more to do before she could go on to a four-year college. Quinton expressed the belief that it would take him a long time before he finished school. Mindy demonstrated that she was willing to work hard to complete school, and to do whatever it took to become a good teacher. Persistence and not settling may be similar in meaning but not settling is more meaningful because it is a reflection of the attitudes of all three participants.

Research Questions

The main research question that guided this research was how community college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in school describe influences on their capacity to be self-determining. To answer that research question, the participants responded to a series of sub-questions. Their answers to those

sub-questions provided keys to the answer of the central question. In this section, I detail the answers participants gave to the sub-questions.

Question 1: What was the student's personal definition of self-determination?

Quinton felt that self-determination meant he could set his own goals and make an effective plan to achieve the goals that he had set. In addition, after he had his plan of action, he had to actively follow through and strive to meet his goals. Rana described self-determination as the will to want to go on and to never give up. She identified her daughter as the reason for her own desire to succeed. She also credited her desire to succeed to never wanting to appear stupid to others. Mindy felt that self-determination was setting realistic goals and then working toward achieving the identified objective.

In general, their definitions encompassed the ideas of decision-making, goal setting with goal-attainment, persistence, and the desire to serve as a role model for another significant person.

Question 2: Did the student receive any instruction to help him/her achieve self-determination?

Quinton reported that he received some instruction in self-determination skills through Project Open Door. He learned self-advocacy skills, and he was also taught about his disability so he understood what accommodations he needed to succeed. Although Rana and Mindy did not report any formal instruction, it is likely that they did receive some instruction in self-determination in the normal instruction most teachers give to students. However, they learned through the hard lessons what worked for them educationally and what did not. Quinton's formal instruction benefited him, as the more informal lessons of life and classroom practices may have benefited Rana and Mindy.

Question 3: If they did receive formal instruction, what type of instruction in self-determination did the participants report as being most effective for them?

Quinton felt that a combination of the instruction he received through Project Open Door and the support he received from his family helped him in his development of self-determination. When questioned further, he stated that he believed that a combination of who he was and how his mother raised him were important influences on his ability to be self-determining. He gave his mother credit for teaching him to believe in himself and to work for what he thought was important. He also stated that his religion had been a powerful force in his life and had been a major influence on his development of self-determination. He went on to say that although his family had done a lot to help him in the development of self-determination, his friends had been instrumental in helping him maintain and grow stronger in his ability to be self-determining.

Rana reported that she felt a particular instructional method in reading had made a huge difference for her because as she developed belief in herself as she developed the ability to read. Mindy reported receiving some training in church on taking personal responsibility for herself.

They all reported some type of instruction that benefited them in their development of self-determination. Even though Quinton received formal instruction, he always credited his family as a significant factor in the self-determination skills he possessed.

Question 4: How did participants who had not been trained in self-determination learn to be self-determining?

Rana said that she learned self-determination from the people in her life, which

included her family and friends. She said it is important to put positive people in her life, and without these positive people it is difficult to learn the skills associated with self-determination. Rana also reported that being married, pregnant, and on her own at the age of 16 had been her training in self-determination. She needed to succeed for her daughter.

Mindy felt that her family had never treated her as a person with a disability, but instead had encouraged her to exercise decision-making skills from the time she was very young. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of functioning as a strong independent woman.

Although neither Rana nor Mindy reported formal training in self-determination, they reported teachers and experiences in school that gave them opportunities to develop the skills of self-determination. Teachers routinely give opportunities for choice making in their lessons, and students are frequently given the opportunity to advocate for themselves. These experiences are not normally labeled as lessons in self-determination, but they do provide practice in how to be self-determining.

Question 5: What aspects of home life and social experiences did participants consider most important in helping them become self-determining?

Mindy stated many times that her parents had been an important factor in the development of self-determination. She had also learned from her grandfather the importance of being independent and the dignity of finding a career she could love. At home, she had been taught that her decisions were her responsibility and that she had to seek out challenges to grow. In addition, she said her religion was a strong motivating force. Her religious training reinforced those concepts and taught her that she had to take

ultimate responsibility for the decisions she makes. She acknowledged that she had a support group of family, friends, and church.

Quinton also emphasized that his family, friends, and religious fellowship had been instrumental in supporting his development of self-determination. The fact that his mother had to fight so hard to secure an appropriate education for him left a strong impression.

Rana did not report any formal instruction in self-determination. She felt that the ability to be self-determining came from her family's desire for her to succeed. She felt that she had never been told that she had a particular skill; however, she initially described her parent's encouragement to try new experiences as motivation for self-determination. On further reflection, she modified that to say that her grandfather's interest in her had encouraged her to be self-determining.

Later, she described her daughter as a strong motivator for her self-determination. Rana felt that she had to continue to grow and develop her own skills to be able to teach her daughter the skills that she needed. Rana also credited her friends as role models for her in the area of self-determination by being a strong support system for her.

Rana also cited the ability to make choices about her educational path in college as another motivator for her development of self-determination. She felt empowered to be able to choose classes that she wanted to take and to set her own pace in completing the required credits.

Therefore, the answer to the research question is a complex one. How do community college students with learning disabilities who received special education services in school describe influences on their capacity to be self-determining? The

answer was different and unique for each participant, but some of the same elements in many of the related experiences seemed to weave a common theme. Although their families play a tremendous role in their development of self-determination, so do their friends, religion, and both formal and informal instruction in educational settings. Therefore, it could be said that although family appears to be the most powerful force, friends, religion, and educational experiences seem to be close contenders in importance to this process.

Implications for Practice

According to the participants, self-awareness, taking responsibility for their own decisions, the support of family and friends, the importance of religion, seeking and using the accommodations available to them, and not settling for less than what they were capable of were all important aspects of self-determination. Bronfenbrenner (1977) stressed the importance of communication between the family setting and other settings, such as the educational setting, to which an individual might travel. This played an important and powerful role for all of the participants because their families intervened on their behalf when necessary.

In addition, although the participants did seem to learn important skills, such as decision-making, self-advocacy, and not settling for less, directly from their families, their friends, educational experiences, and religious experiences reinforced those skills. Because the family played such a pivotal role in the development of the individual and in the capacity of the individual to be self-determining, it is important to examine this influence and then to examine the influence of the educational setting.

Working with Families

The participants in this study demonstrated that they were self-determining and in fact, they were chosen for the study because they had that quality. They were the lucky ones. It seemed their parents knew little about learning disabilities or the importance of their children developing skills in self-determination through the IEP process. But the accounts of the participants of the influence of their families illustrate that the families which include parents and grandparents, tried to do what was best for their children. In one case, the Quinton's mother had to fight for what she believed to be right for her child. In another case, Rana's mother seemed to stumble upon the right educational setting after many failed attempts. In the third case, Mindy's parents listened to experts and caused more problems for their child. It was not until the child refused the remedy the experts offered that she began to be successful. In all cases, the extended families of the participants seemed to offer support that the parents alone were not always able to give. Another important factor was that the parents of the participants focused on what their children could do rather than on what they could not do. They taught them responsibility and involved themselves in their children's education. Thus, a combination of elements appeared to contribute to the development of self-determination among the participants.

We know from the experiences reported by the participants what the parents of these three community college students with learning disabilities who exhibited self-determination did, but we do not know what the parents of students who are not successful do. It is possible that some parents do not understand the implications of their child's identified disability or do not know how to teach the skills of self-determination. In addition, although school personnel need to alert families to the importance of helping

students with disabilities to develop self-determination skills, school staff may not be able to directly influence or assist parents in this task because of a lack of time or a lack of communication.

For individuals with disabilities who do not have families to instill these values, it is important to address self-determination in the school setting. From the time it is discovered that a child has a disability, the educational system and the family should begin an effective partnership that enables the child to receive the instruction he or she needs. None of the participants reported that their families received much help or guidance in understanding the problems that their children were identified to have. In fact, it appeared that no one even explained that there was a disability, and in one case the mother had to demand that her child be tested to better understand his lack of academic success.

Not only do some parents appear to lack understanding of learning disabilities, but also they are not always aware of the importance of self-determination for children, especially those with disabilities. Zhang et al. (2005) reported that parents of children with disabilities frequently believe they are protecting them from danger or from making unwise decisions. But all children, including children with learning disabilities, need to develop skills in decision-making, goal setting and attainment, and self-awareness to be successful as adults.

Schools need to offer programs that help parents acquire the skills they need to aid in their children's development of self-determination. Parents of children with disabilities frequently show interest in the transition process as their children grow older. Involving students in the IEP process in middle and high school is certainly one way to

help students develop these skills, but the development of self-determination skills should begin long before that. Families need to help students develop self-determination skills at home, and schools need to teach those skills to parents in their children's early elementary school years.

Some families grow accustomed to having many educational decisions routinely made by the school. Parents sometimes allow school personnel, whom they regard as experts, to make decisions for their children. In addition, special education services in the K–12 educational setting are mandated by law, and parents have grown to expect that such services will automatically continue. Families need to be prepared for what awaits their children after graduation.

Some programs in the K–12 setting and in colleges already work with parents to help them develop self-determination skills and teach them to their children. Field and Hoffman (1996) developed the *STEPS to Self-determination* curriculum to teach self-determination skills to students, and it involved parents as a very important aspect of the process. At least one program at a prominent university in Maryland, “Families and Professionals United,” was sponsored by the Maryland State Department of Education and Towson University to work with parents, teachers, and students with disabilities to foster the development of self-determination skills. In addition, associations have developed programs for children with disabilities that may also be helpful to parents, but parents need to be made aware of these programs. It is true that the families of the participants did not use programs such as the ones mentioned, but they might have if they had known about them. In addition, as stated earlier, we do not know what other parents

might need. School personnel need to pass on that information and support the efforts of parents to help their children develop self-determination skills.

Some children with disabilities are identified as infants or toddlers; however, students with learning disabilities are not always identified until they are older. Some are not identified until they are in high school, or even into adulthood. For this reason, stressing self-determination for all students is important for students with disabilities. All students need to have some self-determination skills, but students with disabilities may require more intense instruction after they have been identified. Students who had services provided to them from the time they were identified as having a disability may not have had to ask for accommodations or other help. Therefore, some students may benefit from instruction in self-advocacy skills, just as Quinton did through the formal instruction he received in college. Students need to learn to request accommodations while they are still in school so they are prepared for postsecondary education.

Involving students with disabilities in the transition process is supposed to happen but according to the participants, it does not always work out that way. Students are supposed to be invited to their IEP meetings once they turn 14, but they often do not become involved. Often parents do not want their children brought out of class to attend meeting, or they want to make the decisions for their children. This could be an effective tool to help students develop self-determination if it is used properly.

Even though I did not start out to do this, my research has verified what other researchers, such as Hoffman (2002), Field et al. (2003), and Zhang et al. (2005) , also found: that the support and instruction offered by the families of students with learning disabilities was of major importance in the development of self-determination. We need

additional qualitative studies to explore what families believe they need to support the development of self-determination in their children with disabilities. We could then design more effective programs. At the present time, we have only speculation as to what would be helpful to parents. The best way to know for sure would be to hear from them directly.

Infusing Self-determination into the General Curriculum for All Children

Although some special educators are introduced to the value of self-determination in pre-service training, general educators may not have the same exposure. But if self-determination has widespread value, then general educators should also be trained in this area. Collaboration between special educators and general educators may be helpful for both in developing lessons in self-determination that could be infused into the curriculum for all students. Students could be given more decision making opportunities in all classes and in the total school setting if teachers and administrators were willing to involve them.

Universal design is a method of helping infuse self-determination practices in to general education settings. Many new text books are designed to meet the needs of a wide spectrum of abilities and interests. Materials can offer a range of difficulty that can meet the needs of struggling readers while providing reading challenges to students who are functioning on the college level. Students cover the same material, but in a different way and at a different pace. This allows all students to benefit from the experiences and insights of everyone in the class.

Various programs have been developed to help teachers provide instruction in this area. Some programs even stress the importance of family as significant role models for

their children in the development of self-determination. A few of these programs are taught as separate units or clusters of lessons, whereas others are taught in conjunction with content-specific material. There are enough programs that if a teacher wants to teach self-determination, the materials are available (Grigal et al., 2000).

Greater Help from Education

Self-determination as an educational outcome (Wehmeyer & Swartz, 2001) is frequently referred to in the literature as a means of fostering self-determination, but it did not appear to be happening on a consistent basis in this study. Teachers often did not have the skill, time, or backing from the administration to be able to implement effective programs to teach children how to be self-determining. My research reinforced what was already known about the development of self-determination. In the vast majority of cases, self-determination skills are not being formally taught to students, whether they had disabilities or not, and all students, with or without disabilities, could benefit from this instruction. Some students seem to have better skills than others in this area, even without direct training, but there is always room for improvement.

Because young people who have a strong degree of self-determination achieve better adult outcomes than those who are not self-determining, school administrators need to explore encouraging teachers to develop the skills to instruct students in this area. Nevin et al. (2002) and Eisenman and Chamberlin (2001) discussed training preparation programs and system wide initiatives that encourage the preparation of all teachers in this skill. If schools taught this as a skill, parents are likely to become involved, even if they had never before been aware that self-determination was a desirable goal.

Reported Need for Academic Challenges

Although challenge is not mentioned specifically in the literature of self-determination, all three participants expressed regret that they had not been challenged academically when they were younger. They felt that they had not been given challenging material and that they had not been held to the same standard as students without disabilities. Math was mentioned as being a problem for all three of them, and they expressed regret at not having been taught more of that subject. Instruction in reading and writing skills were also viewed as deficient, and they expressed disappointment that more was not done to help them in these areas as well.

Fortunately, each one found strategies that worked for him or her, and they now knew what they needed to do to be successful. For all three of them, success was an important motivator. They all felt it was important to succeed to prove they had ability all along. They had to prove to themselves and others that they could indeed accomplish something.

My research highlights an important element in the education of students with learning disabilities. Students want to be challenged, and they want to excel. No Child Left Behind (2001) calls for all students to meet certain standards. Although I believe all children can learn, they might not all learn the same thing at the same time or in the same way. Youth with learning disabilities may need different strategies and accommodations to learn and report their learning, but they want the opportunity to live up to high standards. They need to have others believe in them and professionals willing to help them learn in their own best style to be successful. They want the chance to learn and grow, and we have to give them that opportunity.

All three participants had plans for their futures, and they could describe how they planned to achieve their goals. They all had to work hard to be where they were at the time of my study. Even though they seemed aware of the obstacles ahead, they all seemed to be determined to reach their destinations. They all acknowledged that they faced many challenges, but they appeared confident that they could meet those challenges. They demonstrated an internal locus of control in that they believed they had some influence over their environment. They felt that if they followed their plans, they would accomplish the goals they had set for themselves. Nevertheless, we need to examine how we challenge students with disabilities and make changes that will benefit all students.

Implications for Policy

There are a few policies it would be prudent to pursue. A policy addressing family support of children in the area of self-determination and learning disabilities would be one area to investigate. Another area would be in teacher training and interaction with students with learning disabilities to provide instruction in self-determination when needed. Finally, the need for better access to accommodations and a more challenging curriculum for students with disabilities would be other areas of consideration.

Family

One of the findings of my research is that parents do not always understand the nature of their child's disability. Parents are not informed about the scope of the disability, and the ones in my study had to work hard to find programs to support the

academic development of their children. These parents sought information, and they found what they needed. However, we do not know what happens to parents whose children are not self-determining and do not establish attainable goals for themselves. It may be that we need to develop programs and supports to aid parents in the issues that arise in relation to their child's disabilities.

My research found no mention of support groups that the parents attended. The parents might have benefited from outside support groups or from additional help from school personnel, but instead they had to fight for the best placement for their children. These parents were successful in supporting their children and produced self-determining youth with learning disabilities.

What about the students with learning disabilities who were not successful? What do they do? We do not know, but we need to find out. Should there be programs to help parents, and what kind of program would work?

It may be that what is in existence now might be all that is needed. On the other hand, if we need to offer better support to parents, programs to help them better understand and support their students with learning disabilities need to be accessible and offered at times parents can actually attend. It is probably not enough to send home fliers about programs because parents may not understand the fliers or may feel uncomfortable with the strangers who offer these programs. Personal contact between parents and schools or agencies would be far more effective.

We may find that personal contact and effective communication are the keys here. It may be necessary to implement policies that provide personnel who have the time to go out and talk to parents. Schools might establish a relationship with parents so they feel

comfortable asking questions and attending workshops or other activities that would help them learn more about their children and self-determination. More research might lead us to implement such programs. This sounds expensive, but in the long run, if it helps children be more successful in adult outcomes, it would eventually pay for itself.

If some parents of children with disabilities do not understand how to prepare their children to be self-determining, they need to be helped. The vast array of programs regarding self-determination emphasizes the importance of school and the educational system, but many of these programs also mention the importance of parents in preparing students to be self-determining. My findings confirm the importance of parental involvement in the development of self-determination among students with learning disabilities. Some of these programs try to involve parents, but it is likely that more needs to be done to support parents in their efforts to help their children with learning disabilities become self-determining. My research confirms that parents can do a great job of character building, but schools can do an equally good job of skill building. Working together, the family and the educational setting can do much to help students grow in a variety of positive ways.

Providing Instruction for Teachers

The participants of this research encountered a wide range of teaching styles. The participants reported having some teachers who supported their learning and challenged them to grow and having others who did not. All of the participants reported that they encountered difficulty in school. Rana and Quinton reported attending schools designed especially for students with a variety of disabilities, and they did not report many difficulties with the educational support they received from their teachers. In general,

they reported positive experiences in the special school settings, whereas their public school experiences were more difficult. Mindy, who remained in the public school system, reported that some of her experiences were positive and others were not.

The participants did not report on specific instruction in self-determination in the K–12 setting, although it is likely that they received some. What was significant was the diverse experiences they encountered. After reviewing the experiences they reported, it seems that an evaluation of practices in the delivery of services to students who appear to have special requirements might be in order. Rana struggled in high school, especially because she could not get the accommodations she needed. Even though she did not have an IEP at the time, she had a history of receiving special education services, and the accommodations she requested were not out of line. Mindy was pulled out of classes, making her feel singled out and labeled by her peers. Quinton was passed along in elementary school, and his needs were never really addressed until he reached the private school.

Their own tenacity and perseverance kept them in school and allowed them to succeed when others might have faltered or quit school altogether. They had support from family and friends, but we need to do a better job of teaching students with learning disabilities. Improved teacher training in dealing with students with disabilities may be an answer, but we need to learn to accept a greater diversity in the way learning takes place so we do not lose talented and otherwise capable learners.

The type of instruction in self-determination that my participants needed was better support to help them deal with their learning disabilities. They needed to know more about their disabilities as they progressed through school. Mindy was not even told

what her disability was, and no one told Rana's mother what her problem was until Rana was older. Quinton also did not know until middle school that he had a disability.

Sometimes students are successful despite our efforts, not because of them.

Students also encounter difficulty in college because of the attitudes of college instructors. Rana reported at least two occasions when instructors informed of her disability did not honor the accommodations she was entitled to receive. Acceptance of diverse learners in college is also an important issue for students with learning disabilities.

Teachers who view learning as a locked door to which they alone hold the key are a problem for students with learning disabilities. What those teachers fail to realize is that there can be many keys to the same door. Teachers need only give students a selection of keys and allow them to find the ones that work for them. Teachers need to be trained to deal with students with learning disabilities who may have unusual approaches to learning. This can and should be done in the initial training that teachers get in college, but it can also be provided through teacher training and in-service programs once teachers are in the field.

Teaching Self-determination

The literature cited earlier in this chapter states repeatedly that students benefit from being instructed in self-determination. My participants did exhibit self-determination, but Rana and Mindy seemed to possess a strong sense of self-determination from the time they were very young, and they had never received the intense training often recommended. Quinton also demonstrated self-determination, but he received training in self-advocacy skills in college, and he received reinforcement for

academic skills. He reported that this training had made a difference in his life. It would appear that some students benefit more from direct instruction in self-determination than others.

Wolanin and Steele (2005) support the idea that students with disabilities in high school are given a broad array of services, and when they get to college that support is no longer there. For some students, this presents a big problem, whereas others seem to adjust fairly quickly. Therefore, it is probably accurate to say that some students would benefit from formal instruction in self-determination whereas others may not need such intense instruction.

All students with disabilities can benefit from knowing more about their own disability. They need to know what their disability means to them and how to deal with the challenges it presents to their lives. They also need to know how to secure the accommodations they need to succeed. The participants in this study demonstrated the value of being able to communicate information about their disability and the accommodations they need. Instruction that enhances communication skills for students with disabilities would be a valuable addition to their education.

In addition, there are new provisions that make it mandatory for schools to provide exit documents and conferences to all students who graduate from high school with an IEP or 504 Plan. This policy is an important step for families and students because it provides them with another opportunity to talk about their disability and the services that are available after they graduate from high school.

Students are also required to have a career plan before they graduate, but sometime the special education students get left out of this process. A career plan is

another tool that students and parents can use when they are contemplating the end of high school and the beginning of a new area in their lives. These plans could be used in conjunction with the planning done with the transition facilitator to reinforce ideas that students have about their futures.

Furthermore, the participants reported that they did not want to be singled out especially in high school to receive special services. We may need to change our approach. Rana felt that students who had received special education services throughout school should be more independent, and rely less on supports. Mindy did not want to be identified in any way with special education. We need to understand this feeling and work better to infuse many of the services into the general curriculum. Students may be less resistant to services if they are available to everyone.

Need for Better Accommodations

There is an untapped resource in our schools: underachieving students. There is no one answer as to why that happens; nevertheless, it has been suggested that all students be given access to the same accommodations regardless of disability. That has some interesting implications. In some cases, it has meant that certain accommodations are off limits for everyone, so everyone is at an equal disability. Unfortunately, that merely means that some students are hurt more than others.

In other cases, equal access to accommodations means that students who may benefit from accommodations but who do not actually qualify for them are now allowed to use them. This may be exactly what they need to unlock that key to success. That would be counted as a positive in our society. Others may use accommodations they do

not need, thereby diminishing or discouraging their need to strive and expand their skills. That scenario would not be considered positive in our society.

Finally, equal access to accommodations may be too cost prohibitive. Not everyone can be given a computer with all the latest programs. Those accommodations are important for some students and can mean the difference between success and failure. Other students do not need their own personal computer or other technological advances. Perhaps the key here is access to a variety of equipment. This is a controversial subject that will require more public debate.

Providing Meaningful Challenge

The issue of challenge is another controversial subject. All the participants said they regretted that they had not been challenged enough; nevertheless, students have a prescribed number of courses they must take to graduate. In most cases, four years of instruction in English, three to three and a half years of social studies, math, and science, and a variety of other subjects are standard requirements for graduation. Four years of math may be appropriate now as well. Although students are encouraged to take challenging courses beyond the basic requirements, students who are struggling in these areas perhaps need more exposure to the subject to maintain or improve upon skills. The major drawback of offering continuing academic challenge is the additional personnel that might be required to offer supplementary courses or support to help the development of individual skills, given limited funding for education.

We need to expect achievement from all students, but the expectations need to be realistic. The belief that all students can learn is accurate. It is not accurate to assume that all students can learn the same thing in the same way. Four years of math could look

very different for different students. For that matter, four years of any subject can be presented and learned differently. This is precisely why self-determination is so important. As educators, we have to help students understand what they need, and we have to help them learn how to communicate those needs to others so they can achieve their goals.

Resilience

The concept of resilience has not been mentioned in this study; however, it may be worthy of further research in relation to self-determination. The perseverance evident in the reported experience of the participants may be due to a combination of factors. Resilience may account for the ability they all seemed to exhibit as they worked for their goals despite hefty obstacles in their paths.

Self-determination Policy

The participants figured out how to be self-determining despite some roadblocks, and because of all the different forces in their lives that came together to help them. There are policies in place through IDEA that are supposed to encourage the development of self-determination for students, but they are not followed consistently. Infusing self-determination practices into the curriculum, providing support for teachers to help them learn techniques for teaching self-determination, and providing support to parents are all within our grasp. We can provide better support to students as they learn to be self-determining adults.

Recommendations for Further Research

One important implication of my research is that we need to know more about why some youth with disabilities are self-determining and others are not. We do know

that students who have supportive families that encourage them and communicate among settings on behalf of their children do better. We know that students who have supportive friends, access to accommodations, and in some cases a strong religious background report being self-determining. Now we need to address the youth with disabilities who are not self-determining and discover why they are not. My participants felt that they were successful and they demonstrated the qualities of self-determination. We need to find students who are not self-determining and talk to them about the influences in their lives.

We also need to talk to the parents of students who are unsuccessful to determine what problems, if any, they encountered, and what can be done to address any challenges that might have existed for them. Parents play such a major role in the lives of their children that we need to do what we can do to support their efforts. Armed with this information, we can develop programs that will give students the instruction they need to be self-determining.

In addition, my participants did come from diverse backgrounds, and although there was no apparent difference in the goals their families had for them, the research in self-determination suggests that different cultural groups have diverse goals in self-determination. Educational personnel and school systems need to be sensitive to diverse viewpoints regarding the goals of self-determination, but little research has been done to help us in our understanding of what self-determination means in different cultures.

More research also needs to be done to understand just how students without disabilities who are self-determining gain those skills. A big assumption has been made in the literature that students without disabilities also need to be taught self-determination

because it is desirable for all students to be self-determining. Nevertheless, we do not know if we are doing enough to meet the needs of the general population of students in the area of self-determination. We also do not know what part resilience plays in the development of self-determination. There is still much that needs to be learned about self-determination as it relates to education.

Appendices

Appendix A. Overview of Major Special Education Legal Actions as Suggested by Yell (1998)

| Year | Legal Development | Brief Description |
|------|--|--|
| 1893 | Watson v. City of Cambridge | Children who were “weak minded” could be excluded from school |
| 1919 | Beattie v. Board of Education | School board had an obligation to expel children with disabilities who “disrupted” school discipline |
| 1934 | Cuyahoga County Court of Appeals | School board had the right to exclude students |
| 1954 | Brown v. the Board of Education | Education must be available to all on equal terms |
| 1958 | Department of Public Welfare v. Hass | Supreme Court of Illinois ruled that a free public education did not have to be provided to “feeble minded” children |
| 1958 | Expansion of Teaching in the Education of the Mentally Retarded | Congress provided funding for teachers of the mentally retarded |
| 1972 | Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania | Retarded children from the ages of 6-21 would receive a free education as much like their non-disabled peers as possible |
| 1972 | Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia | All children with disabilities in the District of Columbia had to be provided with a free public education and the concept of procedural safeguards was introduced |
| 1973 | Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Section 504 | Children with disabilities could not be denied an education |
| 1974 | Amended Elementary and Secondary Education Act | Established Bureau of Education for the Disabled and founded the National Advisory Council on Children with disabilities |
| 1975 | Education for All Children with disabilities Act of 1975 | States were required to provide a free and appropriate education for all children from the ages of 3-21; also included nondiscriminatory testing, inclusion in the least |

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|------|--|--|
| | | restrictive environment, procedural safeguards, parent involvement |
| 1977 | Education for All Children with disabilities | Final regulations passed |
| 1980 | Battle v. Commonwealth | Allowed children with disabilities to receive more than 180 days of education if it is available to non-children with disabilities |
| 1982 | Board of Education v. Rowley | Defines the concept of “appropriate” education |
| 1984 | Irving Independent School District v. Tatro | If a physician is not required to complete a particular procedure, then that procedure is considered to be a related service and must be provided to a disabled student in school |
| 1984 | Smith v. Robinson | If EAHCA provides protection in special education, Section 504 may not be applied |
| 1984 | Carl D. Perkins Act | Vocational education for the disabled must be provided in the least restrictive environment – ten percent of all federal funding for vocational training must be applied toward the vocational education of the disabled |
| 1985 | City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center | Mentally retarded individuals are not a suspect class, but education deserves sharp examination; therefore the courts will closely examine education |
| 1985 | Burlington School Committee v. Department of Education | If the school did not provide proper placement and the parents placed their child in an appropriate place, the parents may be reimbursed |
| 1986 | Disabled Children’s Protection Act | Attorney’s fees will be awarded to parents if they prevail |
| 1986 | Education of the Disabled Act Amendments | Early childhood intervention will be phased in by 1990 |
| 1987 | School Board of Nassau County v. Arline | Children who have contagious diseases may not be denied an education, although health and safety risks to others may cause an individual to be |

| | | |
|------|---|--|
| | | disqualified |
| 1987 | Preschool Amendment | Expanded preschool education to the disabled |
| 1987 | Civil Rights Restoration Act | Amended Section 504, accepted the Arline decision |
| 1988 | Honig v. Doe | If a disabled child is expelled for more than 10 days it is considered a change in placement |
| 1989 | Dellmuth v. Muth | Lawsuits cannot be brought against states and state agencies |
| 1990 | Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) | Changed the title of EAHCA to IDEA – primarily a funding statute |
| 1990 | Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) | Prohibits discrimination on the basis of disabilities regardless of funding – Title II deals with public schools, Title III deals with private schools |
| 1993 | Zobrest v. Catalina Foothills School District | Sign language interpreters may be provided to students in parochial schools |
| 1997 | Reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1997 | Made some changes to the 1990 version – roles of parents strengthened, regular educations included in IEP process, right to placement in private schools also strengthened if public school placement is not appropriate |
| 1999 | Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garret F. | The Cedar Rapids Community School District is required to provide Garret with the nursing services he needs during school hours |
| 2004 | Individuals With Disabilities Educational Improvement Act of 2004 | This act strengthened parental involvement improved educational standards, and reduced paperwork |

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**PROJECT: SELF-DETERMINATION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH
DISABILITIES**

Participant Name: _____

I state that I am over 18 years of age and wish to participate in a program of research being conducted by Alice Faber in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to identify through qualitative research the influences on the development of self-determination for students attending a community college who received special education services in high school.

Procedure

The procedures involve asking participants to share their life stories within the context of developing self-determination skills. Once their stories have been transcribed, the participants will be given an opportunity to review them for accuracy and revision if necessary. Each interview will be taped, and the individual interviews will be conducted over several sessions. This process will last as long as it takes to get the story of the lives of the participants in relation to self-determination.

Risks

There are no foreseeable risks involved in this study.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. It is hoped that this study will help us learn more about how individuals become self-determining.

Alternative to Participation

The alternative to participation in this study is to continue to participate in the program in which you are currently enrolled. Nothing can be held against you for not participating in this study.

Cost/Compensation

There is no cost for you to participate in this research study. Once you have been finished the study procedures you will be paid an amount mutually agreed upon by both you and the Principal Investigator.

Confidentiality

This informed consent form with your name on it will be kept separately from all your answers. Your answers and data will be kept anonymous, which means that no identifying information, such as your name or social security number, will be on any of your study materials. This means that none of your answers or data can be identified as coming from you, even by the investigator, once you have completed this study. All of your study materials, answers, and data will be kept in the locked cabinet of Alice Faber, and only the Investigator, Mrs. Faber, will have access to this information. Identifying information about you will never appear in any public form.

Right to Withdraw from the Study

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary and you may discontinue your participation at any time without prejudice or penalty, and without affecting your present status in your current program. Your academic standing will not be affected by your decision to participate or not participate in the study. You will be told of any significant new findings that develop during the study, which may affect your willingness to participate in the study.

Right to Question

You are free to ask questions at any time without penalty. If you have questions, please contact Mrs. Alice Faber, M.Ed. at the following address.

2705 Jeffrey Lori Drive
Finksburg, Maryland 21048
Office Phone 410-876-1975
E-mail Teapot1508@aol.com

If you agree to join this study, please sign your name below.

NOT VALID WITHOUT THE
IRB STAMP OF CERTIFICATION

Subject's signature date

_____ I have read and understand
the information on this form.

_____ I have had the information on
this form explained to me.

Appendix C: Letter of Introduction to Colleges

Alice Faber
2705 Jeffrey Lori Drive
Finksburg, Maryland 21048
Phone 410 419-8633
Fax 410 876-1975

Counseling and Advisement Center
Winchester Community College
110 Painters Mill Road
Owings Mills, Maryland 21117

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter in order to introduce myself to you and to ask for your help. My name is Alice Faber and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland. At the present time I am working on a doctoral dissertation under the direction of Dr. Hanne Mawhinney researching the role that self-determination has in the lives of students who had been identified as eligible to receive special education services in high school. I am requesting that you forward the enclosed letter to students who had formerly been identified as receiving special education services in high school.

Purpose of the study

Some students who had been given a special education label leave school after graduation and simply go home and sit. Others go out and get a job, continue their education, or obtain vocational training. The purpose of this study is to identify through qualitative research what factors lead some students to self-determination, while others appear to be lost in their own lives.

Procedures

I want to locate individuals who are attending community college to see if training in self-determination had any long-term effects, or to discover just what did bring them to where they are at the present time. I plan to locate the participants who are attending college through the counseling center. The participants will be asked to sign a permission to participate in the study and I also may ask the parents of the participants to sign a permission form as well. I intend to explore their life stories within the context of developing self-determination skills. Once their stories have been transcribed, the participants will be given an opportunity to review them for accuracy and revision if necessary. I plan to tape each interview, and I expect that the individual interviews will be conducted over several sessions. I want to spend as much time with each participant as they will allow me to, and for as long as it takes to get their own story of their lives in relation to self-determination. The participants and I will be looking at their experiences and how those experiences have influenced them in where they are today and where they hope to go in the future.

Risks

There are no foreseeable risks involved in this study.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to students from participating in this study. It is hoped that this study will help us learn more about how individuals become self-determining individuals.

Cost/compensation

There is no cost for students to participate in this research study. Once students have been finished the study procedures students will be paid an amount mutually agreed upon by both students and the Principal Investigator.

Confidentiality

The informed consent form with the student's name on it will be kept separately from all student answers. Students' answers and data will be kept anonymous, which means that no identifying information, such as students' name or social security numbers, will be on any of the students' study materials. This means that none of the students' answers or data can be identified as coming from students, even by the investigator, once students have completed this study. All of the students' study materials, answers, and data will be kept in the locked cabinet of Alice Faber, and only the Investigator, Mrs. Faber, will have access to this information. Identifying information about students will never appear in any public form.

Right to withdraw from study

Student participation in the study is entirely voluntary and students may discontinue student participation at any time without prejudice or penalty, and without affecting student's present status in their current program. Students' academic standing, vocational training, or employment will not be affected by students' decisions to participate or not participate in the study. Students will be told of any significant new findings that develop during the study, which may affect students' willingness to participate in the study.

Right to question

Students are free to ask questions at any time without penalty. If students have questions, please contact Mrs. Faber (410-876-1975).

University statement

The University of Maryland at College Park is committed to providing participants in its research all rights due them under state and federal law. Students give up none of their legal rights by participating in the research project. Please call the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if students have questions about students' rights as research participants.

The research described in this letter has been classified as minimal risk by the University of Maryland Review Board (IRB), a group of scientists, physicians, and other experts. The board's membership includes persons who are not affiliated with the University and persons who do not conduct research projects. The board's decision that the research is minimal does not mean that the research is risk-free, however. Generally speaking, students are assuming the risks of research participation. But, if students are harmed as a result of the negligence of a researcher, students can make a claim for compensation. If students believe they have been harmed through participation in this research study as a result of researcher negligence, students can contact the IRB for more information about claims procedures.

Your help in forwarding the enclosed letter to students who had formerly been identified as receiving special education services in high school will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Alice B. Faber, M.Ed.

Appendix D: Letter of Introduction to Students

Alice Faber
2705 Jeffrey Lori Drive
Finksburg, Maryland 21048
Phone 410 419-8633
Fax 410876-1975

Current Students
Winchester Community College
110 Painters Mill Road
Owings Mills, Maryland 21117

Dear Student:

I am writing this letter in order to introduce myself to you and to ask for your help. My name is Alice Faber and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland. At the present time I am working on a doctoral dissertation under the direction of Dr. Hanne Mawhinney researching the role that self-determination has in the lives of students who had been identified as eligible to receive special education services in high school. I am requesting that you consider participating in this research project.

Purpose of the study

Some students who had been given a special education label leave school after graduation and simply go home and sit. Others go out and get a job, continue their education, or obtain vocational training. The purpose of this study is to identify through qualitative research what factors lead some students to self-determination, while others appear to be lost in their own lives.

Procedures

I want to locate individuals who are attending community to see if training in self-determination had any long-term effects, or to discover just what did bring them to where they are at the present time. I plan to locate the participants who are attending college through the counseling center. The participants will be asked to sign a permission form to participate in the study and I also may ask the parents of the participants to sign a permission form as well. I intend to explore their life stories within the context of developing self-determination skills. Once their stories have been transcribed, the participants will be given an opportunity to review them for accuracy and revision if necessary. I plan to tape each interview, and I expect that the individual interviews will be conducted over several sessions. I want to spend as much time with each participant as they will allow me to, and for as long as it takes to get their own story of their lives in relation to self-determination. The participants and I will be looking at their experiences and how those experiences have influenced them in where they are today and where they hope to go in the future.

Risks

There are no foreseeable risks involved in this study.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to students from participating in this study. It is hoped that this study will help us learn more about how individuals become self-determining individuals.

Cost/ compensation

There is no cost for students to participate in this research study. Once students have been finished the study procedures students will be paid an amount mutually agreed upon by both students and the Principal Investigator.

Confidentiality

The informed consent form with the student's name on it will be kept separately from all student answers. Student's answers and data will be kept anonymous, which means that no identifying information, such as the student's name or social security number, will be on any student's study materials. This means that none of the student's answers or data can be identified as coming from any student, even by the investigator, once students have completed this study. All of the student's study materials, answers, and data will be kept in the locked cabinet of Alice Faber, and only the Investigator, Mrs. Faber, will have access to this information. Identifying information about any student will never appear in any public form.

Right to withdraw from study

Student participation in the study is entirely voluntary and students may discontinue student participation at any time without prejudice or penalty, and without affecting the student's present status in their current program. The student's academic standing, vocational training, or employment will not be affected by the student's decision to participate or not participate in the study. Students will be told of any significant new findings that develop during the study, which may affect the student's willingness to participate in the study.

Right to question

Students are free to ask questions at any time without penalty. If you have questions, please contact Mrs. Faber (410-876-1975).

University statement

The University of Maryland at College Park is committed to providing participants in its research all rights due them under state and federal law. Students give up none of their legal rights by participating in the research project. Please call the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions about student's rights as a research participant.

The research described in this letter has been classified as minimal risk by the University of Maryland Review Board (IRB), a group of scientists, physicians, and other experts. The board's membership includes persons who are not affiliated with the University and persons who do not conduct research projects. The board's decision that the research is minimal does not mean that the research is risk-free, however. Generally speaking, students are assuming the risks of research participation. But, if students are harmed as a result of the negligence of a researcher, students can make a claim for compensation. If students believe they have been harmed through participation in this research study as a result of researcher negligence, students can contact the IRB for more information about claims procedures.

I hope that you will consider participating in this research project. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 410 419-8633. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Alice B. Faber, M.Ed.

Appendix E. Confidential Self-Determination Questionnaire

1. Did you receive special education services when you were in high school?
2. What is your disability?
3. What type of special education services did you receive?
4. How many hours of special education services did you receive?
5. Do you know what self-determination means?
6. Did you receive any training in self-determination in high school?
7. What type of training did you receive?
8. Did you receive help in transitioning from high school to college?
9. What type of transitioning services did you receive when you graduated from high school to college?

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