Challenges to Social Interactions as Perceived by Young High Ability Adults with Learning Disabilities: A Qualitative Research Design

Dana Hathcock

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Ann,

Thank you is hardly adequate to express my gratitude, for the varying support you each provided with a willing attitude. Yet, I offer a heartfelt thanks for the time we shared, and for the wisdom you presented and I snared. My experience has come to rest, as I go out to take the final test. The test of my abilities to be a model, a mentor, a researcher, a nurturing friend, and colleague. And to provide respectful guidance to those who seek to plant seeds and fill the lives of others with intrigue.

Thank you,
Dana Talbott

December, 1998
CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AS PERCEIVED BY YOUNG HIGH ABILITY ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

BY

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DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Special Education
The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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*Dean, Graduate School*

**NOV 16 1998**

*Date*
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of those special people with learning disabilities (differences) who have been the inspiration of my life’s work. My brother, Michael Hathcock, with his incredible talents and his tremendous academic struggles peaked my interest in Dyslexia and led me into the field of learning disabilities over 20 years ago. His story and the stories of many students, friends, and loved ones led to the conceptualization of this study. Another special friend with learning differences, who chooses to remain anonymous, provided me with the guidance to turn my conceptualization into the design of this dissertation. It is my desire that through the voices of the participants in this study, the voices of the others will be heard as well.
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The importance of a solid support system during the PhD and dissertation process is immense. I would like to say thank you to the many people who played various supportive roles during my progression of this process. Some of you listened kindly when I complained in frustration; some of you put up with my mood swings in heroic fashion; some of you accepted the neglect of our friendship and loved me from afar; some of you picked me up, dusted me off, and sent me back into the game each time I considered throwing in the towel; and each one of you believed in me every step of the way. My sincere appreciation goes out to all of you for my success in completing this dissertation.

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"Though a man go out to battle a thousand men, if he conquers himself he is the greater conqueror."  

_Buddhist Proverb_

I truly conquered myself during this process.
CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AS PERCEIVED BY YOUNG HIGH ABILITY ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was designed to analyze the perceptions of adults with learning disabilities concerning social competence issues. The questions in the research were posed to participants to elicit examples of the challenges experienced as a child and as an adult; examples of the coping skills utilized; examples of circumstances which helped to alleviate the challenges; perceptions regarding the educational system and people/situations in general as factors in performance; and successful outcomes as well as possible reasons for those outcomes. Five female and five male individuals ranging in age from 25-40, having been identified with learning disabilities, participated in this study. Three sets of interviews, based on Spradley's (1979) ethnographic interview, were conducted in Albuquerque, New Mexico during the year of 1998. The focus of the interviews were (1) video clips of social interactions; (2) strength and challenge areas for the four characteristics of social interactions: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control; and (3) follow-up questions based on the first two sets of interviews.
CHALLENGES TO SOCIA L INTERACTIONS AS PERCEIVED BY YOUNG
HIGH ABILITY ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:

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ABSTRACT

The qualitative study was designed to examine the perception of social
interactions engaged in by gifted individuals. The population
of gifted individuals was divided into three subpopulations based
on their social interactions: those who have difficulties engaging
in social interactions, those who are perceived to engage in social
interactions, and those who have no difficulties engaging in social
interactions. The findings of this study revealed that gifted
individuals engage in social interactions in a variety of settings
and situations. The study also indicated that gifted individuals
perceive social interactions as important for their personal and
professional development. The results of this study suggest that
further research is needed to understand the complex nature of
social interactions for gifted individuals.
The major findings revealed:

Most of the participants tended to isolate themselves by choice.

Most of the participants tended to withdraw within group situations by choice.

Most of the participants had a strong desire to avoid hurting others.

The ability to interact positively with others had a direct relationship with having a positive self-esteem and a strong self-confidence.

All believed that their ideas and creative strategies used to compensate for their learning differences should be viewed as unique versus defective and honored instead of ridiculed.

As children the female participants tended to be very quiet, serious, and the "perfect kid". The girls internalized their frustration.

As children most of the male participants had distinct behaviors depending on the situation. For the most part, the boys externalized their frustrations.

Most of the participants indicated language processing difficulties of some kind. Stress and being overwhelmed with life in general tended to slow the processing even further which affected social interactions.

This exploratory study was rather broad, yet allowed various intriguing concepts to surface. Further research should seek the relationship between intuition and anxiousness and the effect of changing the educational environment on social challenges, as well as additional suggested information.
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background of the Problem

Samuel Kirk (1963) first used the term learning disabilities (LD) to describe children who have disorders in the development of language, speech, reading, and associated communication skills needed for social interaction. In Educational Principles and Practices (1967), a very influential book that was ahead of its time in the field of learning disabilities, Johnson and Myklebust devoted an entire chapter on nonverbal disorders of learning, which included the inability to read gestures, difficulty with body image, and spatial orientation deficits. They referred to these difficulties as social imperception. Lerner (1971) provided extensive information on problems with social competence among students with learning disabilities. She stated that some students with learning disabilities have a lack of judgment in certain situations, difficulty perceiving how others feel, problems in establishing family relationships, and problems in other areas of social ability. Though the voices of these very influential advocates were mentioning social interaction deficits from the inception of (the term and field of) learning disabilities, it was the mid-1980s before the field as a whole began to recognize the importance of social skills in the progress and success of individuals with learning disabilities (Lavoie, 1994).

From a review of research, Schumaker and Hazel (1984, p. 492) identified specific concerns for students with learning disabilities in the area of social skills. Many students with learning disabilities:

- are less well liked and less socially skilled than their peers without LD.
- tend to choose less socially acceptable behaviors in various circumstances.
- are less able to predict consequences for behaviors.
- misinterpret social cues more often.
- adapt their behavior to the characteristics of their listener less often.
- perform certain verbal and nonverbal social skills at significantly lower
levels (smiling while talking, hand illustrations while talking, forward body lean).

- perform certain inappropriate social behaviors at significantly higher levels.
- have conversational skills deficits (asking questions in general, making requests, accurately and fully communicating information to others, providing positive feedback).
- have problems in conflictual situations (negotiation, resisting peer pressure, explaining a problem, giving and accepting criticism).

Social skills deficits have been shown to have adverse effects on an individual’s life adjustment, such as a higher incidence of: dropping out of school, delinquency, mental health problems, and “bad conduct” discharges from military service (Shumaker & Hazel, 1984). The social problems of persons having learning disabilities continue into adulthood even if they are not as negative as the consequences listed above. For a long time, arguments were made that these social problems were due to frustrations caused by labels and continued failure in academic areas (Secondary Cause Hypothesis). In her book, *Social Development of Learning Disabled Persons* (1981), Kronick stated that she accepted this belief when she entered the field of learning disabilities in the mid 1960s. However, as she observed a generation of children with learning disabilities grow into adulthood—and realized that some, although remediated academically, remained friendless, lonely, and unproductive—she challenged the belief that their problems could be attributed completely to their feelings about having been poor students, or to secondary problems. Kronick saw a quality of social ineptitude and imperviousness that had yet to be explained.

The Primary Cause Hypothesis views social skills deficits as resulting from neurological dysfunctions (Hazel & Shumaker, 1987). In 1985 the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (ICLD) was formed to determine what was known about learning disabilities. Five areas were
targeted, including social skills deficits. Based upon the findings, the ICLED recommended a modification of the current definition of learning disabilities to include social skills deficits as a specific learning disability. The modification was not made, but the request alone placed a much greater focus on the severity of the issue. In addition to the Primary Cause Hypothesis and the Secondary Cause Hypothesis is the Social Learning Theory Hypothesis. This hypothesis views that social skills deficits result from failure to acquire a social skill due to lack of opportunity to learn the skill and/or a lack of exposure to appropriate models. Rick Lavoie (1994), a director of a residential school for students with learning disabilities, stated that students with LD do not learn by accident, through osmosis, or by exposure and that they have to be taught everything. Lavoie included that the parents of his students all have impeccable social skills. He questioned, “If it’s as simple as taking the child and putting him in a regular education classroom where he could observe good social skills all day, why didn’t the child learn the social skills from the parents?”

Gresham and Elliott (1989), Gresham (1993), Conte and Andrews (1993), and Lavoie (1994) all agreed that the cause of social incompetence is significantly less relevant than the effects. All children, regardless of cause and eligibility criteria, should receive appropriate intervention services for identified social skills deficits. For the many who do meet the established criteria, the Individualized Education Program must specify those areas most in need of remediation (Gresham, 1993). Many people have stated over the years that learning disabilities are a school problem and that many children function well in other environments and after graduation. This is true for some, but not for the majority of persons with learning disabilities. Mellard and Hazel (1992) emphasized the variety of unique challenges placed on persons with learning disabilities when they make the transition from high school to post-secondary
environments. Whether the post-secondary experience is vocational training, community college, military service, employment, 4-year college/university, or vocational rehabilitation, the new setting expects a higher level of individual functioning and social responsibility. The struggle to gain independence is stressful for everyone as they exit high school. Having a learning disability increases that struggle and a challenge in social competence compounds it even further. Mellard and Hazel found that young adults with learning disabilities encountered social problems in every post-secondary environment. They suggested that improving social competencies of persons with learning disabilities should have a greater focus in both secondary and post-secondary experiences.

**Statement of the Problem**

Research with students with learning disabilities (LD) indicates they are more at risk than their peers without LD for social skills difficulties and, as a result, low parent, teacher, and peer acceptance (Vaughn, Lancelotta, & Minnis, 1988; Vaughn & Zaragoza, 1991). Various social skills training programs have been created and researched throughout the years. While results have been promising, difficulties with achieving a durable, long-term effect on social competence and with generalizing those effects to various settings have been noted (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Though the causes of inadequate interpersonal skills of students with learning disabilities have been hypothesized, parents, educators, and researchers do not really know why this phenomenon so often occurs. Various adaptive skills that some of these students have developed over the years to help them cope with their social competence challenges also are unknown. Additionally, driving forces or supports such as people and situations that may have prevented other students
Statement of the Problem

Research into attributes with proven value for student success (e.g., achievement and self-determination) and on issues of how they interact with student profiles (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) could inform how to better leverage institutions to support students.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of student engagement on academic achievement, particularly in higher education settings. The study aimed to understand how student engagement affects academic outcomes and explore strategies for enhancing engagement and academic success.
with learning disabilities from experiencing the same interpersonal difficulties are unknown.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of adults with learning disabilities concerning social interaction issues, to identify:

1. the skills that some students with learning disabilities have developed to cope with their social interaction challenges, and
2. the driving forces or supports that may have prevented other students with learning disabilities from experiencing the same social interaction challenges.

**Research Questions**

The following questions have been posed to guide this qualitative study:

1. What were some of the social challenges with which individuals with learning disabilities dealt, as children?
2. What were some of the social challenges with which individuals with learning disabilities dealt, as adults?
3. In what ways did the target individuals cope with these challenges?
4. What circumstances helped the individuals to alleviate their challenges with interpersonal skills?
5. Do the individuals with learning disabilities perceive the educational system as a factor in their interpersonal performance?
6. Do the individuals with learning disabilities perceive people or situations in general as a factor in their interpersonal performance?
7a. What successful interpersonal outcomes have some individuals with learning disabilities experienced?
7b. To what do they contribute those successes?
Significance of the Study

Getting the perspectives of adults with LD concerning interpersonal interactions, rejection, and making and maintaining friendships, may provide novel insights for educators, family members, and other professionals. With this additional awareness, a possible contribution can be made for improvement in social skills assessment and social skills training.

Specific Considerations

Definition of Terms

Specific Learning Disabilities - 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 to do mathematical calculations. The term includes conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not apply to children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual handicaps, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (Department of Education, 1992, p. 159). This is the definition in law.

Learning Disabilities - is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with LD but do not by themselves constitute a LD. Although LD may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic
influences such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1988). This is the official definition of the NJCLD, which is composed of nine national organizations concerned with LD. Each of the nine organizations has adopted this definition as well (Hammill, 1993, p. 4).

**Social Skills** - are the special abilities and techniques one uses to perform competently on a given social task (greetings, dealing with provocations, etc. (McFall, 1982).

**Social Competence** - is an evaluative term that refers to the quality or adequacy of a person’s overall performance on a specific task within a given social interaction. The evaluation is made by significant social members in one’s environment, such as teachers, parents, and peers (McFall, 1982).

**Skill Deficit** - occurs when the individual does not have the cognitive and overt social skills needed to succeed in social interactions (Gresham, 1981).

**Performance Deficit** - occurs when the social skills are present in the individual’s repertoire, but the skills are not performed (Gresham, 1981).

**Self-Control Deficit** - occurs when the person emits high rates of aversive behaviors (Gresham, 1981).

**Naturalistic Inquiry/Research** - avoids the artificial constraint of control and manipulation while investigating human behavior in its natural/unique contexts and settings (Isaac & Michael, 1995).

**Qualitative Research** - addresses the manner of generating data, which reflects the subjective opinions of the subjects as well as the subjective judgment of the observer (Isaac & Michael, 1995).
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Overview of Social Competence and Learning Disabilities

This review of literature is designed to present an evolutionary perspective of the study of social competence issues among persons with learning disabilities. The review is divided into four sections, including definitions, assessment, interventions, and summary/theoretical framework. The section on assessment is divided into three segments, including identification of social challenges, identification of characteristics, and diagnosis and assessment of social competence. The section of interventions is divided into four segments, including social skills training, problem-solving, generalization instruction, and change of direction.

Definitions

Several definitions of social skills and social competence have been provided over the years, such as an individual's ability to express both positive and negative feelings in the interpersonal context without suffering consequent loss of social reinforcement (Bellack & Hersen, 1977); a judgment by another that a person behaved adequately in an interpersonal situation (McFall, 1982); and socially acceptable behaviors that enable a person to interact effectively with others and to avoid socially unacceptable responses from others (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Gresham (1981) divided social competence problems into three categories: (1) a skill deficit exists when the individual does not have the cognitive and overt social skills needed to succeed in social interactions; (2) a performance deficit occurs when the skills are present in the individual's repertoire but the skills are not performed; and (3) a self-control deficit is present when a person emits high rates of aversive behaviors.

McFall (1982) conceptualized a relationship between social competence
and social skills. Social competence is an evaluative term that refers to the quality or adequacy of a person’s overall performance on a specific task within a given social interaction. The evaluation is made by significant social members in one’s environment (teachers, parents, peers). Social skills are the special abilities and techniques one uses to perform competently on a given social task (greetings, dealing with provocations, etc.). Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) contended that, with this relationship, McFall provided a foundation for advances in the assessment, classification and teaching of social skills. In the studies designed to examine the effectiveness of social skills assessment measures or of intervention methods, the researchers often refer to a specific definition on which they based their work.

Assessment

As there are several definitions of social skills, there are several definitions of each of the procedures used in social skills assessment as well. For example, as many as 13 separate definitions of sociometric assessment have been found (Gresham & Elliott, 1989). General definitions have been chosen for each of the procedures.

Sociometric techniques are designed to assess an individual’s relative popularity and acceptance within a peer group (Lavoie, 1994). The three categories are peer nominations, peer ratings, and peer assessment (Gresham & Elliott, 1989). Peer nominations require children to nominate peers based on certain non-behavioral criteria such as best friends, preferred play partners, or work partners. Peer ratings request all students in a classroom to rate each other on a Likert-type scale. Peer assessment strategies ask children to nominate or rate peers on various behavioral characteristics such as liked most, liked least, smartest in class, or best in math.

Behavior rating scales are checklists which are completed by parents,
teachers, or peers and are used to evaluate a target child's overall social behavior. *Behavioral observation codes* are utilized to count the frequency of certain social behaviors which the target child emits in observations. *Behavioral checklists* typically are three point rating scales used to determine the quality of a behavior if it occurs (Schumaker & Hazel, 1984).

*Social skills interviews* are forms which provide appropriate questions for interviewing parents, teachers, peers, and the target students themselves (Sheridan, 1995). Much of the literature advised against self-reports and student interviews, stating that the information would be biased. Sheridan concurred that though “interviewing” students may seem peculiar, it is essential that students' thoughts about their problems are taken into consideration.

Studies involving social skills assessment of students with learning disabilities began over 20 years ago and have encompassed three major categories of focus. The first category focused on the identification of social challenges including rejection. The second category focused on the identification of characteristics of persons with learning disabilities who experienced these social challenges. The third category focused on the identification of target students in need of intervention procedures as well as the assessment of the procedures' effectiveness. Gresham and Elliott (1989) contended that two different types of assessment techniques should be utilized for identification/classification (of target students) and for measuring the effectiveness of intervention/therapy. However, the various types of assessment procedures overlap tremendously in the literature which discusses assessment for identification/classification and/or intervention/therapy. The same procedures were often used to identify target students and to evaluate the intervention procedures. For this literature review, these procedures have been combined into one category.
The first major thrust in research on social skills issues with students with learning disabilities came in 1977 when five contracts were awarded to institutions of higher education to conduct research in specific areas relating to learning disabilities (Commissioner of Education, 1977). The University of Kansas Institute focused its research on the characteristics and demands of high school aged students. A curriculum comprised of strategy training, social skills, modified materials, and instructional procedures was developed (Schumaker, Deshler, Alley, & Warner, 1983). The Teacher’s College Institute of Columbia University focused its research on problems in learning basic skills, reading comprehension, and memory/study skills (Connor, 1983). The University of Minnesota Institute focused its research on assessment and identification of children with learning disabilities (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Graden, Wesson, Algozzine, & Deno, 1983). The University of Virginia Institute focused its research on children with learning disabilities and attentional problems. Emphasis was placed on developing cognitive behavior modification techniques and on direct instruction. The Chicago Institute at the University of Illinois focused its research on social competence. Studies included children with learning disabilities’ communicative competence (adapting to listeners, conversational skills), reading abilities, causal attributions, and motivation (Bryan, Pear, Donahue, Bryan, & Pflaum, 1983).

**Identification of Social Challenges**

Bryan (1974) conducted an experiment to determine the popularity of children with learning disabilities. Comparison groups consisted of 84 children with learning disabilities and 84 children without learning disabilities matched in age, gender, and race. A sociometric rating scale was administered to an additional 1,430 third, fourth, and fifth graders who attended classes with the subjects. The sociometric rating scale asked students for names of three
students they would choose as friends. The rating scales also asked students for three names of students they would not want to choose as friends. Further questions asked were broader in nature such as “Who finds it hard to sit still in class? Who is handsome or pretty? Who is always worried or scared?” The students were told their answers were private. The results indicated that children with LD, particularly white females, were found to be less attractive and more rejected by their peers than comparison children.

Sixty boys including 22 with learning disabilities, 18 with behavior problems and 20 who functioned as a control group, had their cognitive social skills evaluated by Romano and Bellack (1983). The students with LD were all mainstreamed into regular seventh, eighth, and ninth grade classes. The control group attended classes with these students. A class roster and sociometric scale was given to all students in these classes. Structured interviews were given to the 60 subjects to assess social cognitive skills. These interviews included four scenarios involving aggression (being teased or physically harassed) and four scenarios involving assertion (refusing a friend’s request to borrow money). The verbal portion of the WISC-R was administered to examine a relationship between language abilities and social skills. The results indicated that students with learning disabilities were significantly less socially accepted by their non-identified peers and, therefore, at possible risk for problems in social adjustment.

Hagger (1992) utilized the teacher, parent, and self forms of the Social Skills Rating Profile and peer nominations to examine the multiple perspectives of social functioning of students with learning disabilities and students who are low achievers (LA). The study involved 44 students with learning disabilities, 43 students with low achievement, and 54 students who were high achievers (HA). Students with LD and students with LA were found to be more rejected, less
popular, and less self confident than the HA students. It appears that the social needs of many students, whether they have learning disabilities, intellectual impairment, or low achievement, are not being met.

In a meta-analysis of 152 research studies in the area of learning disabilities and social skills deficits, Kavale & Forness (1995) found students with LD do possess deficits in social competence. Approximately 75 percent of students with learning disabilities can be distinguished from their non-disabled peers. This degree of separation was found across different rates (teachers, peers, self) and across the majority of social skill realms. The presence of social skill deficits was affirmed, however, the reasons for those deficits was not identified. Cause and effect relationships between academic and social deficits as well as the ways social dysfunction is mediated by variables (e.g., language, memory, perception, cognition) that also contribute to academic deficits were questions remaining unanswered.

**Identification of Characteristics**

Bryan, Wheeler, Felcan, and Henek (1976) discovered that the communication of children with learning disabilities differed from conversations of their peers in several categories. They compared two groups of third, fourth, and fifth grade boys and girls, consisting of seventeen students with learning disabilities and seventeen without. An observation technique was designed and used to record the subjects’ conversations as completely and accurately as possible. One observer recorded statements made by the subject and a second observer recorded all statements made to the subject by peers.

Another research study underway at the same time examined children’s concerns for others and their willingness to donate to charity. Twenty-eight of the subjects in the observational study also participated in the donation study. The students with learning disabilities (LD) emitted more rejection statements
and more competitive statements than the students without learning disabilities (NLD). The NLD peers observed communicating with the students with LD, also emitted more rejecting and competitive statements than the NLD peers communicating with other NLD students. It appeared that the students with LD may have aroused negative attitudes in others just by being present. The students with LD received fewer consideration statements than the NLD group, but they also emitted fewer. The NLD group made more consideration and help statements and therefore they received more of that type of statement. It was observed that the children with learning disabilities were sometimes very nasty to others, and this behavior did not have to occur very often for them to be highly rejected. The students with LD also contributed much more money to the charity program than the NLD students. It was suggested that just because people may be generous does not mean they say generous or helpful things to others. This study supported the literature which indicates that students with learning disabilities are likely to be rejected by their teachers and their peers. It also further examined the characteristics of the children who face such rejections.

Bryan, Sherman, and Fisher (1980) examined the nonverbal behaviors of 10 year old boys with learning disabilities in an interview with an adult female. Subjects were divided into two groups with students with, and without learning disabilities assigned to both groups. One group was instructed to be impressive and attempt to make the interviewer like them. The other group was told the interviewer was there to learn. The interviews were held individually in a trailer. According to the researchers, the results suggested three types of nonverbal activities in which students with learning disabilities differ from their non-identified peers. First, they spend less time looking at the interviewer and when they do look, looks are quick and sly in appearance. Secondly, they
smile less, indicating possibly a low motivation to appear pleasant to others. And thirdly, they use more filled pauses, perhaps trying to maintain the floor once they have it. The students with learning disabilities who were asked to impress the interviewer actually responded in an opposite manner. Perhaps the suggestion made it more formal and they became more withdrawn. Looking activities and smiling appear to differentiate students with and without learning disabilities in an interview setting and, in turn, affect adult judgments of them. Children with learning disabilities appear to be shy, indifferent, or uninvolved in the situation, which, subsequently, evokes negative appraisals (Bryan, Sherman, & Fisher, 1980)

Hoyle and Sarafica (1984) examined the social status of elementary aged boys with learning disabilities by testing their perceptions of social competencies, their conceptions of friendships, and their behavior in school in comparison to their peers without learning disabilities. Social status was evaluated using a peer nomination of best friends and a peer rating scale conducted with 141 students in the school. Additionally, 23 boys with learning disabilities and 23 boys without learning disabilities were administered the Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1979), the Interpersonal Understanding Interview (Selman & Jacquette, 1979), and The Behavior Problem Checklist (Quay & Peterson, 1975). Students with learning disabilities classified themselves as having social competence and as having many friends, but they were not rated that way by their peers. Due to less accurate self assessment, students with learning disabilities may not make the fine adjustments needed for smooth interpersonal interactions. The results also indicated that, although these students developed a high degree of friendship, their application of the concept for friendship was low, especially in conflict resolution. The students with learning disabilities did not differ from their peers without LD in their self
ratings of social competence and self-esteem, but their teachers viewed them as shy, socially withdrawn, lacking in confidence, anxious, and fearful.

Saloner and Gettinger (1985) conducted a study of thirty children with learning disabilities and thirty children without learning disabilities using a social inference test and a visual perception test. The students with LD scored significantly lower than the non-identified students in social inference (p<.01). No significant differences existed between students with learning disabilities or non-identified students on the visual perception test. However, the two test scores correlated significantly for the children with learning disabilities, but showed no relationship for the NLD students. This suggests that, within the group of students with LD, factors that affect perception of visual non-meaningful configurations may also affect perception of visual meaningful stimuli. Saloner and Gettinger (1985) state that this lends credence to the claim that children with visual perceptual problems often are unable to perceive interrelationships in nonverbal social situations. The group with learning disabilities also had more difficulty with the test in areas of verbal expression. There appears to be a relationship among visual, verbal, and social skills in children with learning disabilities.

Wiener, Harris, and Shirer (1990) investigated the relationship between IQ, achievement, and social behavior as rated by peers, and peer status. Sixty-three boys and twenty-seven girls with learning disabilities from 9 to 12 years old participated in this study. An additional ninety-four non-identified children participated as a comparison group. All of the subjects attended regular classes and their classmates were involved in the study as raters for the sociograms. The descriptive statement choices on the social behavior nomination scale were as follows:

**Cooperative:** "Here is someone who is really good to have as part of your
group, because this person is agreeable and cooperates—pitches in, shares, and gives everyone a turn."

Disruptive: "This person has a way of upsetting everything when he or she gets into a group—doesn’t share and tries to get everyone to do things their way."

Dependent: "This person is always looking for help, asks for help even before they’ve tried very hard."

Clown: "This person is a comedian—likes to entertain everyone through his or her jokes and funny actions."

Aggressive: "This person starts fights. They say mean things to other kids or push them, or hit them."

Shy: "This person acts very shy with other kids, seems always to play or work by themselves. It’s hard to get to know this person."

Leader: "This person gets chosen by the others as the leader. Other people like to have this person in charge." (Wiener, Harris, & Shirer, 1990, p. 119)

Achievement and IQ were not significant precursors of peer status in children with learning disabilities. Children with learning disabilities were less likely to be labeled as cooperative, leaders, and humorous than children without learning disabilities. However, they were not more likely to be labeled as shy, dependent, aggressive, or disruptive. Children with and without learning disabilities differed considerably on the prosocial skills, but not on the negative social behaviors. Children without learning disabilities tended to be noticed more when they exhibited prosocial behaviors, and children with learning disabilities tended to be noticed more when they exhibited negative social behaviors. The children with learning disabilities were absent from the regular classroom most of the day. The researchers believed that the prosocial behavior of many of the children with LD was simply not witnessed.
A study designed to identify patterns of social-emotional sub-groups of among children with learning disabilities was conducted by Margalit and Levin-Ayagon (1994). One-hundred twenty-two students with learning disabilities from 12 self-contained special service classes participated in this study. This study included the perceptions of the target students in regards to their social competence. Four sub-types were identified from the data. Group one consisted of lonely students with internalizing tendencies who experienced the highest levels of loneliness. This group hated being alone and felt sorry for themselves, yet maintained a passive expectation for the desired change and showed an very low level of social initiation according to their teachers. However, the teachers saw their cooperation with adults and self-control both to be outstanding.

The second group of students was identified as lonely with externalizing tendencies and a low level of self-control skills. Their peers did not accept them, but they were aware of their social challenges and desired friendships. Regardless, this group failed to control their frustrations and anger which often caused them to get into trouble.

The third group was smaller in size and demonstrated externalizing maladjusted behaviors, but felt socially competent, rarely felt lonely, and recounted numerous friends. Peers accepted these students and the teachers regarded them as social initiators. This group was also reported by teachers to be low in cooperation and self-control. The fourth group of students was identified to have difficulties focused on academic deficiencies. This group of children was viewed as relatively age-appropriate in their social adjustment.

The ability to identify emotional expressions from facial, posture, and gesture cues by children with and without learning disabilities was investigated by Nabuzoka and Smith (1995). Seventy-four children with learning disabilities
and 19 without learning disabilities ranging in age from 4 to 12 years old participated in the study. Pictures were utilized to assess perceptions of facial and posture cues and video recordings were used to assess the gesture cues. Children with learning disabilities were found to be less efficient than their non-disabled peers in the identification of emotions. However, increased accuracy with age was observed amidst children with learning disabilities on every measure. The researchers argued that a major conclusion from the results of this study was that students with LD do not merely have a social-perception deficit, but that their difficulties can partially be explained by a development lag. It appeared that children with learning disabilities may improve in their social-perception with age, but not necessarily reach equivalency with their non-identified peers.

**Diagnosis and Assessment of Social Skills Competence**

According to Hazel and Shumaker (1987), an ideal social skills assessment tool for students with learning disabilities would: (a) be based on validated social skills deficits of students with learning disabilities; (b) be psychometrically adequate in terms of reliability, validity, and social validation; (c) be practically useful in school settings; (d) span the age range from preschool to adolescence; and (e) comprehensively assess all social skills required for social competence. They concluded that no single assessment tool meets all of these requirements. Gresham and Elliott (1989) argued that a single assessment tool should never be used for identification of social skills deficits in any population. The use of one assessment tool would be restrictive and would not produce the vital information for targeting specific social skills deficits or evaluating the outcomes of interventions. Utilizing a combination of techniques and strategies can secure a valuable "snapshot" of the individual's social capabilities and deficiencies (Lavoie, 1994).
The Social Behavior Assessment (SBA) (Stephens, 1978), the first and most comprehensive behavior rating scale developed specifically for social skills, has been shown to differentiate students with learning disabilities from those without learning disabilities (Gresham & Elliott, 1989). A list of 136 social skills necessary for success in the classroom are divided into 30 sub categories, which are grouped into four broad domains (environmental, interpersonal, self-related, and task-related behaviors). There is also an SBA-P (parent) form which views skills outside of school.

The SBA has also been used successfully as a pretest and posttest measure to assess social skills training programs. However, it is time consuming. The Social Skills Rating System-Teacher Form (SSRS-T) (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) was designed to provide information comparable to the information provided by the SBA, but in less time (Chewning, 1992). Chewning tested the discriminant and concurrent validity of the SSRS-T in a study of 180 subjects. There were ninety students without disabilities, 56 students with learning disabilities, and 34 students with intellectual handicaps.

The concurrent validity of the SSRS-T was determined by correlating it with two other teacher rating scales of social skills. The results provided evidence of construct validity of the SSRS-T. It was practical in terms of ease of administration and was efficient in terms of time required, making it suitable for researchers and teachers to use to assess the effectiveness of social skills training. When reviewing research on interventions, the Social Skills Rating System was utilized again and again for pre and and post test assessments. This scale appeared to have held up over time.

The Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment (K-6) (Walker & McConnell, 1988) contains 43 items arranged in three domains: Teacher-Preferred Social Behavior, Peer-Preferred Social
Behavior, and School Adjustment Behavior. A 5-point Likert scale is used to rate each behavior from never occurring to frequently occurring. Gresham and Elliott (1989) found the scale to represent a reliable and valid measure of children’s social skills. Walker, Stieber, and Eisert (1991) investigated the psychometric characteristics and factorial replicability of the *Walker-McConnell Scale* adolescent version (7-12). The statistics and reliability estimates proved to be as robust as the elementary version.

Hazel, Shumaker, Sherman, and Sheldon (1982) identified eight social skills which have been shown to differentiate youth with learning disabilities from youth without learning disabilities. They developed an observation checklist which included six of those skills: giving positive feedback, giving negative feedback, accepting negative feedback, resisting peer pressure, negotiating, and personal problem solving. Serna and Lau-Smith (1994) developed a program for teaching self-determination skills to students who are at risk. They included assessment and intervention strategies for eight prerequisite social skills, which were adapted from Hazel et al. Following Instructions and Conversation were omitted from Hazel et al’s checklist, but Serna and Lau-Smith included them in their program.

Irvin and Walker (1993, 1994) demonstrated a prototype technology for assessing the social competence of children with disabilities. The assessments utilize a videodisc and a microcomputer with a “touch screen". Three content areas of social competence were selected for focus: peer-group entry, dealing with teasing and provocation, and compliance of teacher directives. Videodisc and touch-screen assessments were created for (a) recognition of important cues within social settings; (b) preference for adaptive or maladaptive strategies for social negotiations; and (c) prediction of consequences or outcomes for each of the three content areas.
According to the researchers, preliminary psychometric data on sensitivity, reliability, and construct validity showed evidence that the assessments justify continued development. The data showed that prototype assessments (a) discriminate among students with disparate social knowledge/perceptions; (b) are consistent internally and across time; and (c) can be interpreted meaningfully across constructs. This technological approach allows aggregation of social competence information from four major sources: (1) direct observations; (2) direct assessment of child knowledge/perceptions of social strategies and settings; (3) sociometric assessments; (4) ratings of social skills by teachers and parents (Irvin & Walker, 1994). As our research and knowledge of social competence and learning disabilities has progressed and as our world of technology has progressed, it has been fascinating to see the two worlds mesh.

A model for an integrated assessment approach for individuals suspected of having social challenges was presented by Bryan (1997, p. 65). Five categories for assessment were suggested including affective status, self-efficacy, social status, social skills, and absence of destructive behaviors. The following table was provided to summarize the social goals and areas for assessment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective status</td>
<td>Affective status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child should be relatively happy, not</td>
<td>Assess levels of depression,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>debilitated by negative affect.</td>
<td>loneliness, anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy and optimism</td>
<td>Self-efficacy and optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child should believe he or she can</td>
<td>Assess locus of control, learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achieve goals and overcome adversity.</td>
<td>helplessness, and optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child should have peer friend and adult</td>
<td>Assess social network at school,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supporter.</td>
<td>home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Social skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child should have attention, perceptual,</td>
<td>Assess ADD-HD, social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognitive, and behavioral skills to develop</td>
<td>perception, social cognition, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriate interpersonal relationships.</td>
<td>behavior.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22
Specific measures were provided to assess an individual’s status in the five areas deemed important. The author warned that some measures had not yet established reliability and validity. Therefore, practitioners were urged to be cautious in the application of results of these measures to individual children. Other limitations mentioned were that the components did not consider age and gender differences and that the model was limited to evaluation of child factors. Recognition of home and school contributing factors was stressed as well (Bryan, 1997).

Interventions

In a two part review of social skills assessment and intervention literature, Shumaker and Hazel (1984) based their approach on Gresham’s three categories of social competence problems. They in turn identified three categories of procedures used to improve the social competence of students with learning disabilities: (a) those that involve the manipulation of antecedent and consequent events in order to eliminate performance deficits and behavioral excess (basically behavioral management); (b) those that focus on improving control over social behavior (cognitive training which involves self-recording and self-evaluation of behaviors); and (c) those that teach new skills to improve skill deficits or provide incompatible responses to replace behavioral excesses (skill training- teacher description of the appropriate skill usage; modeling of the skill using live video, audio, or pictorial models; student rehearsal of the skill - verbal rehearsal of steps or role-play activities; and feedback from instructor or other learners.)

Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995), who supported McFall’s social
skills/social competence conceptualization, identified two major approaches to improving social behavior: (a) social skills training is skills based and assumes that there are key skills underlying social competence, which can be identified and systematically taught; and (b) social problem-solving (cognitive problem solving) is strategy based and focuses on developing improved cognitive awareness of social situations and comprehending adaptive strategies for response. Modeling, coaching (rehearsal & feedback), role-playing, problem solving, opportunities for generalization, cooperative learning activities, group friendship activities, problem solving videos, counseling, and relaxation training encompass the range of activities used in social skills/social competence interventions.

Social Skills Training

LaGreca and Mesilov (1981) found that interpersonal skills need to be taught very specifically and directly to children with learning disabilities. They sought to adapt social skills training procedures to meet the needs of children with learning disabilities. They chose two areas to examine: “communication-conversation skills” and “taking initiative in social situations”. Eight boys with learning disabilities, ages 12-16, were divided evenly into an experimental group and a control group. Modeling, coaching, video-taped role play, and practice with peers were the procedures used in the social skills training. Video taped recordings of the students’ social interactions were used as pre and post test experiments. The social skills of the students with learning disabilities improved when post-measures administered. The students with learning disabilities scored with their comparison group at times, and only slightly below their comparison group at other times. The researchers cautioned that the sample size was small and the intervention period was short. In no way were the subjects considered to be socially skillful. However, it was suggested that
problem areas were identified that would further facilitate the development of effective intervention programs.

Smilon (1984) examined the effects of a social skills program on the self esteem of adolescents with learning disabilities. The students were assessed using the Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory and a modified version of the Coopersmith Behavior Rating Form. The results did not confirm the hypothesis that students with learning disabilities who received social skills training would make significantly greater gains in total self-esteem, than students with LD and NLD students who did not receive training. The students with LD who received social skills training did, however, make significantly greater gains as hypothesized than the comparison group in social self-esteem and on teacher ratings of positive and assertive behavior.

Trapini (1986) investigated the effect of social skills training and tutoring on spelling achievement, teacher ratings, and use of social skills in the classroom. Twenty boys with learning disabilities were randomly assigned to experimental, comparison, and control groups for this study. The experimental and comparison groups were given social skills instruction which included greeting, listening, asking and answering questions, and complimenting. Additionally, the experimental group actively rehearsed the training by tutoring spelling with second grade boys. The control group was not involved in any of the procedures. The experimental group made statistically significant gains as compared to the control group in the use of greetings and in answering questions. The results in the other three areas (listening, asking questions, and complimenting) were not statistically significant, but revealed support for the intervention.

In a meta-analysis of 53 research studies in the area of learning disabilities and social skills training, results showed limited positive effects
(Kavale and Forness, 1995). A mere 58 percent of students with learning
disabilities benefitted from training, and this modest improvement was similar
across different raters (teachers, peers, self) and different social skill domains.
The researchers stated that the levels of improvement demonstrated a call into
question of the value of social skills training in a total treatment program for
students with learning disabilities.

**Problem-solving**

Schneider and Yoshida (1988) questioned the actual effect of
interpersonal problem solving skills on the adjustment of students with learning
disabilities. They investigated this concept in a comparison study of thirty
mainstreamed students with learning disabilities and thirty non-identified
students, all attending junior high. The students were given tests which
measured Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving (ICPS) skills and the
School Behavior Checklist (SBC) to determine classroom adjustment. The
researchers concluded that interpersonal problem solving does not seem to
improve adjustment, and, perhaps, coaching behavior would be more
successful. They noted that mainstreamed students were usually the subjects
in such studies and perhaps non-mainstreamed students need to be included
since their adjustment problems may be what prevents them from being
mainstreamed. Since the non-mainstreamed students are so often the focus of
social skills training, including them in the studies might increase the variability
on tests of social problem skills and measures of classroom adjustment. Thus,
the measures could provide more positive results.

As research has accumulated data, it has become apparent that social
skills training alone may not be useful in enhancing acceptance and adjustment
examined the the efficacy of a social strategy training model that involved skills
training plus peer pairing and classroom involvement on the acceptance of a fourth grade girl with learning disabilities. The girl (Debra) had the lowest peer acceptance score of fourth-grade female students in her school. She was paired with a non-identified girl in her class who was rated highest in peer acceptance. The class was told that these two girls were selected to become problem-solving trainers for the class. A box was placed in the classroom and students were encouraged to write down their problems with others and put them in the box. There was then a ten week intervention program, consisting of two phases. In the first phase the two girls were individually taught a problem-solving strategy and would join the adult trainer in the class when a problem was selected for discussion. Occasionally the adult trainer would ask the girls for their advice in solving the problem. In the second phase the girls would practice demonstrating a problem in the form of role play. Then they would perform the role play for the class and help the adult trainer teach the class a problem solving strategy. The girls were recognized by the principal as the “official problem-solving trainers” for the school.

The core intervention was based on a cognitive behavioral approach which included a four step problem strategy called FAST: (a) F - Freeze and think! Don’t act too quickly. What is the problem?; (b) A Alternatives - What are all my possible solutions?; (c) S Select one - What is the best solution in the long run?; (d) T Try it! - How can I implement the solution?; (e) If it doesn’t work, return to alternatives.

The study was very successful. Not only was Debra given social skills training, but she was provided with the opportunity to be perceived as a valuable member of the classroom and school. She was given the opportunity to be involved with highly socially accepted peers. The girl who was teamed with Debra, stated that she and her friends never knew how cool Debra really
was. Follow-up, which occurred a year later, found that Debra was considered to be happy, popular and socially accepted.

Vaughn, McIntosh, and Spencer-Rowe (1991) replicated the work of Vaughn, et al. (1988) with ten boys and girls with learning disabilities during a twenty week program. As in the study with Debra, the ten students chosen were lowest in peer acceptance (rejected). Five of the students were rated with other than a rejected status (4-average, 1-controversial) at the posttest period. At a one year follow-up the student ranked controversial maintained that status. Two of the students ranked average, maintained that status. One of the students having been ranked average, regained a rejected status, and one of the students rejected at both pretest and posttest periods gained an average status. The researchers of this second study concluded that peer rejection is a "stubborn thing", and even with system involvement, peer rejection resists change. It was stated that interventions are needed, and that they are likely to be successful only when they are long term and involve significant others such as peers, teachers, and parents.

Shapiro (1989) examined the impact of self-management training on problem solving and job related social skills for adolescents with learning disabilities. The study was implemented each year for three years with twelfth graders who attended vocational-technical (vo-tech) schools. Each year there were three groups. Group one consisted of students with LD who received Self-Management training (LD-SM). Group two consisted of students with LD who did not receive Self-Management training (LD-NSM). Group three consisted of students without LD who also attended the vo-tech schools (NLD-NSM). Groups two and three served as control groups. A total of 67 students with LD received the Self-Management training over the three years. All three groups were administered pre and post evaluation using the Problem-Solving
Assessment (PSA) and Occupational Skills Assessment (OSA). Those students receiving the self-management program during the 86-87 year and the 87-88 year made significant positive gains on both the PSA and OSA measures. The 85-86 group made significant gains on the OSA measure, but the gains on the PSA measure were not significant. This program showed promise. However, none of the observations occurred in the natural setting, therefore generalization possibilities are unknown.

An instructional technique utilized to build social and academic skills through problem solving videos, called TVDRP, was presented by Elias and Taylor (1995). TVDRP refers to television/audio media, discussion derived through open-ended questions, and rehearsal and guided practice, frequently incorporating role play or other experiential, hands-on activities. Participants of the Improving Social Awareness-Social Problem Solving Project found this technique to be very effective with children in a variety of special education classes. The program emphasizes skills in three integral areas: self-control, group participation and social awareness, and social decision making and problem solving. A discussion on how to select videos, an eight step discussion-leading guide, and a TVRP worksheet and discussion guide are provided to aid in the creation of a program appropriate for various individuals from elementary to high school.

An individualized, classroom-based social skills training program, which utilized coaching and problem-solving approaches, was developed and evaluated by Wiener and Harris (1997). Forty-five children aged 9-12, with learning disabilities, attending self-contained special education classes participated in this study. The researchers adapted a social skills program created for adults with developmental handicaps called Social Life. One component of the program, a game board similar to Monopoly, was believed to
have potential interest for children with learning disabilities. Thirteen youngsters received intervention 1, 7 received intervention 2, and 25 received no intervention as members of the control group. Intervention 1 consisted of six weeks of social skills training and six weeks of a similarly formatted academic skills training. Intervention 2 consisted of twelve weeks of social skills training.

Modest gains in social skills and decreases in problem behaviors were found for those in Intervention 1 as compared to the control group. Peer acceptance of the Intervention 1 group remained stable for one year, while the control group deteriorated in peer acceptance. Equivalent changes were not observed for those in Intervention 2 and the dynamics of the specific classroom were believed to be the reason (Wiener & Harris, 1997).

Hartas and Donahue (1997) examined conversational and social problem-solving skills in adolescents with learning disabilities. Most research involving conversational skills had been limited to preschool and elementary aged children. With evidence that social and cognitive development may cause advances in conversational skills, investigating conversational skills in relationship to social problem solving and interpersonal collaborations in adolescents with LD seemed crucial. One hundred sixteen seventh and eighth grade boys and girls with and without learning disabilities were audiotaped during simulated telephone hotline conversations. Each adolescent's ability to request, give, and evaluate advice on hypothetical interpersonal problems were examined. Three types of dyads were created including two persons with LD, one person with LD and one without LD, and two persons without LD.

Results suggested that adolescents with and without learning disabilities were equally capable of requesting advice. However, adolescents with learning disabilities exhibited more difficulty with generating solutions to interpersonal challenges. The individuals with LD constructed fewer overall
advice statements and (among boys) fewer antisocial advice statements when discussing siblings, and fewer mediated advice statements when discussing friends in heterogeneous pairs. In contrast, adolescents with and without learning disabilities were equally inclined to formulate ignore/avoid and third-person advice remarks. Both types of advice were considered to be indirect and less assertive ways of dealing with social challenges. According to the researchers the results indicated that future intervention models need to integrate conversational and social problem-solving skills goals to augment collaboration skills of adolescents with learning disabilities.

**Generalization Instruction**

Schumaker and Ellis (1982) conducted a generalization study with three adolescents with learning disabilities. The Social Skills Assessment Instrument from the ASSET program was administered to all of the resource students attending a particular high school. The three students chosen for the study were among those who achieved the lowest scores on the 10 social skills assessed. The students had previously participated in behavioral role-play testing of the same 10 social skills. Based on the results, three or four skills were targeted for each of the participants to learn. The students were then evaluated on these targeted skills in contrived situations in their natural environment. Two resource-room teachers and three student accomplices were trained to initiate specific difficult situations and to respond to the target student’s interaction. The students received individual social skills training from an LD teacher. After each skill was taught and performed to a criterion of 100% correct, a role-play test and a test in the natural setting would occur randomly. The next skill was then introduced and the process continued.

The results indicated that adolescents with learning disabilities who have learned a social skill do not necessarily generalize their use of the skill to role-
play or natural settings. The findings did indicate that the adolescents are capable of generalization, but that generalization training is needed as well when social skills are being taught.

Walker, McConnell, Walker, Clarke, Todis, Cohen, and Rankin (1983) analyzed the efficacy of the ACCEPTS Curriculum for improving the social adjustment of children with various disabilities. Twenty-eight elementary children participated in one of three groups. Group one received social skills training using the ACCEPTS Curriculum, plus they were each rewarded with social praise or free time activities for performing the new skill in natural settings. Group two received the social skills training only and group three, acting as the control group, received no treatment or reinforcement.

The ACCEPTS Curriculum is designed to teach social skills for classroom adjustment and for peer-to-peer interaction. Five major areas are addressed: (1) classroom skills, (2) basic interaction skills, (3) getting along skills, (4) making friends skills, and (5) coping skills. The curriculum, primarily designed for small group instruction, can also be used in one-to-one, large group, or complete classroom formats. During this study, one target child and two or three peers without disabilities received instruction for approximately 45 minutes each day for four to seven weeks. Peers served as role models for instruction and for facilitating generalization of learned skills to natural settings.

Teacher ratings, a criterion role play test (CRP), and behavioral observations of classroom and playground situations were used to assess behavior changes in the target children. The effects were marginally significant or approaching significance. The researchers suggested that the less than robust effects were probably caused by several factors, which they discussed including recommendations for improvement in future research. Additionally, they believed the program to have the potential to facilitate social adjustments.
required for mainstreaming students with disabilities.

Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) found that systematic social skills training approach used in the ACCEPTS(K-6) program and its companion ACCESS (7-12) still showed promise, but it had not generally produced the robust effects that this approach could eventually yield. When the approach is combined with cuing, coaching, debriefing, feedback, and reinforcement in natural settings, it can provide improvement in social competence. The authors believe that social skills training and intervention, when implemented appropriately, has the most potential for becoming an effective tool. Twelve years after the initial analysis, even the authors were not entirely satisfied with the results of their program. They also mentioned the need for the program to be appropriately implemented.

Northcutt (1986/1987) examined the impact of training on one aspect of successful mainstreaming—the relationship between teachers and students with learning disabilities. Thirty male third, fourth, and fifth grade mainstreamed students were assigned to two groups. Twelve of the students and their parents participated in nine weeks of social skills training and eighteen students participated in nine weeks of controlled academics. The following areas were covered in the social skills program: emotions, body gestures and facial expressions, greeting, listening, speaking, gaining attention appropriately, and problem solving with peers and teachers. Coaching, modeling, role play, and games were employed during the instruction. The researcher was very concerned about facilitating generalization in this study. The social skills training, therefore, occurred in both special education and regular classroom settings. Much time was also devoted to discussion of applying the skills to specific situations, especially to interactions with teachers. Results were not statistically significant, but changes in behavior at home were
indicated by 11 of the 12 parents participating in the study. The researcher stated that the rating scale may not have been sensitive enough to detect slight behavioral changes and, perhaps, the generalization procedures were insufficient.

The generalization of social skills to natural environments by elementary students with learning disabilities was investigated by Blackbourn (1989). Four students, ages 6 -11, each with a different targeted behavior, participated in the study. Baseline data were gathered on each child and intervention took place in a resource room. Intervention included a discussion and verbal rehearsal of appropriate skill use. Positive consequences were given for skills used appropriately. Once the students performed the skill well, reinforcement in the form of systematic attention was given by teachers and parents in various settings. All of the subjects demonstrated generalization of the targeted skills to the new environments. Blackbourn (1989) suggested that these techniques be employed with other subjects, in other settings, and even on other specific social skills.

Jacobs (1990/1991) investigated the impact of a social skills program on the social competence and academic achievement of students with learning disabilities. Select subtests of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and grade point averages (GPA) were employed to assess the effect of the social skills program on academic achievement. Three subtests from the Behavior Rating Profile, Teacher Rating Scales (TRS), Students Rating Scales (SRS), and Parent Rating Scales (PRS) were used as indicators of the affective variables. The subjects were 49 middle school students with learning disabilities. Twenty five of the students participated in a 20 week social skills program. A specific course was created and these procedures were employed: modeling, role playing, performance, feedback/ reinforcement, and transfer of training through
practice in other environments. The students were taught to have goals both as a message sender and as a message receiver. As a sender, they were to clarify the message and be sure it was understood. As a receiver, they were to listen, understand and respond to the message. Many times students with learning disabilities get into conflicts because they do not perceive the communication correctly. The teacher ratings and GPAs provided statistically significant (p<.05) support for the intervention. The other ratings were encouraging, but not significant. Jacobs recommended that the study be replicated for further support.

Griffin (1991/1992) examined the combination of social skills training and interpersonal cognitive problem solving as a method of helping students with learning disabilities, to not only learn social skills, but to also generalize and maintain those skills in all areas of their lives. The Social Behavior Assessment-Revised (SBA-R) was administered to all subjects at pretreatment, midtreatment, posttreatment, and follow-up stages. Sixty boys, ages 10-12, with learning disabilities were divided into three groups. The experimental group received ten weeks of a cognitive social skills training program (Social Skills in the Classroom). Interpersonal Cognitive Problem Solving (ICPS) strategies were taught after each targeted skill was introduced in the social skills training program. In the second group the same amount of time was devoted to a prescribed discussion of social skills in general and social problems of students, but no structured, programmed treatment was provided. The third group received no contact or treatment. The teachers participating in the program were trained and very involved in the study.

The experimental group was measured on the following three variables: gaining attention, classroom discussion, and on task behavior. The data indicated a significant (p<.001) improvement at posttreatment. The
experimental group was also observed in a class where no treatment took place to determine if generalization had occurred. The data indicated significant \( p < .001 \) generalization of treatment effects for all three measures. The main limitation stated by the researcher was that the study was conducted in a suburban private school for students with learning disabilities who were drawn from middle to upper middle class socioeconomic homes. Griffin suggested that the study be replicated in a classroom where the school program is less special education oriented. Then improvements, maintenance, and generalization of social competence to actual mainstream classes could possibly be observed.

Based on research indicating that young adults with LD are frequently dissatisfied with their social life and relationships, Rudolph and Luckner (1991) explored the implementation of a social skills training support group with adult students with LD. The support group components included a relaxation exercise, review of homework and previously learned skill, introduction of a new skill, a warm-up exercise, review of the skill steps, facilitator role-play, student role-play, and transfer training. Four men and three women participated in the study, which provided positive results.

Four of the students stated that they were relieved to discover that they were not alone in their shyness. Others appreciated the interaction and opportunities to exchange coping strategies for difficult social situations. The facilitators observed a marked change in the students' patterns of interactions. The students arrived alone for the first few sessions, with little discussion among themselves, before, during, or after meetings. By sessions 4 and 5, the students were observed walking down the halls together, and they were no longer silent before and after the sessions. Three of the students decided to join a student-initiated self-help group for students with learning disabilities to continue to improve their social skills. Due to the time involved for a postsecondary
counselor to provide one on one support in the development of interaction strategies, a social skills training support group may provide a cost-effective way to empower students with learning disabilities with the necessary skills and support.

Clement-Heist, Siegel, and Gaylord-Ross (1992) examined the influence of simulated and in situ vocational skills training on the generalization of social skills of adolescents with learning disabilities. Four high school seniors with LD participated in the study. Baseline and generalization behavioral probes were conducted at the job site (an automobile association office complex) of the four participants. During phase one the target students attended a weekly, 2 1/2 hour vocational social skills training program with four to eight other students. The training occurred in a transition school in a classroom named the "Employment Skills Workshop.” Three targeted social skills, ordering (sequencing) job duties, conversational skills, and giving instructions, were each divided into nine components and addressed for two consecutive weeks (totaling 6 weeks). The initial training included modeling, role-play, and feedback. Later, attention was drawn to how, when, and where the skill might be used in each of the student’s particular situations. Additionally, the students were directed to complete self-rating forms when they performed a skill on their job site. Confederates, various people who assisted in the study, also observed, rated behaviors, and administered probes to the target students while they worked. If a participant did not demonstrate a skill within two weeks of the training, then s/he entered phase two for that skill.

In phase two, individual generalization training began in the work place break room, with a review of the skill, its importance, and its components. Several relevant and on-the-job situations requiring the use of the skill were identified. The instructor and student would then participate in a few role-plays
followed by discussion. Two different sessions were conducted within a week, and if no generalization occurred additional training took place in the student's department in the actual work situation.

Four students were trained in three behaviors, totaling twelve behaviors. Eight of the twelve behaviors improved through simulated training in a school setting. In situ training (in the natural setting) occurred in six instances, which resulted in the improvement of four of six behaviors. The researchers contended that on-site training should perhaps be viewed as a beneficial extension of simulated training. It appears to depend on the severity of the learning disability as to how much simulated and/or on-site training is necessary.

**Change of Direction**

Over the years an abundance of research in the area of social competence in persons with learning disabilities had been conducted. Consistently individuals with learning disabilities were shown to suffer more from their interpersonal interactions and attempts to maintain friendships. As data were collected on the efforts to ameliorate the difficulties, the main focus was placed on "fixing" the child. More and more data showed that the environment played an important role in the interpersonal difficulties of these individuals. Many of the successful components of interventions included more than just the targeted individuals; the setting and the people with whom the individuals relied on each day were included as well. The direction of the focus began to change.

In their article "Why Social Skills Training Doesn't Work", Vaughn, McIntosh, and Hogan (1990) presented an alternative model for helping ameliorate social challenges for students with learning disabilities. The development of social skills training programs have been based on varying
models and theories including behavioral, cognitive-social, cognitive-behavioral, and cognitive. The authors reviewed the literature relating social training to peer acceptance and then presented a social competence/contextualist model. The social competence model views social skills to be only a piece of the social competence puzzle. A combination of four major behaviors encompass effective social competence including positive relations with others, accurate/age-appropriate social cognition, absence of maladaptive behaviors, and effective social skills.

A contextualist model views social relationships as a function of interactions between individuals, the social setting, and values. Peer relationships and social rank are seen as an interactive process in which a person is both influenced by and influences the social practices of others. A deficit model of social relations assumes there is a problem within the individual and that the individual has an inadequate social skills repertoire. Therefore, the focus is on changing the individual. From a contextualist perspective, a deficit model is deficient because it fails to address significant elements of social relationships, environmental influences, the interactions between the target individual and others, and values of the culture, the individual, and others.

A six year longitudinal study was conducted based on the social competence model and the four components: peer relations, social cognition, behavior problems, and social skills (Vaughn & Haager, 1994; Vaughn & Hogan, 1994). This study examined the social competence of ten students with learning disabilities from kindergarten through fifth grade. Their small sample revealed that, especially for males, an evaluation of the factors of social competence at a given time does not prove to be a very good indicator of a child’s social competence over a longer period of time. Some children received drastically different social skill scores across school years. The researchers
believed this not be signs of large improvement or decline, but possible evidence of varying levels of "goodness-of-fit" between teacher raters and children. Additionally, three patterns emerged for the subjects over the six years: (a) consistent competence, (b) early problem resolution, and (c) lingering/inconsistent difficulties. Four children obtained the first level of being consistently competent. Three children showed a pattern of problem resolution at some point but were in the average range by the final evaluation. Three boys demonstrated lingering problems throughout the study.

The researchers contended that studies of social competence of youth with learning disabilities have targeted interindividual differences versus intra-individual differences. Intra-individual differences of designated students with learning disabilities can best be documented in longitudinal studies. It was believed that qualitative measures could enhance future investigations of social competence.

Tanis Bryan (1994), who was a leader in the research on learning disabilities and social skills over twenty years ago, commented on the above longitudinal research study. She purported that Vaughn and Hogan (1994) had taken a step in the right direction with their research. Bryan stated that three reasons for doing research have dominated special education research. The first is scientific: Questions are asked because of a desire to understand the nature of disabilities. The second is therapeutic: Questions seek answers to ameliorate the problems experienced by individuals with disabilities. The third is political: Questions are asked about the impact of public policy on persons with learning disabilities. Bryan argued that the research of Vaughn and Hogan has implications for these three rationales for conducting research.

The results of these studies increase the scientific basis for understanding the social challenges of students with learning disabilities. The
results indicate that intervention efforts need to focus on the students who do not outgrow their problems—whose problems start early and persist at least through second grade. The scope of the research informs policy by virtue of suggesting that although individual interventions may be necessary, it is possible that the needs of many children might be met through reorganization of the classroom, or placement with empathetic, supportive, and effective teachers. The research results indicated that a portion of students with learning disabilities have consistent social challenges across time, but some experience problems that can be ameliorated at an early age. Various interventions constructed to match the specific challenges make more sense than one social skill program for everyone including those who have no problems and those whose problems are temporary. Bryan concluded that the results of the Vaughn and Hogan studies suggested that the organization and structure of the classroom may be the “cure” to social challenges for many students with learning disabilities. Classroom climate, the teacher’s tolerance and support, and a proper match between the child and group are vital to a child’s well-being. Solutions do not necessarily need to focus on changing the child; changing the environment may function as well or better (Bryan, 1994).

**Summary and Theoretical Framework**

Research indicates that students with learning disabilities are more at risk than their peers without learning disabilities for social skills difficulties and low parent, teacher, and peer acceptance (Bryan, 1974; Kavale & Forness, 1995; Romano & Bellack, 1983). Additionally, research suggests that young adults with learning disabilities encounter social competence challenges in every post-secondary environment, including vocational training, community college, military service, employment, 4-year college-university, and vocational rehabilitation (Mellard & Hazel, 1992). A variety of social skills interventions
have been developed and researched with promising results, but the success rate has been unimpressive.

Various theories have been developed over the years to examine why so many students with learning disabilities are not well accepted by others, experience social skills challenges, and have difficulty with friendships. The three major theories, Primary Cause; Secondary Cause; and the Social Learning Theory, were discussed earlier in the background of the problem. The social skills intervention models have been primarily deficit based. Vaughn, McIntosh, and Rowe (1991) suggested that interventions based on a contextualist model were more appropriate. The deficit model views the individual as having the problem, thus interventions are participant centered focusing on improving skills. The contextualist model views the problem as a function of both the individual and the system; thus, increasing the individual's skill level is insufficient without systemic change. Bryan (1994) agreed that sometimes the environment needs to be changed as much if not more than the child. The word interaction denotes more than one person being involved. Would it not then be wise to assume that all participants in the process should be responsible for making the interaction successful?

In reviewing the research of social skills training for persons with learning disabilities, the most promising results came from the studies which involved more than one procedure and more than one person. The studies involved social skills training, problem solving, and generalization of the social skills. They also involved the significant others in the lives of the students with learning disabilities, such as their friends, teachers, and families. Possibly the best theory for these social skills challenges also would be one that involved all the other theories. Research has focused on the primary cause theory and the social learning theory by providing modeling and teaching of appropriate social
skills. The efforts have not been very effective (Kavale & Forness, 1995). Individuals with learning disabilities are still suffering from rejection and the consequences of their social skills challenges.

Perhaps, like the contextualist model of social skills interventions, a theory for social skills deficits in students with learning disabilities should perceive the problem as a function of both the person and their environment. Persons with learning disabilities learn differently than persons without learning disabilities. This does not necessarily mean that persons without learning disabilities learn better or that they perform tasks better. For over twenty years persons without learning disabilities such as researchers, educators, and family members have tried to teach persons with learning disabilities to behave exactly the way the nonidentified persons behaved. This has all taken place without any consideration as to how the persons with learning disabilities perceived the situation. Perhaps what has been considered to be social misperception is actually just a unique perception. Persons with learning disabilities often have unique and wonderful approaches for viewing things. Numerous years of attempts to make persons with learning disabilities change to meet others’ standards have not been very successful. Many of the researchers have stated that more qualitative research in the area of social competence and learning disabilities needs to be conducted. It also has been suggested that social competence appears to have a developmental factor for those persons with learning disabilities. Therefore, asking adults to reflect over their lives and reveal their perceptions may provide us with a missing link. A great deal has been learned about social competence and individuals with learning disabilities through the years of research. Much about what works and what does not work is now known. The field needs to build upon that foundation by adding the voices of those who have faced the challenges;
therefore, this study explored the perceptions of adults with learning disabilities regarding their social competence.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of adults with learning disabilities concerning social competence issues. As a result this researcher designated naturalistic inquiry and qualitative research as the broad methods for this study. Naturalistic research or naturalistic inquiry avoids the artificial constraints of control and manipulation while investigating human behavior in its natural/unique contexts and settings. Qualitative methodology addresses the manner of generating data, which reflects the subjective opinions of the subjects as well as the subjective judgment of the observer (Isaac & Michael, 1995). The characteristics of and terminology used in naturalistic inquiry and qualitative research are described below:

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described fourteen characteristics of naturalistic inquiry which are briefly summarized below. It is the intention of the researcher to utilize all of the characteristics in this study.

Natural setting: The researcher goes to the people.

Human instrument: The researcher is the data collection tool.

Utilization of tacit knowledge: The researcher utilizes the non-verbal messages and carefully describes body language without making inferences.

Qualitative methods are more sensitive and adaptable. For example, the researcher is not observing anger, but is observing a person. The behaviors may indicate anger (tacit behaviors).

Purposive sampling is used rather than random sampling (Discussed further under design components).

Inductive data analysis is utilized to construct general concepts.

Grounded theory: The theory emerges from or is grounded in the data.

Emergent design: The design is allowed to emerge, flow, cascade, and
unfold rather than being constructed preordinately.

Negotiated outcomes: The people who provide the information are allowed input in negotiating the meanings and interpretations of the data.

The case study reporting mode is used instead of the scientific or technical report. This gives the voice of the participant (emic voice) as well as the voice of the researcher (etic voice) to the study.

Idiographic interpretation: The data are interpreted in terms of the particulars of the case rather than in terms of law like generalizations.

Tentative application: The researcher is tentative or hesitant about making general applications of the findings, providing a more thoughtful approach.

Focus-determined boundaries: The boundaries for the study are likely to be emergent rather than preconceived.

Special criteria for trustworthiness: In qualitative research credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are used rather than internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. The qualitative version of the criteria is similar, but more appropriate in a natural setting.

Isaac and Michael (1995, p. 221) summarized Lincoln and Guba's criteria for establishing trustworthiness and confidence in research results in a very clear and precise manner. Their summary follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional Research</th>
<th>Naturalistic Research</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Internal Validity</strong> - Did variations in the independent variable produce a change in the dependent variable?</td>
<td><strong>Credibility</strong> - Will methodology and its conduct produce findings that are believable and convincing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>External Validity</strong> - Can the results of this investigation be generalized to other settings?</td>
<td><strong>Transferability</strong> - To what other contextually similar settings can these findings be applied?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reliability</strong> - Are the results consistent, repeatable, and predictable from one study to another?</td>
<td><strong>Dependability</strong> - Within reasonable limits, are the findings consistent with other similar studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectivity</strong> - Are the events under study public and observable so as to allow agreement among investigators?</td>
<td><strong>Confirmability</strong> - Are both the process and the product of the data collection analysis auditable by an outside party?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Various data collection methods are utilized in both quantitative and qualitative research; the difference is in how the data is analyzed and reported. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) provided us with assumptive modes and design components, which help distinguish qualitative methodologies from quantitative methodologies. The assumptive modes include inductive vs. deductive, generative vs. verificative, constructive vs. enumerative, and subjective vs. objective. The design components include theory first/theory later, sample/select, comparability/translateability, preconceptions/post-conceptions, accommodation/manipulation, and triangulation. Some of these items will repeat certain aspects of the characteristics of naturalistic inquiry described above. Though there is some repetition, the inclusion of the assumptive modes and design components of qualitative research provides further clarity to the terms used and methods described in the research site and subject selection, data collection, and data analysis sections of this chapter.

**Assumptive modes.** Inductive vs. deductive refers to how the research begins. Qualitative research begins inductively and open-ended without a theory in mind. The theoretical constructs are built from the data. Quantitative research begins with a theory and works deductively to find data to match the theory. Generative vs. verificative involves verifying a known theory or generating a new theory or new concepts. Quantitative research is looking to verify a theory, while qualitative research is looking to discover or generate themes or theories from the data collected. Constructive vs. enumerative deals with how the units of analysis are developed and depicted. With qualitative research the various themes generate more questions and more data until analytic constructs are formed. In quantitative research behaviors are counted or enumerated. Often a construct is formed in a similar manner as above, applied to other persons of the same category (teachers), and then counted. Finally, research tends to
follow a subjective-objective continuum. The subjective experiences of both the participants and the investigator are built into the framework of qualitative research, while experimental researchers strive to be totally objective (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

**Design components.** The first design component is theory first/theory later and is similar to inductive vs. deductive in that quantitative research begins with a theory and qualitative research allows the theory to emerge from the data. The second component is sample/select and involves the selection of participants. Quantitative researchers use a random sample to select subjects for their studies, while qualitative researchers use purposive sampling in choosing participants for their studies. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) purposive sampling increases the range of data exposed, while random sampling may suppress more deviant cases. The third component, comparability/translatability is used in qualitative research instead of reliability and validity. For comparability the data, including the characteristics of the group studied and constructs generated, are described clearly enough for other researchers to make comparisons to other like and unlike groups. For translatability, the methods are described clearly in order that other researchers may conduct further research.

Preconceptions/post-conceptions is the fourth component. Qualitative researchers usually do not have preconceived concepts going into a study, but when they do they are open to differing concepts which may come out of the study. The fifth component is accommodation/manipulation: Quantitative measures control the setting and manipulate variables. Qualitative researchers enter the world of those being researched and make every attempt to accommodate the needs and desires of the participants during the research process. Finally, the sixth component is triangulation. Qualitative researchers
use several types of collection techniques, so that data gathered in one manner can be used to cross-check the accuracy of data gathered in a different manner. This is another mode of improving the credibility of the findings and interpretations (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

**Research Site and Subject Selection**

Data for this study were obtained from adults who had been identified with learning disabilities either as a child or as an adult. The participants were purposively selected. A request was made to the Learning Support Services (LSS) at UNM to send a flyer explaining the proposed study to a number of students who have been identified with LD. For protection of the students, LSS has a policy which prohibits the delivery of names of identified students without their permission. At the time of the request the researcher was informed that flyers are no longer allowed to be sent to students. Flyers were left in the LSS office and passed out to interested students. Flyers were posted in the office of the Disabled Student Services (DSS) as well. The flyers also were posted and circulated to attract additional persons who have been appropriately identified with learning disabilities but are not registered with these services. Additionally, flyers were circulated via colleagues of the researcher. As people volunteered, they were asked to circulate the flyer to their acquaintances who have learning disabilities. The following criteria was designated to screen individuals when initial contacts were made: Age range 25-40, documentation of learning disability had to be available, selection was limited to five females and five males, a variety of ethnic backgrounds was attempted, and a variety of educational backgrounds was attempted. After initial screening, ten people were chosen to participate in the study. At that time written permission was requested. The sample included male and female individuals ranging in age from 25-39. The researcher strived to be as accommodating as possible to the
participants in this study. The various meetings were conducted at the place and time most convenient to each individual participant (safety factors for the researcher and participant were considered as well). The researcher acquired a portable TV/VCR, which made the viewing of video clips more convenient. A $20 stipend was paid to each participant at the end of the study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for this study occurred in two phases. Due to the concern that some participants might have difficulty processing a verbal question and/or adequately verbalizing their feelings in a normal interview format, video clips were utilized to elicit memories and perceptions.

Phase one consisted of the following procedures:

- The participants viewed video clips of social interactions and then were asked to discuss their intellectual and emotional reactions. Additional questions stemmed from their responses. For example, “Can you describe your social interactions in group situations as a child?”
- The second set of interview questions were based upon the four characteristics of social interactions found in the *Social Skills Rating System* for grades 7-12 by Gresham and Elliott, (1990): cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control.

Depending on the preferences and needs of each participant, these procedures took place in one or two sessions. In phase two, consisting of follow-up interviews, questions were asked which were generated from all of the results in phase one.

**Interviews**

Three sets of interviews, based on Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic interview, were conducted in this study. The interviews began as semi-structured and moved to unstructured as responses generated new questions.
**Set 1:** The participants were informed that they would view video clips of social interactions and that following the video clips they would be asked to discuss their reactions to the clips. Videotaped scenarios of situations involving various forms of personal interaction then were individually viewed by each adult. The visual presentation of a specific circumstance was likely to trigger the memory of similar instances in each participant’s life. This was intended to make recall of information much easier. Following the video clips, the interview began with the open-ended question of “Could you describe your intellectual and emotional reactions to this scenario?” The pattern of requesting the participants to separate their reactions into intellectual and emotional categories was not maintained very long. The first participant separated the reactions for the first two video clips and then transitioned into providing one reaction. The researcher asked the 2nd participant to separate the reactions into two categories, but only one reaction was provided. The reactions were lengthy and full of valuable information. At this point the researcher just asked for reactions or memories from the clip. If a participant did not have either a reaction or memory, then the researcher asked a question which involved the general topic of the video clip (e.g., Were you able to have close relationships with friends when you were a child?)

A few grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) stemming from the responses were then asked. For example, “Could you give examples of the type of formal situations that frustrated you?” A grand tour question allows the participant to take the researcher through a grand tour of specific situations. Responses to the grand tour questions lead to mini-tour questions. Mini-tour questions are grand tour questions which deal with much smaller units of experience (Spradley, 1979). An example might be “Could you describe how you learned to cope with people in formal settings who have negative
attitudes?"

**Set 2:** The second set of interviews began with the grand tour questions below and the responses often led to mini-tour questions. Any confusion about terms were clarified.

- "Could you describe your strengths in the area of cooperation as a child and as an adult?"
- "Could you describe your weaknesses in the area of cooperation as a child and as an adult?"
- "Could you describe your strengths in the area of assertion as a child and as an adult?"
- "Could you describe your weaknesses in the area of assertion as a child and as an adult?"
- "Could you describe your strengths in the area of responsibility as a child and as an adult?"
- "Could you describe your weaknesses in the area of responsibility as a child and as an adult?"
- "Could you describe your strengths in the area of self-control as a child and as an adult?"
- "Could you describe your weaknesses in the area of self-control as a child and as an adult?"

**Set 3:** Grand tour questions again were developed, this time based on the data collected in phase one. In addition, the participants were encouraged to voice any thoughts that they believed would be beneficial to the study. These were ideas that had not yet been addressed by the researcher or that were elicited by the process in phase one. Many of the responses lead to mini-tour questions. The interviews were tape recorded and transcriptions and/or notes were prepared by the researcher and by a paid transcriber.

**Video Clips**

The researcher spoke with a representative of the University of New
Mexico regarding patent law in the use of video clips. The following specifications were made. Four videos were purchased by the researcher and less than five minutes of interaction from each video was taped for the video clips. The video clips were not used as a part of the dissertation, but were merely used to elicit memories or reactions of social interactions from the participants' lives.

The following video clips were employed with the interviews in phase one. There were a total of eleven clips, five representing childhood experiences and six representing adulthood experiences.

**Childhood:**

- 2 min., 45 sec. — This interaction is between a boy and his opponent in the finals of a chess championship. The first boy offers his opponent a draw, which would allow them to share the championship. His opponent refuses and when the first boy wins he replies, “Good game.” His opponent says nothing and leaves. The first boy’s behavior would be considered appropriate, but his opponent’s would be considered inappropriate.

- 55 sec. — This interaction is between two young friends. One boy’s father is upset with him for losing his chess match. The boy’s friend is very supportive and compassionate. The interaction would be considered appropriate.

- 1 min. — This interaction takes place in a high school classroom. A girl is being harassed by two other girls about her clothing. The first girl’s response would be considered appropriate.

- 2 min., 10 sec. — This interaction takes place between a high school male and a high school female in the record store where the female works. They attend the same school and the young gentlemen appears to be attempting to get to know the young lady. They both appear uncomfortable and the situation is a bit awkward, but their interaction would be considered appropriate.

- 2 min., 50 sec. — This clip begins with an interaction between two high school males, in which the first male is putting pressure on the second male in regards to the second male’s relationship with a female. The clip moves to the female trying to call the second male and his refusing to accept her calls. The second young gentleman has apparently caved to peer pressure and would be considered inappropriate.
**Adulthood:**

- 1 min. — This is a classroom interaction between university law students and the professor. The interaction would be considered appropriate.
- 2 min., 25 sec. — This clip begins with a young man and the grounds keeper of a football field discussing the young man’s desire to play football at that school. The clip moves to the young man bulldozing past the receptionist into the coach’s office. The young man’s interaction would be considered inappropriate in several instances.
- 55 sec. — This clip involves a young man’s interaction with the assistant coaches, the players, and the head coach as they leave the field after practice. The behavior of the young man would be considered inappropriate.
- 55 sec. — This interaction takes place between a young woman and two young men. The young woman has come to the table to speak to the first man. He sits and stares at her and never says a word, the second man has to do the talking. The first young man’s interaction would be considered inappropriate.
- 32 sec. — A man enters and interacts with a receptionist at a rehabilitation facility. The interaction would be considered appropriate.
- 1 min. — This interaction takes place in a safety deposit box unit of a bank. A woman’s interaction with a clerk would be considered appropriate.

**Pilot Testing**

As a protection of the emotional well-being of potential participants and to ensure that interview questions were clear, concise, and non duplicative, three individuals with learning disabilities known to the researcher between the ages of 25 and 40 examined the video clips and interview questions prior to the use with the research participants. The questions for the pilot testing were in a Likert format as follows:

- Trigger memory of earlier experiences?
  
  ____ Yes  ____ No

- Trigger positive or negative emotions?
  Positive 1  2  3  4  5 Negative

- How comfortable am I with these emotions?
  Very comfortable 1  2  3  4  5 Very uncomfortable

- How sorry am I to have triggered this memory?
If a pilot participant chose 4 or 5 for discomfort of his/her emotions, a discussion followed to determine if the discomfort was believed to be traumatic or just painful. If the pilot participant felt the emotion was painful, but the regret was no greater than normal (3) the video clip or the question remained in the final study. Additionally, the pilot participants were asked to call the researcher if heightened distress was experienced at a later time. If the participants (pilot or actual) had indicated great distress at any time, they would have been encouraged to stop. The viewing of one video clip did evoke tears in one pilot participant. When asked about the discomfort level, she said that it just made her sad to realize that she had not had the social skills in earlier years that would have allowed her to have a similar relationship as the one represented in the video clip. She chose a two for discomfort level and a one (not at all) for how sorry she was to have triggered the memory. A time or two, after observing a video clip, an actual participant would respond with a statement such as “That was uncomfortable to watch.” When asked if the emotions brought on were traumatic and if the process should be stopped, the response was no and that a painful, but not traumatic, memory had been triggered.

No video clips and no questions were removed through the pilot testing or through the actual study. The use of the video clips was very beneficial to the interview process. Even when a reaction was not immediately elicited, the video clip scenario was still an excellent base for asking questions about issues such as peer pressure or interactions in class as a child and as an adult. For example, if viewing a scenario did not trigger a reaction and a participant was then asked about his/her close relationships with friends as a child, then perhaps the response was, “Yes, I had friends, but not like that kid. I was always unable to put my arm around a friend, but I wanted to be able to do that
and I..." Showing the scenario first made the response for some much more specific than if they had simply been asked a question about their ability to have close relationships when they were younger.

**Data Analysis**

This study began inductively and open-ended with no theory, hypothesis, or preconceived concepts in mind. The data was triangulated through three distinctive sets of interviews. Data from the first two sets of interviews generated questions for the final set of interviews.

As the data were being collected, the researcher began scanning and asking questions of the data. This procedure assisted with the generation of additional questions, but it also helped the researcher to begin to see patterns, irregularities and categories into which the data was later sorted. Once the data collection had been completed, the researcher again scanned all of the data and took notes. This time she looked at the total picture as well as all of the puzzle pieces. The puzzle was basically dissected and reconstructed. From the notes, the researcher created a framework for sorting and classifying the data into categories. She utilized various methods to physically sort the items of data into the chosen categories. Due to lack off wall space, butcher paper was not used. Instead, notes for each interview were created on 8x11 white sheets of paper and pieced into three different matrices on the floor. Each matrix represented an interview and coding was utilized when comments or behaviors occurred frequently. Patterns appearing in each matrix were matched and then narrowed into themes. The categories and themes generated from this sorting process were interpreted into analytical and theoretical constructs. The participants were allowed input in negotiating the meanings and interpretations of the data. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher contacted each participant and reviewed the key results.
Positionality

This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the researcher’s positionality. This should reveal her motives, her choices, and her behaviors while conducting the study and analyzing the data. A portion of the etic voice is presented in this chapter to help clarify the following chapters. To enhance the etic voice, the positionality will be presented in first person.

During my doctoral program, I was identified with having learning disabilities in three academic areas. The evaluation indicated that my academic performance was related to processing difficulties in the areas of short-term memory, long-term retrieval, and processing speed. During participant selection, I identified myself as having learning disabilities to my participants. As an insider, I sometimes asked a question that to an outsider might seem leading or redundant. In actuality, the questions stemming from my insights appeared to be an advantage. As the interviews were conducted, my empathy, objectivity, and ability to be nonjudgmental appeared to place participants at ease and to allow for more open and honest discussions. At times my own language processing and poor memory probably affected the interactions as well. Reviewing the tapes revealed that, for most of the participants, my own challenges seemed to put them more at ease. If we both lost the train of thought, we laughed about it and replayed the tape to discover the forgotten idea.

As a researcher, I carefully monitored my speech and actions to avoid influencing the “truth” emerging from the participants. However, occasionally I did get overly excited about a thought and slightly “pushed” into their conversation. In those few instances, I stopped, apologized, and they were able to discuss how they understood my conduct to be strategic. Usually they opened up even more. However, during the final interview, one participant
made reference to some of my behaviors that caused him/her to feel the same stresses that other people had caused in the past. The incident was actually a very important piece of data and will be discussed at length in chapter five.
Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of adults with learning disabilities concerning social competence issues. The questions in the research were posed to participants to elicit examples of the challenges experienced as a child and as an adult; examples of the coping skills utilized; examples of circumstances which helped to alleviate the challenges; perceptions regarding the educational system and people/situations in general as factors in performance; and successful outcomes as well as possible reasons for those outcomes. In this chapter the results will be presented in five sections, results of subject selection, results of interview one, results of interview two, results of interview three, and a summary. The final four sections primarily will be a presentation of the emic voice, the voice of the participants, using transcript notes and direct quotes from the three sets of interviews.

Results of Subject Selection

Process of Selection

Following the posting and circulation of the flyers, the researcher began to receive several inquiries about the study. It appeared as though the ten participants would be able to be chosen very quickly. However, those inquiring did not meet the criteria for various reasons or were not interested after the initial contact. Some did not meet the age requirement; two people had physical disabilities, but not learning disabilities; one person was in the process of being tested for learning disabilities, but had not yet been identified; one person felt that the amount of money being offered was too low and that the lapse of time between the original set of questions and the follow-up questions was too great; and two people looked up the researcher’s e-mail address and asked questions discreetly, yet never returned a second response. As time began to pass, the researcher had only eight participants that met all of the
criteria. She began to ask colleagues, participants, etc. for names of possible participants. Two additional participants who met the criteria signed consent forms and the researcher gathered all the fliers and ended the search with ten participants. Calls of inquiry continued and the researcher recorded names and phone numbers in hopes of increasing the number of participants at a later time. With the amount of data collected and other obligations, the researcher had to limit this study to ten but would like to conduct similar studies at a later date.

Part of the difficulty with getting enough qualified participants more quickly may have been the timing. Late summer sessions had begun. Many of the later calls were after the Fall semester had begun. A few people reported finding the flier earlier; how the others discovered of the study is unknown. Six participants read a posted flyer, three were referred by colleagues, and one was referred by a participant.

**Description of Participants**

**Disclaimer:** Descriptors that would allow researchers to duplicate like samples, such as age, gender, etc. were not changed. However, to maintain anonymity of the participants, their names and other information have been changed (e.g., work or living location).

Pilot Participants (Pilot Testing is described in detail in chapter 3):

All three pilot participants were pursuing graduate degrees and were identified as being gifted and having learning disabilities as adults. Each met the same criteria identified for the participants in the final study.

**Pilot Participant 1:** Gina, female, Hispanic/Caucasian, age 34  
**Pilot Participant 2:** Jeff, male, Caucasian, age 37  
**Pilot Participant 3:** Sara, female, Caucasian, age 40

**Participant 1:** Bev, female, Caucasian, age 25
Bev earned an undergraduate degree in Arts and Science from a major university. Bev was working in a small town in New Mexico in the area of social work and was hoping to pursue a graduate degree in the near future. She had a strong desire to help others in some way but had not quite decided how she wanted to accomplish her goal. Bev did “ok” in school but suffered from depression a great deal. In college, she was identified as having learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). She believed that the depression, LD, and ADD were intertwined and had enormous effects on each other. Discovering more about who she was had allowed her to come to terms with herself and provided her with more self-confidence.

**Participant 2: Josh, male, Caucasian, age 25**

Josh was pursuing an undergraduate degree in Arts and Science from a major university in New Mexico. He was working part time, while completing his degree. Josh was not identified as gifted, as having learning disabilities, and as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) until he attended college. School was always a struggle and a very frustrating experience for him. He often felt he was as smart or smarter than others but had usually failed to show evidence of that fact. At other times he surprised everyone, including himself, with what he was able to comprehend, verbalize, and/or perform. Josh grew up with a lot of mixed feelings about himself and is still working through those emotions today. He felt guilty when he did not work while attending college, because he felt like he was not being responsible. However, several of the participants discussed that it was just too much to do both. Most had to refrain from working, work part time, or go to school part time.

**Participant 3: Kyle, male, Caucasian, age 26**

Kyle earned an undergraduate degree in Business from a major university outside New Mexico and is pursuing a graduate degree in Education
at UNM. He had difficulty in school while growing up, but he had incredible strengths as well. Kyle was an avid reader and able to teach himself very complex information. His contradictory abilities did not make much sense to him, and he became extremely angry as an adolescent. Sometimes the anger was aimed at others, and sometimes it was turned inward. He even abused his body through physical over-exertion at times in the attempts to alleviate his feelings of turmoil. Kyle was identified as having learning disabilities, gifts, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as an adult in college. This was only after extreme struggle and much failure. Understanding who he was had helped Kyle to come to terms with himself.

**Participant 4: Jonathan, male, Hispanic, age 30**

Jonathan earned an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts from a small college in New Mexico and was pursuing a graduate degree in education at UNM. He was working as a teaching assistant in a town on the outskirts of Albuquerque. Jonathan was identified as having learning disabilities as a child. He struggled in school from an early age and remembered being singled out in various ways by teachers and students. He began to hide the fact that he attended special classes when he was in middle school and high school and fought to remove himself from special education in high school. Though there were negative issues about the special services, he still believed the support that he received was crucial in his life. Jonathan was looking forward to becoming a full-time teacher and passing on the strategies and points of view that he had learned and developed over the years.

**Participant 5: Charlie, female, Caucasian, age 31**

Charlie earned an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts from a major university outside of New Mexico, a graduate degree in education from a major
university in New Mexico, and was pursuing post-graduate work in Biology at UNM. Charlie found that she had to be employed very little if at all while pursuing her education in order to maintain her grades and her sanity. Charlie was identified as having learning disabilities and giftedness as a young child. She attended a special school for students like herself for a portion of her education. She believed that the support from this school was very important in her growth process. Charlie actually had many positive attitudes about attending a school that isolated students who were gifted and have learning disabilities from their non-identified peers. Charlie had a strong need to reach out and help others as much as she could. She too was still trying to determine how she wanted to achieve her objective.

**Participant 6: Rhonda, female, Native American, age 31**

Rhonda was working part time and pursuing an undergraduate degree in Arts and Science at the University of New Mexico. She suffered a lot of frustration and pain while growing up, both academically and socially. She developed a great deal of anger as an adolescent, but always felt guilty when she lashed out at others. After being identified as having learning disabilities and ADD as an adult, Rhonda was beginning to come to terms with who she was. She had a child for whom she was very determined to provide the kind of safe environment that she feels she did not receive. Rhonda was pursuing advanced education because she believed she had limited herself in the types of employment due to her difficulties in language processing.

**Participant 7: David, male, Caucasian, age 32**

David earned an undergraduate degree in History from UNM. He was currently living in Santa Fe and working as a computer programmer at a company there. He was pursuing a graduate degree in computer science at the College of Santa Fe. David was identified with having learning disabilities as a
child by the school system in the state of Arizona. When he entered school in New Mexico, his records somehow were not accepted. He struggled a great deal in school. When David was again tested, his IQ was found to be very high (well into the very superior range). For some reason he was not identified as having learning disabilities, but he was placed in special education regardless. He never understood what his problems were. His special classes were too easy and boring, but his regular classes were too difficult. He felt a great disappointment in the education and support that he received. In college he was tested again and found to be very bright as well as dyslexic. However, the scars from his childhood education have left a deep mark from which he felt he might never recover. David had always had to progress through his education slowly in order to keep up with everything.

**Participant 8:** Patrick, male, Caucasian, age 33

Patrick earned an undergraduate degree in special education from UNM and a graduate degree from the College of Santa Fe. He was completing postgraduate work in education at a major university in Washington and planned to pursue a PhD in the future. He had to pursue his education slowly in order to maintain good grades. Patrick was identified as having learning disabilities as a child and received special services throughout his school career. Though he hid the fact that he was in special education classes as much as possible and disliked high school intensely, he believed the educational support he received was beneficial. He worked as a Special Education Coordinator in a large town in Washington. He had a desire to teach in higher education in the future. Patrick had always had to pursue his education at a slower pace.

**Participant 9:** Karen, female, Caucasian, age 37

Karen was pursuing an undergraduate degree in American Studies from UNM. She did not work while attending school in order to maintain good
grades. Karen struggled in areas of school while growing up, but she acquired coping skills which allowed her to maintain very good grades. She always had those mixed feelings of knowing she was smart, but doubting it at the same time. The struggle became more frustrating in college and she sought testing. During this testing she was identified as having learning disabilities and ADD. She also struggled with depression, and she believed there was a correlation among the LD, ADD, and depression just as Bev did.

**Participant 10:** Brenda, female, Native American/Caucasian, age 39

Brenda was pursuing an undergraduate degree in education at the University of New Mexico after a long-term career in radio broadcasting. She did not work while attending school in order to maintain good grades. She was identified as having learning disabilities and as being very bright as a child. Brenda received some special services, but like David, she was placed on the side to participate in inappropriate activities versus receiving an adequate education. Such activities included playing ping-pong in the lounge every day during her special education classes. During most of her educational career, she avoided special services. School was not difficult for Brenda, yet the process was very unpleasant and laborious. She made good grades, but she always felt different and never felt like she “belonged”. Brenda had a difficult time trusting anyone including herself. However, she also had a great desire to protect others from feeling any similar pain. She wanted to become a teacher in order to give to other kids what she felt she did not get.

**Results of Interview One: Video Scenarios**

Selecting video clips to represent various social interactions at various ages was not as simple as the researcher anticipated. The process of viewing videos, narrowing the videos, and then narrowing the scenes was an arduous one. The social interaction was important as well as the length of time. The
researcher wanted to limit the number of scenarios and the amount of time utilized as much as possible. The scenarios were chosen for appropriate and inappropriate interactions and for various areas of concern such as peer pressure. This section contains a description of each scenario and a presentation of examples of participant responses as well as salient patterns and themes that emerged from the data.

**Childhood**

**Scenario 1:** This video clip allowed for an examination of a compassionate interaction on the part of one child and the inability to respond positively by a second child. The interaction is between a boy and his opponent in the finals of a chess championship. The first boy offers his opponent a draw, which would allow them to share the championship. His opponent refuses and when the first boy wins he replies, “Good game.” His opponent says nothing and leaves. The first boy’s behavior would be considered appropriate, but his opponent’s would be considered inappropriate.

The viewing of clip #1 lead David to discuss his frustrations of trying to make people understand that he was intelligent.

I couldn’t communicate with them. I became very quiet, very withdrawn, I didn’t trust a lot of people. Because if they really saw what I knew I really was they would become uncomfortable, because I couldn’t actually do the things I needed to do.

When Patrick watched clip one it caused him to realize how differently he interacted with regular education kids in comparison to special education kids. He recalled a time in fourth grade when he was telling a joke about a plane crash on the border of Arizona and California. The joke asked in which state you would bury the survivors and the punch line was that you don’t bury survivors. During the sharing of the joke, the regular education student told
Patrick that the two states did not have common borders. Patrick thought the kid was wrong, but he decided the the regular education kid should know better than himself so he backed down and said, "Whatever, two states with common borders". Later, when Patrick found out that he had been correct he was angry with himself for having backed down. He said:

My interactions with regular ed. kids was usually based on I wasn’t sure because I didn’t know if they knew more than I did. With the special ed. kids I knew I knew more than they did. I sat in class with them every day. I can see I ended up taking more of a leadership role in that kind of thing. I ended up playing two different roles for my perceived outcome.

He said that when he went to college he took classes with people who had been in honors classes in high school. Some of those people were struggling and he was doing well. That was when he realized he was as smart as everyone else and he stopped trying to hide himself. He felt more free to interact with others. Patrick was very verbal and had always had good social skills in most areas; he just avoided a lot of situations for fear that he wouldn’t match up in some way. He managed to hide his disabilities most of the time until he had to write.

Josh described his reaction to clip one and gives a demonstration of his difficulty to express himself at times. This was at the beginning of the first interview. He relaxed as time passed and though his oral communication was still not extremely fluent, the struggles and frustration were not nearly as evident.

My first reaction is for that kid. I feel bad for him. All he wants is to have a friend, desperately, I think. I can’t remember the movie, but I remember that he didn’t want to demoralize that kid. He was highly intelligent just like the other kid, but he had an emotional... I don’t know. He was more of... He was
more of the kind of person that...(sigh)...I can't explain myself. I'm not very good at explaining myself. (Does that have an effect on your social interactions?) That has a big effect.

The more Josh would get uptight about the difficulty of explaining himself, the worse it would get. Josh talked about always feeling so different and how he thought the need for strategies was unfair. He didn't want to have to use strategies to help him remember things and he still demonstrated a lot of anger about being so bright, yet having such extreme challenges.

Kyle discussed the one boy's inability to take defeat and his difficulty to say good game or something and walk away with any humility. Kyle said he could see how difficult it was for the young boy. He also felt that the other boy was more humble and had a better outlook. He continued to talk and stated:

My personal belief—along with differences come gifts that allow you to see things from a new perspective and focus your attention in on things you like. While getting totally focused and obsessed on a topic, I was often not understood by others and probably neglected the basic social amenities that I should've been making around me.

**Scenario 2**: This video clip allowed for an examination of close relationships/ friendships as a child as well as just a positive interaction. The interaction was between two young friends. One boy's father was upset with him for losing his chess match. The boy's friend was very supportive and compassionate. The interaction would be considered appropriate.

Kyle had a superb vocabulary and incredible verbal skills which tended to captivate the researcher. Additionally, he spoke of being very intuitive and sensitive to the feelings of others. However, the following response after his viewing of the second video clip demonstrates that excellent verbal abilities and
sensitivity to others does not guarantee successful social interactions. There is still a breakdown somewhere in the process.

I wasn’t able to get that close or share any type of secrets with my peers at that age. I had a strong sense of proximity. *(Do you feel that was a part of the learning disabilities or just a personal preference?)* I think a personal preference, but maybe not understanding appropriateness, not understanding cues with my peers. I have had a hard time with that—not understanding when things I did affected them, not understanding how something was humorous, so I didn’t react appropriately or show empathy.

Kyle discussed having what he called “the watcher” within himself and how he was always either too sensitive or too over controlled with his emotions. He would get too serious or be totally inappropriate and run around rampant. He was very hard on himself and he made small things very traumatic. He reported that his father could never punish him, because he was punishing himself too much already.

When Charlie watched clip #2 she saw the young man as being very protective. Being protective of the feelings of others was something that Charlie and several others mentioned a great deal. Charlie often discussed the idea of not wanting others to experience the same kind of pain that she had. Her reaction to clip two signifies this:

> You know how awful it feels when you don’t understand what is going on so you don’t want anyone else to feel that way either. So he is being very protective of everyone else’s feelings. I never want anyone else to go through that kind of pain. So I don’t want—if I was on the other side of it, it’s that uncomfortable feeling of not understanding. I don’t understand what’s going on.

Charlie also discussed how serious the two young boys were and how that
reminded her that she was too serious as a child. She felt she was always trying to do things right and to be good, while never quite feeling she accomplished that.

Close relationships were difficult for most of the participants during their childhoods. One young woman had friends but found it difficult to maintain those friendships. One young man was unable to ever share his inner feelings with anyone. He had friends when he was in middle school and high school, but he felt that a lot of that stemmed around his great athletic abilities. He felt that he gained respect through being an excellent athlete, but he also felt that he used some of those people to get his academic work completed. His guilt continued as an adult.

Two participants found one close friend who could relate to the frustrations and maintained the friendship throughout their school years. Two participants, one male and one female, had friends do mean things to them (e.g., take his/her skateboard apart). They both decided that they didn’t need friends and they found better things to do with their time. The female channeled her energies into dance and running and the male chose hiking, fishing, reading, and skateboarding alone. The male said that his parents and teachers were concerned about his desire to be a hermit. He added that the few years that he spent alone were very good for him and improved his self-awareness.

**Scenario 3:** This video clip allowed for an examination of classroom interactions, group interactions, and dealing with negative criticism. The interaction took place in a high school classroom. A girl was being harassed by two other girls about her clothing. The first girl’s response would be considered appropriate.

Brenda’s response was a good example of some of the reactions to this
scenario:

I know what she was feeling. Maybe not the same, but I didn’t relate to the popular group, because of dealing with things on the right over here. I remember being the object. I remember getting things like this. I never wanted to hurt anyone. I would rather ignore it and let it go. I hung out with a group that was different. I was isolated within the group and the group was isolated. Even the group didn’t really know me, they got to know who they wanted to know. *(Who they wanted to know or who you let them know?)*

Probably, who I let them know.

Most of the participants had a reaction to clip three in that they felt like they were picked on in some way. Most had an issue of being small, skinny, dressed in thrift store clothing, etc. in addition to the school difficulties. Most said that in a similar situation in school, they would have stayed quiet and tried to slink away and avoid the people who were doing the harassing. Kyle said that he would have stayed quiet until recess and then he would have gotten into a physical fight. David said he would quietly endure unless the other kids left a door wide open, then he would just “nail them.” He stated that he became very good at the art of insult, but that most of the time he just stayed quiet. He said it was easier than getting into a battle that he might not be able to win. David also talked a lot about going out on the football field and “pounding” people who had gotten in his face. He said that it was acceptable and no one questioned it.

Most of the participants had difficulty interacting in class when they were younger. As children some found it easier to interact with adults. David and Kyle even found that difficult, because they both received a lot of negative feedback from teachers. David had teachers read his papers as examples of incorrect work. Kyle had teachers tell him he was lazy, an underachiever, or “not that bright”. A few could interact in class if they understood what was going
on and no one called them by name.

**Scenario 4:** This video clip allowed for an examination of male/female interactions. The interaction took place between a high school male and a high school female in the record store where the female worked. They attended the same school and the young gentlemen appeared to be attempting to get to know the young lady. They both appeared uncomfortable and the situation was a bit awkward, but their interaction would be considered appropriate.

Three of the gentlemen were “jocks” in school and said that interacting with girls was not a problem, because the girls would ask them out. However, they also felt that they did not always go out with the girls they would have liked to date. The fourth gentleman who was in special education in school, dated a girl from a different school. He felt that this took away the education issues and placed him on a more even playing field. The fifth gentleman, who was very skilled verbally, stated that he was actually given a nickname because he could never realize that a girl was interested in him even if she practically beat him over the head with a two-by-four in an attempt to tell him so.

One of the young women was always insecure with who she was and that was no different with guys. She refused to go out with a guy that she had had a crush on for several years, because she just didn’t feel she would fit in with him and his friends. She said she basically dated flunkies. When asked if she lowered her standards, her response was yes in a way. Two of the women didn’t have difficulty interacting with males. One stated that it was really easier, because women seemed to be more competitive. One woman said that interacting with boys wasn’t a problem, but she didn’t date at all in high school. When she did begin to date, she was very shy, so she went to places of interest to her in hopes of meeting guys who had the same interests. One young
woman was very uncomfortable around men both as a youth and as an adult.

**Scenario 5:** This video clip allowed for an examination of peer pressure issues. This clip began with an interaction between two high school males, in which the first male was putting pressure on the second male in regards to the second male's relationship with a female. The clip moved to the female trying to call the second male and his refusing to accept her calls.

Peer pressure was an issue for some of the males, because they wanted to fit in somewhere. For other participants, there was a strong sense of right and wrong and a need to be true to themselves. For most of the participants, a pattern surfaced that they had an issue with wanting to avoid hurting other people's feelings. Some felt that this came from all the pain they had suffered and they did not want to cause others to feel that same kind of pain. Other participants felt they had just always had a sensitivity about others' feelings and didn't want to hurt them. Consequently, it was often easy for people to take advantage of them. Because of not wanting to hurt others, it was difficult for most to say no to people. Therefore, they often reached overload, began to fall behind on what needed to be accomplished, and became overwhelmed. Many emotions and frustrations resulted at this time. Then they would withdraw and isolate in order to get caught up with everything they had agreed to do, or they would be on such overload that they would literally shut down and become unable to do anything. They would then feel guilty about their inability to function when they were already so far behind. Additional guilt was experienced due to the incomplete tasks and/or the completed tasks that did not meet their usual standards. Often in future situations, they would avoid specific people in order to escape the need to say no. The process continued to spiral out of control.
Adulthood

**Scenario 6:** This video clip allowed for an examination of interactions in the classroom and group settings at the adult level. The interaction occurred in a university classroom between a law professor and his students. The interaction would be considered appropriate.

As adults, difficulties with interactions in class continued for most participants. They discussed that they had made more efforts to participate and to utilize more strategies overall than during childhood. A few continued to stay silent unless they were really sure of what was going on and that their answers were correct. Everyone who felt it was difficult to interact in class also said that s/he had no problem finding the answers after class. Some wrote notes and asked questions of the professor or fellow classmates, and others would go home and or to the library and research the information. Learning was important to them all, getting that information took them each down different paths. Kyle, with his strong verbal skills actually had to contain his interactions in class. Once Patrick discovered that he was as smart as everyone else, despite having been a “special ed” kid, he found that the interactions were both stimulating and enjoyable.

While discussing the difficulty of interacting in class as an adult, Bev was asked if she stayed quiet most of the time. Her response was representative of the group:

That’s been a challenge, yeah. But over the last four years I’ve made myself you know, try to overcome that. But yeah, it is challenging, because there will be times when we’ll be discussing something, and I have something to say, and my processing is screwed up where I know what I want to say, but I’m unable to spit it out. Especially in a situation like that where everyone is
looking at you and you’re on the spot or whatever. So, yeah, it’s still challenging for me. Sometimes I do it, sometimes I don’t. But I always try to make myself.

Rhonda provided another example of the feelings about interacting in class that appeared to stem from everyone’s frustrations as children. Over and over again the participants talked about how something “went back to their childhood” or “came from getting that as a kid”. Ridicule seemed to be the memory that stood out the most:

Speaking up in class terrifies me. Even when I know what’s going on in class and I know what to say, it’s scary. I’m afraid I’ll sound stupid, or someone will laugh at me, put me down. I try. I’m usually shaking or sweating, but I give it a try.

**Scenario 7:** This video clip allowed for an examination of an interaction with an enthusiastic young man who has difficulty expressing his desires. The clip began with a young man and the groundskeeper of a football field discussing the young man’s ambition to play football at that school. The clip moved to the young man bulldozing past the receptionist into the coach’s office. The young man’s interaction would be considered inappropriate in several instances. Scenario #7 came from a movie which was based on a true story of a young man who was diagnosed with learning disabilities in college. He is about 25 at the time of this particular scene. This video clip stirred a lot of emotions, memories, and reactions in each participant. The responses provide significant information as to what transpires during various types of communication for those with learning disabilities. For this specific clip, a comment from everyone is presented.

Charlie: That one triggers a lot. That’s a—I guess, I think with learning
disabilities you get that one—probably if you make it through it's because you get good at failing and overcoming that and still having that kind of endurance to keep up when people are telling you no. It doesn't even have to be anything big. You get good at failing maybe on academics, but you also get good at failing. You go into places and people tell you “No, you can't do that”, and you still say, “But I'm going to do this.” You go to somebody else and they say, “No, you can't do this.”—So that one fits pretty strongly. Even now everyone is telling me I shouldn't get a PhD.

Charlie discussed the young man's rambling on and on in the clip. She talked about how she learned to write what she wanted to say on a computer in outline form. Sometimes she would even take the outline with her. She began to realize the need for certain strategies. Additionally, just having people tell her that using strategies was “ok” was beneficial. She had believed that she needed to hide strategies because they were a type of cheating.

Josh: I can relate to him. Yeah. Just the way he's talking and stuff. I'm like that basically. But I like his drive. I wish I had that type of drive that he has for things. He's dyslexic and stuff. That's an incredible motivational story. (At the same time, his behaviors are not always appropriate.) I know and I can totally relate to that. If I get really excited about something, I can get like that. I just bounce all over. (How have you learned to deal with that?) I try to really (pause) when I get excited like that, I try to really focus on what I'm talking about. Focus and keep my mind straight ahead and just like keep my sentences—it's not really my grammar I worry about—well I used to, but now I know it's ok—just try to keep my thoughts coherent. I try to keep them linking together so people can follow me somewhat. Otherwise I'm way out there. I've always got thousands of things going on in my mind. Now as we
talk I know I’m way off the subject, but I can relate. *(So your mind is thinking quickly and yet you’re afraid you’re going to forget, so you’re trying to hold onto everything and get all the information out?)* Yeah. That’s exactly it. *(So you talk around and around it until you get it all in?)* Yeah, I do that. I can talk really quickly. When I go in for an interview I get really excited about it. It gets me really pumped up and gets my adrenalin going. Adrenalin, endorphins, whatever chemical it is—it gives off to my brain. It lifts me up, it helps my brain concentrate: my memory, my word retrieval, everything. That’s why I think there has to be a chemical breakthrough with the brain if people will stay on top of that subject. I have good moments and I have bad moments. I really do. I have days where I’m clicking. One day, well usually not a full day, but a time where that 134 IQ is really showing. A time where my brain actually works right and everything comes out.

When he is calm and focused, Josh has very high level, abstract thinking. He discussed that with his memory and recall challenges he tends to drop his vocabulary down a great deal when he speaks.

Various thoughts are extrapolated from Karen’s comments:
I’ve been in that position where I needed to explain something and not—like not being able to put it together where it made any sense when it came out. It’s like I had all this stuff to say, and yet I couldn’t really make it come out right—you know I can tell by people’s faces....At times I’ll make a list or an outline, but if it’s some spur of the moment question—a lot of times I have a hard time organizing it in my head. I don’t always spit it out correctly....Sometimes I’ll think that some information is relevant and will help them see the picture (pause) and they get impatient, they don’t want to know that. *(Is it because you have a processing issue—that it’s important to you?)* Yeah, maybe. *(And yet because they can cut to the chase and see*
this—they don’t need it.) Yeah. (And sometimes that’s where the breakdown is.) Yeah, because it’s like why are you giving me all this? (Yeah, but if someone didn’t give it all to you, you wouldn’t be able to understand it.) Right. Yeah. I never thought of that, but that’s exactly it.

Kyle: I’ve done things like that. Um, where I mean just in the communication style he had where you get caught up in what you’re saying, what you’re thinking. You’ve got so much going on, the dialogues haven’t stopped in 24 hours a day, all night long, constantly all these different ideas and things are going on—so that you go into a situation like that and from an outside perspective, you don’t make any sense. You jump from topic to topic, you talk about unrelated topics the other person has no knowledge of. You fill in the gaps to a circumlocution—talking around the idea, kind of a quick paced sincere and earnest, but overly so. And it’s (laughs) similar to what I’ve experienced. (And how do you feel you’ve learned to deal with that?) He laughed. (Or have you not learned to deal with it?) I have, I think. I still have a problem with it. I need to just focus down on what the question was or what it is I’m trying to communicate. I think the one thing that has helped me in growing older is that my energy level—I’m able to contain. Well, it’s dropped a lot. My metabolism, my hyperactivity has dropped a lot to where I’m able to kind of chill out, take a deep breath and not feel like I’m a wire strung out tight and zzzz ready to snap at any point. Now I can relax down a little bit and just convey what I need to convey or ask questions. I still with most people add a lot more material than I ever needed to. I just keep trying to stay aware of that and know I’m giving them more meat than I need to. But I do it on a genuine level, because I’m interested in them or whatever hopefully.
Brenda: Whoever that kid is is how I feel, but I can’t show it. (Why?) (pause) Well, I can’t be that verbal about it. I can’t be that forceful about it I guess, but inside that’s the way I feel. He knows what he wants, he goes after it, nothing stops him. He feels good, positive about it. (Of course in some ways his interactions are not really appropriate.) True, but when you’re excited about something—I don’t know about you, but when I’m excited about something, that’s the way I feel. I can’t show it. (So you think that in his case it’s better to be able to flounder and blunder?) I’d rather be able to do that. Maybe it is inappropriate and still out of the norm as well. (But in some ways it still got him where he wanted to go?) That’s right and I’d like to be able to do that.

David: replies, “Somebody that is going to get ahead more. He’s got the necessary skills to look somebody in the eye and tell them what he thinks. It’s important.” David discussed being pushy at times and his need to step back occasionally. He felt that the pushiness was a way he could compete. He also talked about his religious mission for two years and how he shoved scriptures down people’s throats. He eventually realized he wasn’t being productive. He did feel that the learning disabilities affected his not having the skills to pick up on all of that earlier. He also felt that the learning difficulties had contributed to the need to shove the scriptures in the first place. David had experienced so much failure and was so sure that he was stupid despite an extremely high IQ. When he discovered that he could learn things if he approached it in the correct way and if he applied enough effort, then he went a bit overboard. He learned hundreds of scriptures and became somewhat obnoxious about his approach to spreading his message. We discussed people getting very quiet or getting into
people’s faces and he said that he did both in different situations. He discussed trying to find a middle ground.

Rhonda: The boy is determined to get where he wants. *(We’ve talked about that a little—you’ll do whatever it takes.*) I’ve done that a lot. As a little child nobody really responded to me and I had no attention. As soon as I was able to come out here, I would make people understand me and listen to me and I did what that boy has done, just forced my way in... For interruptions—I hate to wait. The patience part is hard for me.

At a later point, Rhonda discussed her frustrations over others’ lack of patience with her difficulties in communicating.

Patrick had some interesting thoughts from the perspective of someone who grew up viewing himself as “special ed”:

I do remember having a lot of enthusiasm about doing things and wanting—and not being able to communicate—or feeling like I couldn’t communicate it, or you tell someone about all this emotion you have going and you get this blank face, wall, stare. You wonder, “well Jesus, am I not speaking English? What’s going on here?”

Patrick talked about the youthful enthusiasm and how as an adult he recognized it in others and he tried not to give them a similar blank stare. He reminisced about the frustration of those feelings. He also mentioned the pre-loaded baggage of being a child in special education. “You frequently don’t step out and do it unless you’re sure you can.” Going to college was when he took that big step forward. He said that for the first two years of college, he felt that he was pulling the wool over people’s eyes. He mentioned to his father that the professors wouldn’t be giving him those grades if they knew he was special.
ed. His father asked him if anyone knew and when his response was no his father said, "Then the grades you are earning you are earning on your own right?" Patrick stated:

It was like one of those ah ha kind of experiences. "Oh, yeah that's true. I'm earning these and no one knows who I am." (Were you able to deal with the youthful enthusiasm socially?) I was able to deal with it ok from a social standpoint, but I also feel that maybe from an educational standpoint or from a cognitive standpoint—maybe I didn't understand the situation to such a degree that what I was saying was very ignorant, very out in left field and that I really didn't know what I was talking about. I was just very full of energy. And that was lacking confidence in my own general knowledge in saying yeah, it's ok to have all this energy, and yes, it's ok to do this. For me, it would have been helpful to have someone say, "This is very good, I'm glad you want to do this, but this is the procedure for how you get there," rather than, "You can't get there from here, sorry." That would have been helpful. No one explains to you the procedures for a lot of things. Outsiders like a special ed. kid, don't know what to do.

He discussed the frustrations of so much drill and practice in special education and all the preliminary "stuff" before being allowed to do the fun things such as bending glass in science class.

Patience was difficult, I saw so many people go through it so fast, I was wondering if there was a trick to it. There wasn't, they were just better at the academics. (Did that have an affect socially?) A lot of people I knew that couldn't do it fast just shut down and said, "Screw it, why try." I wanted to do the fun stuff, but man why put so many preliminaries in there? Why not have some fun stuff with the preliminaries? Many teachers have their programs set up and that's it. They don't take into effect that that affects those that are
slower, just as smart, but slower.

He said that other students shut down or acted out. Acting out was a mind set he couldn't deal with, because he didn't want his parents to find out. He said they were not difficult, but it was his mind set.

Jonathan: He's over eager. He sees the the future and he wants to obtain it. I think I'm a lot like that. The difference between him and me is that I'll come up with all these great enthusiastic ideas, and they're above me. There's no way I can obtain them. Then I feel bad about here I spouted my mouth off, and I didn't do it.

Jonathan discussed that as a kid he had people say that he was just a big talker, but that he never did anything. He has attempted as an adult to have dreams, but not discuss them too much until he thinks he can complete them.

Maybe that's the "twice exceptionalness" in me. I have a lot of ideas and it's nice to talk about them, but working toward the goals is tough. I've had to accept the fact that in order to get a lot of these things done, I have to be somewhat of a recluse. And that's hard. My social circle has become more family, and there are a lot of expectations.

Jonathan said he had allowed people to attribute his inability to attend every function as a part of his being a weird artist. When he was in school, he let a lot of things be blamed on his being a dumb jock. On one hand Jonathan down-played frustrations of being in special education or of having learning differences, yet he demonstrated many strategies to cover up his learning challenges.

**Scenario 8:** This video clip allowed for examination of an additional interaction with the enthusiastic young man from clip 7. This clip involved the
young man's interaction with the assistant coaches, the players, and the head coach as they left the field after practice. The behavior of the young man caused him to literally get run over by the crowd. Generally, the responses to clip eight involved a statement similar to the following one: "Same old guy and same old attitude, never giving up, never ending the fight." Some talked about being like the young man and others talked about wishing they had his drive. Additional statements discussed the issues of feeling run over by the crowd or feeling stifled by the limitations that people placed on them.

Karen and Charlie, in their following reactions to clip #8, described a feeling that was spoken by most of the participants in some manner.

Karen: I don't think that has ever happened to me literally, but that certainly has happened in situations where I just feel run over by the crowd and like I'm just not taken seriously. People look—first glance at that guy and he's kind of small and stuff like that. And when people size me up, they really make a much lower opinion than what I'm really capable of.

Karen said that she could explain something to someone such as things on her resume, and people seemed to make a predetermined opinion of her. She stated that people were always surprised at her intelligence. She talked about the frustration of how in school and as an adult she had always felt as though she had to prove herself.

Charlie: This one probably reminds me more of I could be good at something if someone would let me be good at it. If someone would give me the chance to get in and prove myself. It is hard to "get in that door."

She discussed how she wanted to accomplish certain things to help teach people to not tell other kids that they can't do it. She talked about how females also were often told that they couldn't do things just like persons with learning disabilities.
I don’t think anybody should be told, ‘be realistic here, you can’t do this.’ I think they should just be given a chance to try and have someone believe in them and they might surprise you.

Charlie remarked that when put in a box as a child she would withdraw and fester. Then she learned to respond in an angry tone and eventually she learned to share her frustrations with people when she felt they had put her in a box. This is still difficult for her to do with persons of authority with whom she has a great deal of respect.

**Scenario 9:** This video clip allowed for an examination of adult male/female interactions and the issue of getting flustered when someone perceived as “better” in some manner approaches you. The interaction took place between a young woman and two young men. The young woman had come to the table to speak to the first man. He sat and stared at her and never said a word; the second man had to do the talking. The first young man’s interaction would be considered inappropriate.

Karen responded, “I understand that. I at times can just stare. I can’t get anything out.” Karen discussed that this often would occur around someone she respected or believed was smart. She elaborated about taking a class with a writer whom she thought was brilliant. She said that for the first class she just stared and by the second class she was able to get “two cents worth in”. Karen was asked if this only occurred with guys and her response was no, that it happened with women as well. Anyone that she believed to be above her, more attractive, smarter, could cause her to have that “dumb-founded” look.

At times I try to get something out and nothing will come—people give me strange looks. If I’m under stress or there is a lot of pressure, it makes the processing slower.”

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After viewing scenario 9, Brenda states that she would have looked just as dumbfounded as that guy if someone were to come up to her like that in an academic setting. She said that she would wonder why the person was asking her and why they would be interested in what she had to offer. She said she would be leery and afraid, because having people come up to her is so far out of the norm. When asked how she would react in a social setting, Brenda commented that she would probably react the same way. She did not see herself as a social butterfly, nor someone that was easily approachable, because she remains isolated so often. She discussed being unapproachable, because she had put up a wall as a defense mechanism. She believed that this was a way for her to cope with the learning differences. She continued:

I don’t open my mouth unless I have a pretty good idea what I’m going to say. It’s all prepared. I hide myself real well. If I know I have to or want to get to know someone I will make the initial contact. People find me to be very hard to approach. *(Would you like to take the wall down?)* I would like to, but I probably never will. It’s kept me safe. I would like to lessen the thickness of the wall. When people get to know me they say, “You appeared stuck up, extremely self-assured, really unapproachable.”

Brenda stated several times that within herself, she did have an incredible self-concept, she was very comfortable with herself and if she did not have to deal with interacting with others then she would not feel insecure and unsure of herself.

**Scenario 10:** This video clip allowed for an examination of a formal setting in which a request was being denied. A man entered a rehabilitation facility and interacted with a receptionist. The man’s interaction would be considered appropriate.
A portion of Brenda’s response to clip #10 was basically a follow-up of the discussion for clip #9, but she added some interesting thoughts on interactions in formal settings.

That’s basically what we were just talking about. You come in with this certain air about you and nothing can penetrate it. That’s what he did. He came in very self-assured and handled the situation. *So formal situations aren’t really difficult for you because you prep yourself?* Yep, I’m probably more at ease in formal situations. I know I’m more comfortable. *Because there are rules that you know you have to follow and you just prep for them?* That’s more easily me than trying to relax and just be. I can’t do small talk. I’m very good at formal. And it’s effective. *Because it’s easier to put on the facade?* And actually that facade becomes you and you don’t like it too well. I kick into that or default into that quicker than anything else. *So if the facade becomes you, does that mean you are not real?* It means I’m well hidden. It’s still me, but it’s a shield. But I’m 39 years old, 39 years of doing this, it’s easier to kick into that than anything else. Then you know you’re safe. I’m very formal and very polite.

Video clip #10 was a formal setting involving a gentleman going in to speak with a receptionist. About half of the participants made a comment about the receptionist’s attitude or about seeing the situation as another “closed door”. A lot of other good information came from this clip. When she had no reactions to the clip, Bev was asked if formal settings were comfortable and her response follows.

They are comfortable, but this one—that would have flustered me the way she reacted to him, “Oh, well, you’re not allowed here,” basically. He was very calm. “Can I talk to the administrator?” I tend to get flustered very easily. *(Is it the issue of being told no?)* Uh, I guess. I wasn’t told no, but the
fear of rejection was there, even something as minor as that still flusters me.

Charlie had no response, so she was asked if she had more difficulty in formal settings versus informal settings. Her reply follows:

I guess it depends on the office. I mean a lot of time you get those "noes", that was kind of a no. I'll see that it's not looking very hopeful. *(Does that keep you from wanting to do it?)* Oh, definitely. I hate doing those things. *(What do you have to do to make it work?)* I probably do my homework before I go so I know what kind of paperwork they are going to need so that I know I am all prepared before I get there. And kind of maybe I know the answer before I get there so I'm not just getting a random "no". *(Why does the random "no" bother you?)* It's a closed door. You can't get any further. I guess I like to be able to go different avenues, channel different directions, network.

Charlie talked about needing people to believe in her. She had educators telling her she wouldn't amount to anything and she would never read. She didn't read until the 7th grade, but now she reads well. She felt very fortunate to have her parents believe in her and support her.

Though Josh talked a lot about the frustration of having people judge him when he could not do certain things, he seemed quick to judge when he viewed clips #10 and #11. He said he just could not see how anyone could possibly have an issue with that kind of formal interaction. Then he continued with a reaction involving the attitude of the receptionist:

Formal settings are pretty easy for me, because you don't have to communicate any type of emotions or feelings. You know what I mean? It's just a transfer of information. But the way she was acting, I may have had a little bit of a problem with that. I don't know. *(So you are fine unless someone is saying no or being difficult?)* It does start to tweak something in
you. Actually, I do react. If someone is really rude and you can tell they just
don’t want to help you, but they work at a place, they’re the receptionist,
they’re the person that is supposed to be able to give you the information
you need to get something done, sometimes I do react.

Josh discussed that those kind of things really frustrated him, but in typical
formal situations he was not afraid to ask for the necessary information. He also
stated that he prepped for formal situations and if the format was changed from
that which he had prepared, then the processing shut down and the frustration
took control.

Karen responds in a similar manner as the others:

She had an attitude and it’s harder to deal with the formal when the person
is being snippy. When I was younger, I would have slinked out. Today, I
would do like he did, ask for a supervisor or someone, but it’s still harder. If I
know the order of what needs to be done and I don’t have to ask questions,
it’s easier.

Kyle demonstrated how he overcompensated with his verbal skills to
pursue a “pay back” status, during his reaction to the gentleman coming in and
stating his request very clearly:

I think that at one point in my life, because I was angry and I wasn’t being
treated—what I thought was very fairly by the system at my school—at UNM,
now it can be to where I can be unrelenting and I know the system well
enough and I’ve spent time and researched it out to where I know that I know
the student catalog better than most of the deans and I’ll cite it by chapter
and paragraph. And I’ll go in with no humor, no nothing, just boom, right to
the point. “This is who I need to talk to. I need to talk to them right now. This
is what it’s about. This is what I need, these are all the reasons why you
should give it to me and if you don’t, this is where I’m going.” I just do it,
because I’ve gotten so sick of incompetence and being abused that I won’t take it in a lot of situations. So sometimes I go in being unrelenting. I think I’m getting better. I’ve learned humor.

Kyle said that he had also learned to read people’s responses to him. He also discussed having learned to stay calm and guide the person to find the information in the catalog and pretend that he was not aware of the necessary procedures. He found he received much more cooperation than when he entered the situation making demands. It was easy to see the defense mechanism that took over after too many years of being verbally abused and belittled. Over and over again there has been evidence showing the vicious cycles that occur during social interactions with individuals with learning disabilities.

**Scenario 11:** This video clip allowed for an examination of a formal setting in which an exchange of information took place between a customer and a clerk. The interaction took place in a safety deposit box unit of a bank. The clerk was very proper and very formal in her communication. The woman’s interaction with a clerk would be considered appropriate.

David’s response was that he hated formal settings, because he did not understand the rules. He was never expected to participate in formal settings in school. He felt that being taught strategies in the area of formal and informal networking would have helped.

Charlie responded:

At that person’s mercy is very uncomfortable. Even like at school, you are always at someone’s mercy, having to go through red tape. You have to do this hurdle and his hurdle and this hurdle. That is uncomfortable. She was asked if there was anything that she did to work through that type of situation.
Well, I guess I go back and forth. I want to please people, so I want to do the right things to please them. And yet a lot of times I do the ‘right thing’ at my own expense. She discussed having desires and dreams that people were always trying to persuade her from accomplishing. This included a particular degree that she wanted to pursue. In trying to follow what everyone else perceived as the necessary requirements to reach her goal, she often felt that her path was just made more difficult.

Brenda appeared very bright and could remember a great deal of information about certain subjects. The following response indicated that intelligence and ability to remember certain details in specific subjects does not prove that someone is just being difficult or lazy when other things are extremely difficult to remember. Brenda responded,

I was watching that scene thinking, ‘I don’t know how she did that.’ (memorize a great deal of information involving mostly numbers.) I can’t even remember my phone number sometimes. Sometimes it’s ok you can have it written down, but she (woman in the video) had to have all that stuff memorized.

Brenda continued to talk about the difficulty of processing and remembering certain information. She discussed the inconsistencies of that processing and memory skills and how they affected daily interactions.

Each participant was able to have more successful interactions with people they knew and with whom they were comfortable than with people they did not know very well. Basically, people who did not judge them and accepted them as they were, allowed them to be themselves and interact freely. However, it was also mentioned by three or four participants, that when in the presence of someone they admired, respected, or wanted to impress, they
would become flustered, and often the processing would shut down. This reaction would also occur with someone they perceived to be smarter, more attractive, or have more knowledge about a subject. The gender of the person was not really an issue in this case.

Half of the participants were not identified with learning disabilities until they were adults. They believed that not understanding themselves and believing they were stupid affected their self-confidence and self-esteem which in turn affected their abilities to interact with others. The other half of the participants were identified in school. On one hand some of them believed that this helped, but on the other hand it still affected their attitudes about themselves. Two of the participants constantly referred to themselves as “special ed” kids or referred to their peers as the “smart kids”. The support was helpful, but still a lack of communication seemed to persist as to what learning disabilities really meant. Two of the participants whom had been identified were very disappointed in their early education and very angry about their perceived losses of adequate educations. One of the participants who was identified in school was pleased with her progress afterward, but the scars of being told she would never amount to anything still affected her interactions as an adult. She was forever trying to prove herself. All of the participants, identified or not, had modified visions of their capabilities. One of the gentlemen was believed to have a great self-concept growing up and had reasonable social skills, yet he still based all of his interactions on how to present himself or how to hide himself. Until he left the public school system and entered college, he always thought of himself as somehow being “below” his peers.

Results of Interview Two: Characteristics of Social Interactions

During the second set of interviews the participants were asked to
describe their strengths and weaknesses in the areas of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control, both as a child and as an adult. The findings are discussed according to each of the four characteristics.

**Cooperation**

Kyle's and Jonathan's descriptions of their cooperation skills as youngsters provide adequate examples of the participants' attitudes about cooperation in group settings.

Kyle: As a very young youth, I enjoyed working cooperatively with groups and somehow I always seemed to be the leader. I was just always very creative and had neat ideas. So people usually wanted to use my ideas to build forts and tree houses or whatever and I liked doing things that way. But once academics started coming around—I hate, I loathe group projects and cooperation projects. I never have been able to do them or like them. I can maintain task and I can maintain my interest better when working on my own.

Kyle discussed the issue of his inability to keep up with the group, having a better end product individually, and disliking the immature bickering that occurred within the groups. Kyle appeared extremely bright and shared unusually abstract ideas. His peers did not usually understand his ideas, nor he theirs'. Yet if the final project involved writing, he did not want to deal with the possible ridicule of how difficult it was for him to produce work in this manner. Usually as a youth he just did not participate in written projects. Kyle also shined in oral presentations, so if the final project involved an oral presentation he did not want anyone to lessen his opportunities do well. Though he saw himself as cooperative outside of school, he knew he was not inside of school. There appeared to be no doubt that others probably did not see him as cooperative either.
Jonathan was in special education classes throughout most of his years in school. His comments regarding cooperation as a child reiterate the issues brought up by Kyle—the issues of education taking a leader and turning him/her into a follower and even possibly a trouble maker.

I found that if people were willing to work with me it worked out pretty well. But because I couldn’t spell and I couldn’t write—usually I found the ones that wrote were the ones that would put the ideas down. Especially in middle school and high school I could find groups and I usually gave my input. (So you have always been willing to cooperate, but if people aren’t working with you because of the disability what do you do?) I just sit there and be quiet. In middle school and high school maybe I got myself into trouble, maybe I talked to my neighbor too much. I made it like it wasn’t important. My image of being a jock was more important than anything. I had to hold up that image, the way to hold up that image was to get into trouble. (He discussed working in a group building something.) When it came to building something that was very different. If there was somebody else willing to listen to me, we could probably put some pretty neat things together.

The group, as a whole, felt that they were cooperative as children. Many times they felt they were overly cooperative. As children they found it very difficult to voice their opinions, and they would usually just go along with the crowd. This was especially true in group projects in school, as was voiced above. Only two of the ten were comfortable in any way with group projects, both as children and as adults. As children they all had experienced a great deal of ridicule from the way they communicated their ideas or from the way they did things. As children they felt they were stupid and that their ideas were not very good. In an attempt to avoid error, and consequently ridicule, most of
the participants would just stay quiet and go along with the groups’ decisions. Also, most did not want to hurt anyone’s feelings by trying to assert their ideas. Having difficulty understanding the conversation within the group, yet having no desire to let anyone know that, further increased this behavior of remaining quiet and trying to be “invisible”.

As adults, working in groups was still uncomfortable and difficult for most, but all had learned to force themselves to do it. Brenda said that it helped when she learned to negotiate. It was not really an issue of being uncooperative for any of them, it was an issue of learning styles and preferences. Each discussed that when they worked alone, they did not have to worry about maintaining the pace of the group (faster or slower), having to sacrifice their own ideas, having to struggle to understand others’ ideas, and having to wait on someone else’s schedule, etc. Additionally, working in a group setting was usually very distracting and made it difficult for them to concentrate on what needed to be done.

When Patrick discussed disliking having to work in cooperative groups in school, he also talked about disliking team sports as well:

I mean if you were going to give me something to do, I’d rather go fishing, or hiking, or do whatever. Even one-on-one was more tolerable than team sports. I was never very good—I’m not sure if it was that I was not good at doing team sports, it’s just that I preferred having this independence of doing it by myself. I like that.

In discussing cooperation as adults a continuous response was that cooperation would often become difficult if they believed that the person or persons was trying to take total control or take advantage of them. Being controlled was a source of frustration for most. If their ideas were believed to be good, but the other parities involved were totally ignoring them, then
cooperation became difficult. A couple of participants had reached the point that if people were not willing to compromise and the ideas went against the participants' beliefs or schedule, then they were able to politely say, "Sorry, but I won't be able to do that". The majority would still usually just give in if "push came to shove". Two people discussed that they would probably have passive aggressive behaviors of some sort. Brenda said that if she was being forced to work in a way that was uncomfortable for her, she would fight the situation "tooth and nail" in a quiet withdrawn way, but that she would ultimately be cooperative.

Josh stated that if he felt someone else was trying to control all of the decisions in an authoritative manner that he would just say, "No, I disagree." Then he was asked, "So you are capable of saying 'No, I disagree, I don't want to do that'?" He responded,

Actually, I probably withdraw and isolate. But if someone really pisses me off, I'll just say no. They have to really work up my emotions. But normally yeah, I'll just withdraw and isolate and ignore what they're saying to me. Just try to ignore them and let them pick up on the idea that I'm not going to do anything if they are going to act like that.

Josh more than once discussed the issue of trying to stay calm and ignore things he didn't like (bottling things up) until he exploded.

In their strength areas (e.g., history for David, geology for Brenda), working in groups and cooperating with others was more comfortable for all of the participants. Having jobs where they were able to be in charge made cooperation much easier. It was stated that it was not the need to be in control, but that the ideas were theirs, therefore, they understood them and were able to explain them to others. Trying to understand what others wanted and then negotiate for input of their own ideas was still difficult for most as adults.

Most of the participants discussed that with close friends and family
members they were very cooperative as adults. This was reinforced by Bev’s comment of being very cooperative, very diplomatic, always the mediator. This concept actually came up with most in certain settings. They all felt very intuitive and sensitive to others’ needs in many situations. Their inward look at themselves as well as their own struggles had provided them with the ability to see both sides of the picture in many cases. This was an area of strength that they all held in common.

Rhonda, who had a lot of issues with physical and emotional abuse growing up, stated that cooperation with her husband continued to be difficult. She still fought with that attitude of not wanting anyone to tell her what to do. She said that she had found that they got along better when she cooperated. Rhonda also said that she was not a doormat and would not allow him to walk all over her. His cooperation influenced her cooperation.

Assertion

Jonathan stated: As a child, just to be heard I had to be assertive. That’s what I felt, because the “smart” kids always got to be heard and I wanted to be heard too. (Were you assertive or aggressive?) Little bit of both. I think maybe more aggression. Aggression. As I got older I learned to be more assertive.

Rhonda felt that as a young child she had no assertion or aggression and in high school she went directly to aggression. She talked about this today: It goes back to if they’re willing to take the time to understand me, because when I need the time for people to understand me it takes a long time. Some people don’t have that time or that kind of patience. So when they don’t have that kind of patience, they kind of put me off and don’t take the time to listen to me. That triggers the aggressive part in me. I can always understand when someone has time to sit down and talk and understand. I
get frustrated when I’m trying to explain it. Especially with people who talk a lot and when you’re trying to put your side of the uh point of view in and all they do is jump right between your speaking or whatever, the conversation. That’s very hard for me. It frustrates me more and then I start acting aggressively.

Brenda discussed that she had absolutely no assertion as a child and that really went into adulthood. She said that the police academy helped her in that area. The people there pushed her far beyond the limits that she thought was possible, but they pushed in an encouraging manner. After this experience she felt more qualified to assert herself. She discussed the issues of needing the necessary energy and a sense of balance in her life:

Today, if I think I’m going to meet with resistance, if I don’t have the energy, I may just avoid it (she said that if it was important enough, she would approach the situation later when she had the energy). But if I have the energy I’ll just—again negotiating to me is assertiveness you know and being able to go back and forth and decide how best to work out whatever it is. (She was then asked to describe the types of situations in which she might be unable to assert herself.) If I’m overwhelmed and feeling off center or off balance then I won’t be able to do stuff very well. I can’t process (pause) standing your ground is like you have to have in mind what it is you need.

Again, she said she would postpone the process and return at a later time to deal with the situation if she was too overloaded at the time.

Josh’s frustration was evidenced again here. His going back and forth between externalizing and internalizing his frustrations was also demonstrated. He back tracked briefly on an idea about cooperation, but it also fit well here. Josh’s comments here reinforced Brenda’s responses above and in other
places about the need to not be overloaded or everything shuts down or the frustration just snow balls. Josh:

I don't know. I'm just not very assertive right now, because I'm like (pause) when you're weak and you feel inferior, you know what I mean, like when you have an inferiority complex like you feel there are things you can improve. It's hard to be real assertive. *(And earlier while talking about cooperation, when people react a certain way you might not assert until someone makes you angry?)*  Exactly! I just get frustrated and then I get kind of aggressive.

He said that we had triggered a thought about cooperation. We went back and forth to help him remember what it was.

If I know someone knows what they're doing, instead of like really trying to be a part of this cooperation, this team work type of deal, I'll sit right back and let them take full control and be the assertive one and be the one that does all the work with it and just kind of cooperate in a submissive kind of way. That's what I never liked about myself as a kid. I always felt like I could never do anything on my own, I was always really insecure about my own ideas and my own feelings. I just thought they were stupid, that I would just as soon cooperate with someone and let them dictate the way we go with something. *(Which really isn't cooperation.)*  It really isn't. I always hung out with very bright people and they were very aggressive in their ideas. With my friends I can tell them they are full of s-, but in the real world where I don't know people well, I let others be assertive. If I really know an idea is good, I will add it. If I'm not sure, I worry about what the group will think until my idea is gone, because everyone has moved on. That happens a lot. No, I'm not a very assertive person. *(It sounds like you are in areas. You stand up for your friends.)*  It's like I have to be pushed to aggressiveness before I can be
assertive. Like that person (previous video) I don’t like being mean, but I like
the assertiveness. *(You need a happy medium. You haven’t found the
balance yet.)* Well, I did have it. It’s been tough. *(You’re on over load.)* I
am on overload.

Kyle’s comments provided a great example of how the academic
frustrations as well as the communication problems can affect interactions in so
many ways. He also spoke to the defense mechanisms created, the
overcompensation of strengths, and how difficult it often was to change those
things:

As a youth I had problems with assertion. I would either not assert myself at
all and allow people to run over me. Especially with one of my fathers (step
father) and authoritative figures. I became somewhat apathetic. I would flee
from the situation and withdraw inward. Or I would react completely the
opposite and not be able to express myself in an appropriate way and so
just react out and rage and fight or get very emotional and cry and just be
very frustrated. Never was able to do it as a youth.

As an adult Kyle still felt he had issues. Due to his strong verbal abilities
he had to be careful not to over assert himself and override people. He had to
remain very conscious of this concept. Sometimes in his caution he would
actually undermine himself. He felt for the most part he knew when it was
important to assert himself and when to let things slide. He reported that he was
much more comfortable with himself and had found a balance.

I think that most of my fear of assertion was that in the modeled environment
it was aggressive and I’m afraid of that aggression and I don’t want to do that
to people*”.

In certain situations David had excellent verbal skills, and to compensate
for his frustrations as a child he was often very aggressive in his attempts to
assert himself. He said that he was able to enforce his will upon others, but as he grew older he did not like that. In the process he often would not assert himself to his own detriment. He was a computer expert and most of his jobs had involved computers in some way. He said that he had no difficulty going into his office, working, and coming out eight hours later. David believed that from sports he learned teamwork and that it did not always matter who got credit for something as long as the job got done. He believed that policy until someone that he had fed ideas to got to keep their job and he was laid off during financial cuts. He talked again about preferring to not get awards and attention. He felt it went back to school when his papers were read as examples of bad ones.

Patrick believed, that for the most part, social interactions had always been a strength. He did feel that assertion was definitely a weakness growing up and that he still had some issues as an adult.

I've become more assertive as I've gotten older. Particularly in the last five or seven years. As a kid I was fairly passive, sometimes passive-aggressive, but mostly passive. I'd let people do what they were going to do around me or I'd say, "If you're going to do this I'm leaving." I was somewhat concerned about hurting other people's feelings. If I stand up they're going to be upset. Consequently, I was much more willing to let people walk on me. In group situations, it was the fear of not measuring up. One-on-one situations, it was not being sure of how to do something without someone being upset by it or it was hard to say, "No, I don't want to do that because it will upset someone." (How have you learned to be more assertive?) Actually, it was kind of trial and error, get frustrated, or get hurt, or get used enough, you say, "OK dammit, I'm not going to do that anymore."

He did not go through a period of total aggression. He felt it was a progressive
process that he took in increments. He was asked if he believed there was anything that anyone could have done when he were younger to help him learn quicker?

Maybe a bit of assertiveness training—saying, “It’s OK to stand up for yourself.” I always had a real sense of hierarchy of power. Being the youngest kid in the family, you were the bottom of the hierarchy of power. I never had it explained to me that I could stand up and say no I don’t want to do this. Periodically, I would just whine about something.

Later he was asked if was more difficult to be assertive with authority figures and his response was yes. He was then asked if being given strategies might have helped.

Yeah, by giving you various verbal strategies of how to express who you are or your needs without being abrasive within the class. It would have been nice to have that strategy. As it was I did a lot of learning by trial and error and by watching other people. As I became more confident in myself it got easier.

He also did a lot of isolating and avoiding people and situations. He discussed the importance in his time alone, but he also discussed that kids like himself are more difficult for him to deal with as an educator.

While discussing assertion Brenda made a very important comment about the frustration of trying to get out what was inside of her. It emphasized a feeling expressed in some form by most of the participants and a very important factor in social interaction. Brenda also made some intriguing comments about persons with learning disabilities “biting it big” in social interactions.

I’m quietly assertive. (Is that called passive-aggressive?) (she laughed) Yes. A lot of times I can be assertive in what I want or want to do or what I want to get across by making or guiding people around to thinking it’s their
idea, and I learned that that way it’s never focused back on you, yet you’re getting what you need in certain situations. *(Is that called manipulation?)* Yes, it’s just a strategy I use. I’m assertive inside. *(Explain that.)* When people are assertive with me sometimes it hurts and I don’t want to hurt people. *(But you want to be assertive, and get it out?)* Yes, If I could get out what’s inside of me, I’d be a physicist by now. If I could just get it out. But I can’t. *(Does it have anything to do with processing?)* Everything. The whole learning problem—processing, memory, communication, low self-esteem in certain areas as far as social interaction. Social interaction is where a person with learning disabilities bites it big. They bite it big because it is a struggle, it’s a humongous struggle. Every aspect of your life is being affected by the fact that you either perceive or learn differently about life, interactions, academics, everything. The whole gambit, a person with LD is affected by this. So you’re trying to pull in information from all these different areas and you’ve got it, but you just don’t know what to do with it. *(Is that frustrating?)* It’s frustrating as heck. You try to use it occasionally and usually you’re embarrassed by what comes out. People judge you. *(Do they judge you or are you afraid they’re going to judge you?)* I know they judge me. I judge myself and that’s fine. But I’m always worried about how the other person judges me. If you don’t tell people you have learning disabilities you just look like an idiot. If you tell them then all of a sudden it changes their perception of you. and how they treat you. What do you do to protect yourself? You put up your shield. You withdraw.

**Responsibility**

Responsibility was a major strength for most of the participants. In fact, about half of the participants appeared to over-compensate in the area of responsibility as a means of establishing a sense of control in their lives.

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Rhonda: As far as being a mother, and a wife, and doing my job as a student and getting my degree, my background, my religion, all of that...I would say I'm very responsible. Because I'd say if I wasn't responsible, I wouldn't be where I am today.

She was also very responsible as a child except when she was going through her rebellious stage and refusing to do her chores.

Bev stated that she had always been extremely responsible to the point of it being annoying to herself. She was labeled the responsible one in her family while her brother was labeled the brat. She struggled with school so she feels that being responsible may have come from trying extra hard to be good in other areas:

I feel like I have to keep on a like a straight line, like I have to keep structured and on a path and if I become irresponsible in any way, I have like these overwhelming feelings of guilt—and What am I doing?—and just the lack of control. I don't feel confident if I don't feel in control of what's going on. Not in a domineering sense, but just in an awareness sense like I know what's happening, how things are going to work, what's to be expected, things like that. But if it's something way off the deep-end which a lot of times is not a responsible thing, then I feel lost.

Responsibility was a very important issue to Charlie both as a child and as an adult. Important facts included being places on time, standing up for what she believed in (which she learned to do), rescuing abandoned animals, etc.

Brenda stated that responsibility was only a strength for her both as a child and as an adult. She reiterated statements about overcompensating in certain areas in order to try to cover up and how she always worked on being that perfect little person. She mentioned that her only weakness in the area of responsibility was probably for not cutting herself some slack. As she has
gotten older, Brenda has learned that trying to be too responsible and too “anal” takes up too much energy. She was asked if she felt she was overly responsible:

Sometimes I think I’m overly responsible when it affects others, because sometimes I assume they should be too…I think everybody (pause) and I know nobody can be like me. Very few people can be as anal as me. So I need to be able to cut them some slack. So yeah, there’s a down side to it. I expect the same from others and in the land of manana here it doesn’t happen always. If I make an appointment, I’ll be there. I won’t cancel with someone, because I got a better deal or something better came up. I will be responsible to the person.

She said she would cancel in case of an emergency, but that would be the only reason.

Karen believed that she had always been very responsible even as a child. She took care of a younger sister a lot when she was younger. She said that she often did not get her homework completed, but it was not really an issue of responsibility. She always made an attempt, but she often didn’t understand homework, especially math, and she never received support at home. She stated that she would not beat her head against the wall all night, and that was still the case today. She always tried to be aware of what kind of things might throw her and get help ahead of time, but if she got into it and simply could not figure it out, she put it aside. She refused to beat herself anymore. Karen reported that she took making commitments to people very seriously. She refused to overload herself anymore and would not make promises that she was not reasonably sure she could fulfill. If she made a promise or committed to something, she did her best to follow it up with the action.
David discussed responsibility:

I’m too responsible. It’s very important that I do well. A lot of people can skate through life, I can’t. No matter how hard I try, I have to work harder than everyone else to compensate for the weaknesses and that’s the hard part.

David stated that, as a child, he avoided the sense of responsibility. He was unsure if it was due to the learning differences or just to his upbringing.

Kyle discussed being overly responsible except for school work when he was younger. He discusses the issue of things that were important to him.

I think I’ve always had an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. And that’s where that “watcher” (the inner critical voice he described earlier) and where me being too hard on myself has come from. I have many feelings of being really young and trying to be responsible and being considerate of other people, but even taking care of my stuff. I can remember helping out friends and making sure everything was put away. Putting away tools in the workshop. With one of my fathers it was taught in a polite responsible manner.

(later in interview)—High school— I was very responsible in things that mattered to me and things that were probably not related to others. Like school, about doing homework and things—I never did homework ever. I couldn’t do it. (Was it too frustrating?) Yeah, I didn’t understand it at home and it didn’t matter to me, it was a punishment. That’s all homework was for me. That’s all school was. It was punishment, it was jail. There was nothing fun, rewarding, interesting about school. It was a punitive paradigm. There was a lot of corporal punishment, it was not a good environment. Everything I learned at that time was on my own: reading, talking to dad, exploring in the shop—nothing was learned at school.
He mentioned several times how important the positive interactions with this one stepfather were to his life.

Kyle discussed having a really strong sense of responsibility in other areas such as money. He said that his mother actually modeled the opposite. He was always trying to take care of his younger brother. He said he was responsible in school today though it is difficult. School tended to stint his intellect, but he had goals and would do what it took to reach those goals. Finding out that he was gifted and had learning disabilities helped this attitude a great deal. He stated that his father had tried to get him tested when he was younger. The teacher said that Kyle was just lazy and an underachiever; he just needed to try harder. At other times teachers said he just was not that bright.

For Patrick, responsibility was a strength from early childhood. I was always a very responsible kid. My parents were really good at giving visual clues—that whipped puppy look. *(You didn’t have the issue of picking up on non-verbal cues?)* Non-verbal and verbal cues were pretty easy for me to pick out. I was usually very responsible. Even in high school with “the guys”. One night they said, “Let’s go to the golf course, steal golf carts, and go racing around.” I just knew that was a sure fire way to get into trouble. I said, “No, you guys just drop me off.” I got a lot of shit from them for that. And they all got busted. David (participant) wound up crashing a cart into the pond and got arrested.(story continued) In high school in my junior year, I would skip school and go hiking. It wasn’t really out of rebellion, it was just as a special ed. kid at that time I hated it. I decided I’d rather be in trouble than sit in class and be harassed by other students and teachers. *(Was responsibility something you learned or was it just always there?)* It was something that was reinforced by my parents and teachers.

Josh felt weak in the area of responsibility. However, he met his
responsibilities to his family and to school. He was struggling with not working full time while attending college.

Jonathan spoke of some of the same frustrations over trying to be responsible and why it was so difficult for him:

That's a hard one. I think if you were to do a scale from 1-10 on where I was in responsibility—I'd say I was about a 5 or below. I had enough responsibility to get things done that needed to get done. They were not always on time, but they got done. It's real hard, I'd like to be an 8. (So you feel even today that it's 5 or below?) I think today I'm 5 or above. (So you've had to work for responsibility?) I've had to work for it. (continues) A strength is in keeping commitments. I've worked hard to learn to keep commitments. I use to be a space case and blow them off. Now in college, in graduate school I've gotten very good at keeping my commitments. In undergraduate school, I was just in a haze. Financially I was really in a haze. I did a poor job with financial aide. (Do you think the learning disabilities affected that?) Yeah, I think so, I didn't take the time to read the stuff or understand. I didn't take time to make a plan, because it was painful. One of the hardest things for me to do was trying to work and go to school full time. For two years, I just got student loans.

Later his girlfriend encouraged him to work. He was able to find a job that was simple enough to allow him to study as well. Then he started substitute teaching. In the beginning, he kept the students under control and did his own homework. Eventually, he realized that he was being irresponsible and discovered that he could have an impact on the students if he worked with them a great deal.

**Self-Control**

Rhonda felt like she often lost emotional control when it came to her son.
Protecting him and providing him with the safety that she did not receive was of utmost importance to her. When she realized she was somewhat out of control, she worked to regain it so that it did not upset him. She told a story of another woman who went to defend her son to a school mate. The woman remained very calm and diplomatic. Rhonda said that she would not have handled it as well. She would have had a mean voice and probably used harsher words.

Bev discussed her internalizing behaviors:
I lose emotional control. Mine is more like I’d get depressed. Like if something would happen. I wouldn’t know maybe how to deal with—maybe I should have been real assertive and I wasn’t, or maybe I should have said something and I didn’t or I shouldn’t have said something the way I said it. Something like that, then I’d get a negative response and then I’d get depressed, then I’d get moody and then I’d get more negative responses. Yes, I internalize everything. I try to outwardly appear fine. But back then everyone knew I wasn’t. That’s what is funny, kind of. I tried to hide it, but no one was dumb, they all knew that I was like having a major crisis. (Is it that issue of needing to be in control?) I think that’s what keeps me stable, that’s what keeps me from getting depressed. Because depressed is the main core of it all—for me at least. So my fear is getting depressed, so if I feel like I’m losing control of things in my life, be it lack of control, lack of structure, lack of consistency, lack of you know responsibility or whatever, then I feel I’m falling off the wagon in a way. So I start to feel that loss of control, so I get frustrated and it’s internalized and I lose control.

Brenda demonstrated more of her defense mechanisms and over-compensation:
I am very self-controlled in every aspect. (Is it sometimes to a fault?) Yes, because here again I expect others to be like me. (Self-control is a coping
mechanism?) It’s comforting. (It keeps you safe?) It keeps me sane. (It keeps you sane?) Yes, if I’m in control of myself and my environment, I’m free to expend my energies elsewhere and that would be to learn. (Are there areas where you lose self-control?) In the reverse. When people don’t give me the same, I get frustrated and very angry. I’m working on that. I have years of practice of self-control and I know others haven’t so I need to cut them some slack. And it’s not always, it’s just when I’m really, really stressed in academic situations or whatever. The problem is I don’t explode, I implode. (Are you self-destructive?) Kind of. (Is it to the point of physical discomfort?) If I let it get to that point. I’ve learned not to—I think. (Were there people or things that helped you to do that?) Just realizing everyone’s different.

Charlie felt that as a child she was too controlled and too serious. It was very difficult for her to relax and let go. She did say that, before she entered the special school for students with giftedness and learning disabilities, she had outbursts. She was very frustrated with not doing well in school and from feeling stupid. Her parents talked with people who said that it was good that she felt safe enough with them to show her anger, because she didn’t show it anywhere else. Her parents talked to her about it and gave her limitations in that she could not hurt anyone else or herself. She did break a few things and then they began to channel her anger into physical activities. She started running at that point and eventually started dancing. The running gave her an outlet for releasing her frustrations. The dance became an outlet because she was very talented and it was an area where she was very confident. Charlie talked again about the fact that, if her confidence and self-esteem were up, then she was better able to interact with people. She learned to prepare herself for all kinds of interactions so that she did not feel insecure and she could interact
well.

David said that he had no self-control as a kid and that things were bad enough that he had to see a therapist. He was extremely angry about being labeled a dummy when he knew he was not. He discussed the frustration of studying 6-8 hours for a spelling test and having every word down perfectly. Then he would walk to school one block away and not remember one single spelling word for the test. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get above that D. It used to come out in anger:

I was very, very, very angry. It used to really show itself in sports if (unclear) went up against me. I was a big kid, I could hurt people. (Did you?) I got lucky and never actually physically hurt someone. I destroyed trash cans, ripped out fences, broke walls. I broke a lot of inanimate objects, but never physically hurt anybody. (If someone had talked with you and given you strategies do you think you could have learned to channel the anger?)

Yeah, just understanding myself, I wouldn’t have been so hard on myself. Martial arts helped me to get the anger under control.

Josh felt that he had self-control yet lacked it. He discussed bottling things up and ignoring things until a “red switch” clicked and he lost his “mind” in a way. We discussed that perhaps he needed to learn some strategies to help him deal with people who pushed his buttons. He said that that was exactly what he needed and that was exactly his problem. He had never thought of it that way, but he said that he let people push his buttons. He said that he wore his feelings on the outside and even when he tried to ignore people, they could tell they were getting to him. Some would push him until his brain hit that red switch and he became a crazy man. He was concerned as to how far that anger could go.

Kyle became very frightened of his anger and his loss of control when he
was a child. As a result he became very skilled at stinting his emotional growth. He would contain his feelings and isolate himself from situations that he knew would push him in that out of control direction. He would just lock down his emotions to the best of his ability. Eventually this led to his physically and emotionally hurting himself because of his rigidity. He would push his body and get crazed on energy highs and then hit a wall and go into a deep deep depression. So physical activities, which began as a way to channel his anger, were taken too far. Kyle said he had no sense of pacing and he was just driving himself so that he wouldn’t “feel”. He wasn’t trying to prove that he was capable but just trying to rid himself of all feeling. The running and other physical activities kept him from violently acting out, but basically he just turned that violence toward himself. At twenty-five the damage he had done to his body was extensive. He also believed that martial arts helped him to get all of his emotions into perspective.

Jonathan felt that where he lost self-control was when he had anxiety attacks. These attacks surfaced when he was overloaded and overwhelmed with trying to work too much, go to school full time, and keep up with life. He had learned to maintain a balance. He tried to make things fun so that they were easier to accomplish. He had learned in graduate school that if he is getting overwhelmed, sometimes he just needed to allow himself to be irresponsible for a little while and he would go “play”. He had learned his limitations and his needs and he took care of himself.

**Results of Interview Three: Follow-Up Questions**

As the data from the first two interviews were being collected, the researcher began scanning and asking questions of the data. This procedure assisted with the generation of additional questions which would help with triangulation. The final questions and findings for each are presented in this
section.

1. Which do you think was more of a factor for you in your interpersonal performance—the educational system or people and situations in general?

The responses to this question were very interesting. The majority of the participants responded with “people and situations in general”. They were referring to positive factors. Most felt that support and unconditional acceptance came from family members, adult family friends, or persons involved in their extracurricular activities. Having someone in their lives who treated them as another human being and as an equal, without a hierarchy of any kind, was stated to be of utmost importance to the creation of a positive self-regard. A positive self-regard was believed to be vital to successful interactions with others. One gentleman discussed a caregiver who provided mutual respect followed by a caregiver who criticized and berated him constantly. He went from a loving, confident child to an angry insecure adolescent. The academic challenges and adolescence were enough to deal with without adding another variable of negativity. He said that his return to a calm adult had everything in the world to do with the positive influence he had in his earlier years. Without that, he believed he would probably be in prison or have a similar consequence as an adult. Each participant mentioned someone along the way who had believed in them and provided support and encouragement. The amount of that support they received, in every area of their lives, seemed to affect their overall social competence no matter what the other challenges were. The less support received, the more the walls of protection seemed to take over and rule their lives. Positive, supportive people made them feel comfortable and allowed to them to come out of their shells. In turn, those people were able to experience the wonderful human beings who emerged.
Introduction to the Interaction of Intelligence and the Environment

The interaction between the individual and the environment plays a crucial role in shaping human behavior and development. This interplay is complex and dynamic, involving a range of factors that influence cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of life.

Understanding the mechanisms through which the environment influences intelligence and behavior is essential for promoting optimal growth and development in individuals. This chapter aims to explore the interplay between intelligence and the environment, highlighting key factors that contribute to this relationship.

Factors Affecting Intelligence and Development

1. Genetic Predispositions: Genetic factors play a significant role in determining intelligence levels. Genetic variations can influence cognitive abilities, such as memory, problem-solving skills, and creativity.

2. Environmental Influences: The environment, both natural and social, has a profound impact on intelligence. Access to educational resources, exposure to diverse cultural experiences, and opportunities for social interaction are crucial in fostering cognitive development.

3. Biological Factors: Biological factors, such as prenatal and early childhood health, can significantly affect cognitive outcomes. Nutritional deficiencies, infections, and other health issues during these critical periods can have long-lasting effects on intelligence.

4. Social Context: The social context in which an individual grows up can greatly influence intelligence. Supportive family environments, access to quality education, and opportunities for social interaction are all critical in promoting high levels of intelligence.

5. Economic Conditions: Economic circumstances can also affect intelligence. Poverty and lack of resources can limit access to educational opportunities and quality healthcare, which are essential for optimal cognitive development.

Conclusion

The interaction between the individual and the environment is a two-way street, where both factors influence each other. Understanding this interplay is crucial for developing strategies that support optimal cognitive development and enhance overall intelligence. By addressing the environmental factors that influence intelligence, we can work towards creating environments that foster high levels of cognitive abilities in all individuals.
A couple of participants felt that they received some positive influence toward their social competence from the educational setting. When teachers or other school officials provided unconditional positive regard, mutual respect, and validation, then every aspect of school was different including social interactions. However, most of the participants felt that the educational setting compounded their social interaction issues. Negative attitudes and ridicule affected their self-esteem and increased behaviors of withdrawal or aggressive outbursts. Two of the participants were friends and attended the same schools. During high school, the school counselor told both of them that they should drop out of school and become garbage collectors. Several were told by some school official at some point that they would never “amount to much”, never learn to read, never, never, never. The attitudes of the adults affected the attitudes of the other students. The frustration and the rejection caused many of them to get angry and find a way to prove people wrong. How many others have finally said, “You’re right, I give up”?

People and situations in general provided a negative influence as well, because of the creation of a picture of what every one is suppose to look like. It was felt that people judged everyone based on what was perceived to be “normal”. Constantly being concerned about that judgment was said to affect social interaction a great deal. In many cases it continued to reinforce withdrawal and isolation.

2. With the issue of thinking slower—When it seems like you are slow (if this is an issue for you) — do you actually have several ideas and thoughts bombarding you at once and in order to make sense of it you try to slow down and separate the thoughts?

The responses to this question were divided approximately in half. Half
said yes with interesting responses and the other half said no with interesting responses. The answers, again, provided a better picture of what was often going on inside the heads of persons with learning disabilities while trying to communicate with others. A few examples of responses follow:

Yes. I do. I have a million things going on in my head. I think that a lot of people like us that have learning disabilities that I—almost feel we are smarter than a lot of people. Seriously, because we just think at a different level. Our minds are just so bombarded, we’re like wow blibblibl and everyone else is just like ding “I have an idea”. You know, I mean, obviously, I don’t know that, but that’s kind of how it feels sometimes.

Definitely. If a teacher asks you a question in class, I have all these different things that come into my head and I just need time to sort them out. But then I get overly stressed about it. I know I can’t do it in the amount of time and then I completely lose the question all together. And then I am completely panicked.

Sometimes I have to figure out what they want. Very few people want all of the answer. And that’s a part of figuring things out. I analyze what they want. I clarify everything, sometimes to the point of being patronizing: “Do you understand what I’m saying?” It’s because it doesn’t make sense to me. At times I shotgun the subject, put out everything I know on the table and figure that one of them has to be right.

Yes. With ADD/ADHD (attention deficit disorder/hyperactivity) people talk about them not being able to attend, when in fact they are attending to
multiple things at once and they have such a heightened sensitivity to their environment surrounding through their nervous system that they are picking up all this information. And they don’t have necessarily and I don’t see this as pathological, but they don’t have the same filters. You’re getting all this information and you create a situation. When you get all that going, you can get through it and see different relationships that you couldn’t otherwise if you were just going linearly one step at a time looking at each different thing. You won’t see the relationships that exist in a complex situation. So I see it as adaptive in that way, but I know that most people see it as, “You’re not able to attend”, because you can’t sit down and say, “OK, this plus this equals this.” When you’re thinking, Well, what is this representing? Is it two of these? Is it two of these? If it is two of these, well, why does it matter that two of these and two of these equals four of these? You know you start thinking about them in other terms. Or you start building geometrical progression and seeing them that way instead of seeing it as a straight line that is equaling something. You’re understanding them from another dimension.

The following response relayed an interesting analogy. “It isn’t multiple thoughts, it’s one thought that is fragmented. It’s like those refrigerator magnets with words. You have to piece them together.” Another explanation for why the thinking appeared to look slow was: “I don’t necessarily think slower, but there are days when I have difficulty recalling information. This is always very frustrating because I know that I know the information, but I just can’t pull it out of my head to use it.”

3. Do you feel your learning difficulties have influenced your ability to communicate boundaries effectively?
The answer to this question was a unanimous yes. Each participant had different issues with which they dealt and some had gotten better with setting boundaries, but they all felt that at some point in time they had experienced difficulty in communicating their boundaries. The responses reinforced the vicious cycle of withdrawal and isolation. One of the participants who had spent time in special education classes in school, at first, said that it wasn’t a problem and then said, “There were times when I thought that I shouldn’t tell people what was bothering me or even my opinion because I lacked confidence. It was often hard to take a confident stand when I knew that others knew that I was in special education.” This came from someone who received support and was considered to have a great self-concept. What kind of effect did all these emotions have on those who were not getting adequate support and did not have good self-concepts? More examples of the vicious cycles follow:

I definitely had a problem. Because I couldn’t get out what I needed to say, I would just withdraw, so of course, withdrawing I didn’t communicate my needs. I let people take advantage of me. I let people think I was probably dumb, because I didn’t know. I didn’t know how to deal with it. So my way of dealing with it was to withdraw.

I definitely know my boundaries. I know I need more time. I need to do it at home and take time to think it through. I’m good at setting boundaries with my family….I have a hard time setting boundaries with people I want to impress like professors….I don’t like to hurt people’s feelings so if they’re asking for help, it’s hard to say no. I can then take on too much and get overloaded.
Definitely. Every day. I have boundaries, but I often let people step over them. You want to be liked, you want to be accepted. You don’t want to hurt people by shutting them off or shutting them down. I don’t know how to communicate my boundaries. I don’t know how to do that. (Is it boundaries or negotiation?) Negotiation requires a lot of time. I mean once you try to set up a boundary then it’s going to, of course, require some negotiation. Which then is going to require you to start thinking about it and you’re usually going to act a fool, because the other person is on the defensive already and the offensive. They’re trying to attack you and you’re saying, “Wait a minute I just want to explain why”—and then it’s gone, you don’t even remember what it was really about. You will play the fool then. (You’re strategies are still to avoid?) I avoid and adapt. I have learned to adapt more than avoid. I’m getting better.

Definitely. I have serious boundary issues. In the desire to want to help, I can get overtasked to where I’m so far over my head in terms of different energy requirements that I can’t keep up at all. I can’t say, “No, I can’t tutor you, I can’t coach this, I can’t work on this project.” I have a real hard time doing that, especially, when I’m interested in doing it. At the same time in other areas when I was younger, I would get so frustrated over having no boundaries and just shut down everything. Say, “I don’t have any boundaries, I know I don’t have any boundaries, I’ve been abused in multiple situations.” I’d just close down and say, “Hey, I’m shutting down, locking up, don’t bother me. I don’t want to have any interaction with you at all.” Because I was afraid. I didn’t have the boundary ability to say what was and wasn’t appropriate. I didn’t like it, didn’t want it. So I would just go beyond my ability to deal with the situation. It would get too deep and I’d just
shut down, build a wall. I got very good at it.

4. Do you tend to remember more negative rather than positive social interactions?

Two of the ten felt they remembered the positive interactions more than the negative ones, but even they said that a bad memory will stand out when a similar situation arises. They both felt they were fortunate to be able to learn from their past social experiences. The others felt that they tended to remember more negative interactions. Though it was a constant struggle and they worked to find a balance, they too believed that the negatives had given them a positive. They all felt that by looking at the negatives, they were able to “fix” things and improve their interactions.

One participant made a comment that demonstrated how situations in this area could spiral out of control for all of the participants. “I definitely use to see more negatives. I’ve really worked on trying to change that. Maybe it’s going through—like if you think negatively and you realize you know this isn’t making me happy, I’ve got to change this, this is not cool.” She continued to say that this had improved with age and experience. She talked about how when her self-esteem and confidence was up, it made a difference in all of her interactions. “If you go in and your self-confidence is a little off and someone says one little thing it sends you plummeting, you mess up a little more, they react, you react and it snowballs. So it became important to change the negative thinking.”

5. What do you see as the primary positive and negative behaviors that you’ve used in coping with social interactions, as a result of having learning disabilities?
The ability to listen was believed to be a positive behavior for several. They believed themselves to be intuitive and through their own trials they had learned to listen to others. Some said they had honed that skill as well as their verbal skills because of extreme deficits in writing. Organization, planning ahead, and being prepared also were a positives stated, especially for the women. An interesting and telling comment about a positive behavior follows:

Creativity in learning more non-linear thinking—because I often have to go around, or work around, or work with my limitations to get where I want to go. I can't just go in a straight line a lot of times. I think it has helped me to think more creatively and to think about more possible solutions. If I could go from point A to point B, I probably wouldn't even consider it. So I exercise that part of my brain.

The negative behaviors most often mentioned were withdrawal, isolation, closing-off, creating boundaries between people, putting up a wall of defense, and avoiding social initiation. They all knew that there were times when they had to isolate themselves to get things done, but they tried to avoid excessive isolation. They isolated in order to protect themselves, but they had made it a priority to work on that issue. Avoidance of groups, due to the confusion from all the noise, was also considered to be negative. Fun activities were missed out on for this reason. Withdrawal in group settings was still a common behavior, but also one that everyone strove to change.

Manipulating the situation away from a particular difficulty or a particular task also was discussed. As well as manipulating people away from seeing their challenges, they sometimes manipulated people away from realizing their gifts and how much they did know. One man said that when he was younger, he got to a point where he was unable to control the lies. Being overly sensitive and too hard on themselves also was discussed. That inner competitiveness
was a frustration for most of the participants. Anger and defensiveness was mentioned by three.

6. Is it often necessary to do things alone (a project, shopping, etc.) in order to focus on what needs to be done and on what decisions need to be made?

The unequivocal and unanimous response to this question was absolutely yes. One participant was even thrilled to know that everyone else had the same concern. She was always “harassed” by friends for needing to go to the mall alone. She said they all wanted to go with someone, but if she needed an outfit it was easier to shop alone. She never understood why. Again she just thought it was another one of those quirky “stupid things” that she did.

Grocery shopping was a bigger issue than clothes shopping for most. Especially if there was a specific math disability and a budget involved, total concentration was required. Two backyard mechanics said their buddies never understood why they didn’t want anyone else around when they were working on the car. One female said that something even as simple as changing a small light bulb in a friend’s car required quiet concentration. She said it only required taking out a couple of tiny screws, but as long as the friend stood their and talked to her she could not accomplish the job. A great number of tasks that seemed very minor to a majority of the population, required the participants to have “blinders” and remove all outside distractions.

When asked if this fact had any effect on their social interactions and their relationships, the answer was also a unanimous yes. They had to have friends who were not judgmental and who did not give them constant grief for all the “silly” little things that they had to do alone. Going to school required a lot of extra time of total concentration and this not only affected friendships, but often
close relationships with girlfriends or spouses. One young man said that his girlfriend had complained a lot that he did not give her enough of this time. He said that everything he did took so much time and total concentration that it was very difficult to accomplish everything. He wanted her to understand, but he also felt guilt about not being responsible to her and everyone else.

For many, when their friends wanted to go shopping they had learned to go and just hang-out and have fun. When they themselves needed something specific, they went shopping alone. For grocery shopping, some of their spouses had decided that they did not like to shop with them, but it wasn't a big deal. The couple had just worked out a system of some type. One person had learned that if someone else must go along, she gave that person a separate list and said, "Here, you go get these things and I'll meet you in the middle." Again, most had to find people in their lives who were not judgmental and gave them space to do things the way they needed to do them.

7. Has the inward focus, brought on by the isolating factors of your learning disabilities, given you a greater strength in the area of self-awareness? And how has that helped you to positively cope with the differences?

The answer to the first part of this question was also a unanimous yes. Everyone felt they had spent a great deal of time looking inward trying to understand what was going on inside of themselves. They also were always looking at things trying to figure out what they needed to do to correct something. This analysis was what had allowed them to learn to know how that learned, how they did things, and what they needed. It taught them to search for creative alternatives in their approach to things. A few comments:

It's my greatest strength. Socrates: Know thyself. I think that is my mantra. All
my life is to know myself. Know my world. Try to pass on to the students that there is a whole world right there within themselves.

I think I know who I am and what my needs are way better than a lot of people.

I'm real aware of what I do and how I do things. I analyze to the point where I don't want to hear it anymore, but that is how I improve.

It taught me that happiness is a choice. It's not something that comes from somebody else. It's something that you decide every day when you get up. It truly is that simple. You choose to be happy or you choose not to be happy. Self-awareness has taught me that.

**Summary**

Question eight was posed to give the participants a final opportunity to vocalize their opinions and perceptions about social competence and persons with learning disabilities. Their responses provided the reader with a noteworthy summarization of this chapter and a final expression of the emic voice.

8. **Knowing that people will be reading this—what is the main thing that you would want them to know about social interactions for persons with LD?**

This question became a two part question with the participants making a statement to other people with learning disabilities as well as a statement to people without learning disabilities. Some of the responses to people with learning disabilities are summarized first:
A common response was for the person to know that s/he was smart and often knew more or was more capable than the person with the quick answers. It was important to believe in oneself. Additionally, people with and without learning disabilities should have been better educated about learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities just learned differently and often took longer to do things, but the final product often was actually better. It was stated that people without learning disabilities just seemed to be more arrogant because they had not experienced failure as much or as often as those with learning disabilities. Examples of additional messages follow:

Don’t give up in social situations. Don’t foreclose on situations. Don’t sever ties. Don’t isolate yourself and withdraw inside just because you’re not able at the time to communicate in the most appropriate ways. I think it’s better to keep trying. Always to keep trying to communicate. We’re all fighting a hard battle, but we’re not alone in life. Social interactions can be the most fulfilling and rewarding parts of our lives. I think they can help us so much more to understand ourselves, understand other people and make us feel like we have a place in this world.

Don’t be scared to just express your ideas and your feelings. Be honest with yourself and open up to the problems you have and just try to deal with them the best way. That’s the only true way you can be happy in your life is if you’re honest with yourself and you understand who you are—is by facing the problems that are in front of you. Your obstacles, you have to overcome those and I haven’t done that yet, but I’m working on it.

Some of the messages to people without learning disabilities are summarized:

One participant commented that making a statement to people without
learning disabilities would be asking them to treat persons with learning disabilities in a dissimilar manner. Having people see them as different was the biggest complaint. This is somewhat of a catch twenty-two. As was stated earlier by several: if you do not tell someone you have learning disabilities, you just look like an idiot; if you do tell someone you have learning disabilities, then they treat you differently. The desire to avoid this makes sense. However, needing modifications such as more time, etc. in some ways requires alternative treatment. Of course most of the participants felt that everyone should be accepted as they are with all of their varying differences. People need to realize that we’re all different though we share commonalities. That was probably the loudest cry of all. A few of the direct comments follow:

Patience is a virtue. Stop, listen, let them finish their train of thought. If you see they’re struggling, if you see them thinking and they’re trying to formulate an idea, don’t sit there and jump in and tell them what they’re trying to say. They don’t need that. That doesn’t help them. If you give too much information so that all they have to say is yes, you may have missed what they were really trying to say.

Get to know the LD person off of school grounds and get on their turf. Find out how they live their lives and what they enjoy doing. It frequently amazes me when people assume that everyone should learn the same things, in the same way, at the same time. When it comes to academics people often lose their compassion. After all, if academic skills came naturally and easily, they wouldn’t be called skills.

Instead of looking at it as reduced functioning, to realize the extra effort that has to be put into successfully managing—given the limitations. So rather
than being snickered at or ostracized—really it should be honored—as it takes a lot of guts and creativity to be able to not only survive with the limitations but to thrive. That extra effort should be honored rather than saying, "Oh, you're slow," or whatever. Like in school, people usually got negative reactions rather than, "Wow, you've got the courage to keep pushing forward in the midst of these limitations!" I may not go from point A to point B in a linear style like most. I may have to go around or take longer or something, but I still get there. Instead of having a negative attitude about needing to go in a different direction, honor that as an extra skill of creativity. We have to be creative to come up with solutions to our limitations.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of adults with learning disabilities concerning social competence issues. Questions were posed to elicit examples of the challenges experienced as a child and as an adult; examples of the coping skills utilized; examples of circumstances which helped to alleviate the challenges; perceptions regarding the educational system and people or situations in general as factors in performance; and successful outcomes as well as possible reasons for those outcomes. This chapter will provide a presentation of the etic voice using my own analysis. To further the essence of the etic voice, this chapter will be presented in the first person.

The results of this investigation revealed a number of findings regarding adults with learning disabilities and their perceived social competence. The findings are summarized as follows:

1. Most of the participants tended to isolate themselves by choice. Isolation included complete separation from others as well as avoidance of small and/or large group situations. The reasons most often cited for this isolation were: (a) protection from ridicule, (b) attempts to not draw attention due to fear of inability to perform, (c) protection from pressure to do things a certain way or at a certain pace that does not match their learning styles, (d) the necessity for many projects to have no distractions and total concentration (including tasks as simple as shopping), (e) the noise in many group settings being very uncomfortable, (f) avoidance of judgmental people, and (g) being overloaded and stressed with life in general.

2. Most of the participants tended to withdraw within group situations by
choice. Withdrawal included removal from active participation, silent participation, and/or detachment from social or emotional involvement. The reasons most often cited for the withdrawal were: (a) feeling unable or unsafe to express their feelings or ideas, (b) fear of making a mistake and being ridiculed, (c) fear of hurting someone else’s feelings by asserting their ideas, (d) fear of losing control of frustration and anger when someone is being negative, (e) too many voices and too much noise, making it difficult to follow the conversation, (f) being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the topic, and (g) being overloaded and stressed with life in general.

3. Most of the participants had a strong desire to avoid harming others. Even those who sometimes lashed out in frustration, or neglected friends and loved ones at times in order to complete tasks, had an abundance of guilt about causing anguish to others.

4. For all of the participants the ability to interact positively with others had a direct relationship with having a positive self-esteem and a strong self-confidence.

5. The participants all believed that their ideas and creative strategies used to compensate for their learning differences should be viewed as unique versus defective and honored instead of ridiculed.

6. As children the female participants tended to be very quiet, serious, and the “perfect kid”. The girls internalized their frustration.

7. As children most of the male participants had distinct behaviors depending on the situation. Their anger and frustration was exhibited through outward explosions, they clowned around to divert the attention away from their learning difficulties, or they would withdraw and try to become invisible. For the most part, the boys externalized their
frustrations.

8. Most of the participants indicated language processing difficulties of some kind. Stress and being overwhelmed with life in general tended to slow the processing even further which affected social interactions.

9. The majority of the participants believed themselves to be intuitive and very sensitive to the feelings of others.

10. All of the participants considered themselves to be very introspective and analytical. Most achieved this through isolation, which provided a greater self-awareness.

11. Patience was a frustration for most of the participants. They had difficulty being patient with the idea of having to wait. They were equally frustrated by people who were impatient with them when their learning differences affected their pace or style of communication.

Conclusions and Discussion

The following section addresses each of the original research questions, with conclusions drawn from the findings pertaining to each issue. As each principal finding is introduced, it will be highlighted with underlining.

What were some of the social challenges with which individuals with learning disabilities dealt, as children?

All of the participants felt different and out of place as children. “I always felt different from everyone else. I never felt in sync. I would just hide.” “I never felt like I fit in.” “I never felt like I belonged.” This feeling was especially true once they had entered school. They felt a constant judgment over their behavior: how they talked, how they spelled, how they wrote, or how slow they did things. This feeling and constant fear of being judged had a tremendous affect on their behavior and their interpersonal interactions. They very much
wanted to be accepted and to experience feelings of belonging. Most felt that as children they did not really have a problem with giving in to peer pressure, but they did let people take advantage of them.

Due to a strong desire to avoid hurting others and an incredible fear of rejection, most of the participants let others walk all over them and their boundaries as children. Assertion and negotiation were felt to be very difficult. The five females and one gentleman felt that as children they had very little assertiveness if any and that they usually let people take advantage of them. One of the females was very quiet and tried to be nice to everyone until she reached high school. She then rebelled and became the “bully.” The female participants were usually quiet and the “perfect” little person.

Four of the males tended to be more aggressive, fighting, acting out their anger as children. One of them responded:

As a child, just to be heard I had to be assertive. That’s what I felt, because the “smart” kids always got heard and I wanted to be heard too. *(Were you assertive or aggressive?)* Little bit of both. I think maybe more aggression. Aggression. As I got older I learned to be more assertive.

Two of the young men would become clowns in order to take the attention away from their academic difficulties. One of the males was often quiet and tried to be invisible in the classroom because he did not want to bring any attention to himself, yet outside the classroom he would do anything and everything with his friends in order to “fit in.” “Any thing was better than having them call me stupid or being labeled the dummy.”

Three of the gentlemen also played up the “dumb jock” routine, because that was still better than just “dumb.” One mentioned that he hated football and felt he was a horrible player, but again the consequences allowed him to “fit in.” Two of those three actually excelled in sports, and it was one area in which they
had confidence. Another young man was heavily into sports, but it was always individual sports and he always drove himself too hard, always trying to stop feeling. The boys were much more unpredictable in their behavior in interpersonal interactions than the girls.

Cooperation was felt to be a strength for most as children except in group situations such as group projects. Yet, lack of cooperation was not really the bottom line for any of the participants as children. *Being overly cooperative* was more of an issue, but there were still so many other factors involved. Various examples follow:

*Working in groups as a child* was impossible. I would just be silent and go along with whatever. Even if I was asked for input my mind would be blank. And even though I might have good ideas, they just weren't there. It's like I would look up on the screen of my mind and it would be blank.

With this kind of blank slate and then ultimate panic, there was always a negative response of some sort from the group, thus reinforcing the fears of interacting in a group.

As a very young youth, I enjoyed working cooperatively with groups and somehow I always seemed to be the leader. I was just always very creative and had neat ideas. So people usually wanted to use my ideas to build forts and tree houses or whatever and I liked doing things that way. But once academics started coming around - I hate, I loathe group projects and cooperation projects. I never have been able to do them or like them. I can maintain task and I can maintain my interest better when working on my own.

He discussed the issue of being unable to keep up with the group, having a much better end product as an individual, and disliking the immature bickering that occurred within the groups.
Persons with learning disabilities often are criticized for being uncooperative in group projects. Wiener, Harris, and Shirer (1990) found that peers were less likely to nominate children with LD as cooperative and as leaders. The social behavior nomination scale that they utilized defined someone who was cooperative with this statement: "Here is someone who is really good to have as a part of your group, because this person is agreeable and cooperates—pitches in, shares, and gives everyone a turn." The nomination scale defined a leader with the following statement: "This person gets chosen by others as the leader. Other people like to have this person in charge." Some of the responses in this study provided evidence as to why nominations like these might not provide accurate information about students with learning disabilities. A discussion on this thought follows:

If a child is absolutely frightened of having to give input in a group, because of fear that it won’t come out correctly or it will be the wrong answer, s/he probably will not "pitch in" and "share" her/his ideas. If the child does manage to express an idea, but s/he has a reputation for being easy to persuade and his/her idea gets discounted, then the child probably will withdraw and not pitch in or share any more ideas. Then in the future, the child will just withdraw or isolate from the beginning.

This process not only affects the outcome of the nomination of cooperative, etc., but with the lack of input and all of the isolation, the other children have not had the opportunity to genuinely know the child. Then the child also will not be nominated for the most liked, etc., because no one really knows who s/he is. The child gets in such a habit of protecting himself/herself, that s/he does not even really know who s/he is anymore. If the child was a leader in settings outside of school, but his/her ideas are continually discounted in school settings, s/he probably will withdraw or act out in some way that will
get him/her removed from the situation. Then the child obviously will not get nominated as a leader. Under these circumstances, the use of such nominations for children with learning disabilities does not appear to be appropriate.

**Being called on by name in class to answer a question** was frustrating to most of the participants. It would usually cause them to get flustered and draw a complete blank. Some could handle being called on in certain subject areas. Some could volunteer answers to questions if they were sure of the answer. Most would avoid any input if they weren’t sure that they would not end up looking like a “moron” or an “idiot.” This issue affected their interactions outside of class as well. The concern of being judged as “stupid” frequently was on their minds.

The majority of the participants felt they they were **unable to gain closeness with friends** as children. Those who did have friends felt they were unable to open up and tell their true feelings. Others were close to one person who seemed to relate to their differences in some way and maintained the relationship long term. One participant stated:

> I had close relationships, but a lot of them didn’t last. I use to wonder what I did wrong and why I couldn’t keep them. I was very outgoing, very personable— they seemed to die out very quickly. I had friends in the popular crowd, but only one was really close to me. The others were just acquaintances. I was always insecure about relationships.

Various participants discussed situations in which the behaviors of persons with learning disabilities and the reactions received from others could spiral out of control. The response is followed by discussion.

My personal belief—along with differences come gifts that allow you to see things from a new perspective and focus your attention in on things you like.
While getting totally focused and obsessed on a topic, I was often not understood by others and probably neglected the basic social amenities that I should’ve been making around me.

The person was already feeling different and isolating due to rejection and then s/he isolated more while s/he was obsessed with this favorite topic of the moment. Peers saw him/her as being even stranger than they thought, so they rejected the person a bit more with a comment. The comment caused the person with learning disabilities to withdraw at the moment and then probably to isolate more in the future. The endless circle or spiral effect continued.

**What were some of the social challenges with which individuals with learning disabilities dealt, as adults?**

One of the participants discussed the frustration of trying to process the received message and then formulate a coherent response. When the response was incoherent and someone reacted negatively, then the defense mechanisms continued to be built. The defense mechanisms caused more reactions, which caused more defense mechanisms:

Social interactions is where a person with learning disabilities bites it big. They bite it big because it is a struggle, it’s a humongous struggle. Every aspect of your life is being affected by the fact that you either perceive or learn, differently about life, interactions, academics, everything. The whole gambit, a person with LD is affected by this. So you’re trying to pull in information from all these different areas and you’ve got it, but you just don’t know what to do with it. *(Is that frustrating?)* It’s frustrating as heck. You try to use it occasionally and usually you’re embarrassed by what comes out. People judge you. *(Do they judge you or are you afraid they’re going to judge you?)* I know they judge me. I judge myself and that’s fine. But I’m
always worried about how the other person judges me. If you don’t tell people you have learning disabilities you just look like an idiot. If you tell them then all of a sudden it changes their perception of you and how they treat you. What do you do to protect yourself? You put up your shield. You withdraw.

The following comment on assertion and aggression was another example of the frustrations of trying to communicate and receive information:

It goes back to if they’re willing to take the time to understand me, because when I need the time for people to understand me it takes a long time. Some people don’t have that time or that kind of patience. So when they don’t have that kind of patience, they kind of put me off and don’t take the time to listen to me. That triggers the aggressive part in me. I can always understand when someone has time to sit down and talk and understand. I get frustrated when I’m trying to explain it. Especially with people who talk a lot and when you’re trying to put your side of the uh point of view in and all they do is jump right between your speaking or whatever, the conversation. That’s very hard for me. It frustrates me more and then I start acting aggressively.

This next response provided information about attempting to link a vast number of thoughts together that are bombardng the participant at once. The transcription shows difficulty in getting out the information as well.

If I get really excited about something, I can get like that. I just bounce all over. (How have you learned to deal with that?) I try to really...I when I get excited like that, I try to really focus on what I’m talking about. Focus and keep my mind straight ahead and just like keep my sentences—it’s not really my grammar I worry about—well use to, but now I know it’s ok— just try to keep my thoughts coherent. I try to keep them linking together so people
can follow me somewhat. Otherwise I’m way out there. I’ve always got thousands of things going on in my mind.

This person also talked about balancing all the verbal and nonverbal demands required in communication. Maintaining eye contact or smiling and not looking too serious were nonverbal demands that sometimes needed to be held in awareness during an interaction. He said that the problem was that he was already having to concentrate deeply to try to keep everything ordered and coherent. If he had to remember to maintain eye contact as well, then he had to concentrate on eye contact. If he was concentrating on maintaining eye contact then he tended to lose his concentration on everything else and then he lost his total train of thought. That caused frustration which would make things worse and then their was usually a look or response from the other person and things continued to snowball.

Bryan, Sherman, and Fisher (1980) examined the nonverbal behaviors of boys with learning disabilities and found three types of activities which distinguished them from their peers without disabilities. First, the boys were found to spend less time looking at the interviewer and when they did the looks were quick and sly in appearance. Secondly, they were found to smile less. The researchers stated that this indicated a possible low motivation to appear pleasant to others. Thirdly, the boys were found to use more filled pauses, and this was believed to be an attempt to maintain the floor once they had it. The thoughts presented above regarding the attempts to concentrate on several things at once provide a different possibility. Other participants discussed how as children they were always trying to “be good” and do things “right” and in turn were always so serious. The participants were very concerned about how they appeared to others, but there always were too many issues on which to concentrate at one time.
Contributing ideas and answering questions in a class setting was a problem for the participants as adults. Some had made progress, but most were still uncomfortable with the process. Many said that this reverted to the feelings connected with being laughed at in class as a child. Usually, no one received ridicule in class as an adult, but the fear was still there. An example follows:

Speaking up in class terrifies me. Even when I know what's going on in class and I know what to say, it's scary. I'm afraid I'll sound stupid, or someone will laugh at me, put me down. I try, I'm usually shaking or sweating, but I give it a try.

Processing difficulties caused problems for many of the participants when they ventured to express information. Sometimes recall and memory issues would enhance those difficulties. Then reactions from others caused the processing to slow down more or even shut down all together.

I've been in that position where I needed to explain something and not (pause) like not being able to put it together where it made any sense when it came out. It's like I had all this stuff to say, and yet I couldn't really make it come our right—you know I can tell by people's faces....At times I'll make a list or an outline, but if it's some spur of the moment question (pause) a lot of times I have a hard time organizing it in my head. I don't always spit it out correctly.

Initiating conversation and initiating relationships were difficult for most of the participants. One participant had some interesting comments about how challenges such as poor memory could lead to difficulties in relationships, which could lead to fears of initiating future relationships:

The initiation process is difficult—all the childhood issues are still there. I just have the issue of trying to stay focused. Well, I used to always think
that—deep down I’d always think I’m a good person, I think I’m a good friend, I care, I’m genuine, I’m compassionate, I have integrity, all of that, and yet people would respond like, “Oh, I don’t think you’re being attentive enough, you don’t listen to me”—or things like that, because I would get distracted so easily or I didn’t remember things. That still happens to me now. I’ll be like, you have to understand I seriously, honestly have a horrible memory. It’s not because what you told me is not important, ‘cause I know it’s important, it’s just I really forget everything!

This was an example of how memory issues and other issues could get in the way of relationships. A few comments were made, relationships changed or ended and then the fear of another rejection would cause the person to avoid another initiation or at least perspire excessively in the process. Reactions from others continued to cause the participants to have guilt about not being the kind of person s/he thought s/he should be. It was very difficult to abstain from listening to others make judgments. As adults they were beginning to learn to choose their friends carefully and not allow unhealthy judgmental people into their lives.

At the end of scenario nine, Josh stated that he had just processed what had actually occurred in scenario eight. When I asked him if he wanted to discuss it then, he said that in the process of talking with me he had lost the thought again. He talked about how frustrating that was to be so distracted and to lose thoughts instantly. The social impact was tremendous. The process also was difficult for me, because he kept saying, “You just don’t understand.” The fact was that I understood too well and I had to really step back at times and be a researcher. I had been concerned about causing emotional trauma to my participants. I had not considered what kind of emotional trauma I might experience myself. Two of the interviews in particular were very painful for me.
I understood the anguish, because I had observed my family members and my students struggle over the years. As a child and an adolescent social interactions were very difficult for me and the memories surfaced during the interviews. Additionally, my brother often had felt that I could never understand his struggles with learning and had often spoken those same words to me, “You just don’t understand.” I may not have suffered some of the same failures in school, but I certainly suffered the social failures. Sometimes I felt angry that others could not understand what I had experienced. As a doctoral student I experienced a much greater level of challenge in both the academic and social areas of my life. I heard many more of the comments such as, “Come on, come on. This is not a difficult question.” This statement would be made while the person snapped their fingers to hurry my response. Having just processed the question, I would then be processing the answer. Those words of minor insult, spoken in the presence of my colleagues, would cause me to forget the statement that I was about to make. This would cause me to panic, which would gain me non-verbal ridicule. From all of these various experiences I did understand and occasionally after an interview I would feel consumed with emotional turmoil. However, I believe these emotions only enhanced the research process by giving me a deeper understanding.

Setting boundaries continued to be a struggle for many of the participants. Karen learned to set boundaries and to negotiate:

While spending so much time trying to be good in school and just be good, it has often been easy to have people in my life who walk on me. I have had to learn to set boundaries. Actually, I have had to learn everything socially.

Many of the participants felt that as children they tended to get run over by others. Going the other direction and running over others out of defense was rather common for most, at least for awhile until they could find a proper
balance. Many reacted to the scenario of the young man bulldozing his way into a situation with understanding and respect. They felt that at least he reached his chosen goal. Some of the inappropriate social skills have developed out of self-defense. One example follows:

As a little child nobody really responded to me and I had no attention. As soon as I was able to come out here, I would make people understand me and listen to me and I did what that boy has done, just forced my way in.

In certain situations, some participants continued to feel that it often was easier to cooperate and not fight a specific situation. Some would cooperate, but with passive-aggression and internal frustration. Then they would often be angry with themselves for just going along with the individual's or group's ideas. For some it was the issue of not wanting to hurt anyone and make others feel the kind of pain they felt. For other participants it was the issue of not wanting to be rejected or to have someone react negatively. It was believed that having someone react to their opinion was in a sense having something rejected. A few had learned to negotiate and others felt that even negotiation took a lot of energy. There were so many things that had to be dealt with on a daily basis just to keep up with the crowd, they found that some battles had to be left unfought. This in turn would cause reactions from others around them. Some had learned to accept those reactions as problems of the other person, but some continued to react at every turn. Often, it was an internalized reaction, but a reaction none the less.

The following is an example of someone who began to struggle in school and took an easy road without even being aware there was a problem. Later, even this process had an effect on the social interactions.

My difficulty in high school—I didn't know that I had learning disabilities, I was just taking classes that were easier and I got away with it. But I noticed
it as being an obstacle when I was getting older, because people would be talking about things and I'd be like oh yeah I have no idea what you're talking about and I'd just kinda...and then I'd just start to feel insecure and not very confident and withdraw from conversations.

Rhonda stated that until recently she had not had many jobs, because she was afraid of being unable to understand and maintain the pace in jobs such as clerical work. She was still insecure about asking for clarification in job settings. She had housekeeping jobs and hands-on jobs. Rhonda is Native American and her English had been limited at one time, however, she felt that at this point her lack of understanding was due to her language processing difficulties.

Having to interact in formal settings was frustrating for about half of the participants. Asking questions was difficult. Attempting to retain the information they needed while processing the information provided, often was difficult. Some felt they did not know the rules for formal situations and some felt like they were held at someone else's mercy in formal settings. Others were comfortable with formal settings, unless the person was blocking or being negative in some way. Most of the participants discussed accusations of being overly sensitive as well as their own frustrations over feeling exceedingly sensitive. It also appeared that perhaps they had been set up to be on the defensive. I couldn't help but wondering if society has created monsters out of kind, caring individuals by setting them up to always have their claws ready for defensive actions.

In what ways did the target individuals cope with these challenges?

Avoidance and isolation were the negative coping skills that the participants all had in common. Even those who had good interpersonal skills as a whole and those who had good skills in certain areas often avoided
specific situations. Four of the participants who attended special programs based every interaction on how the person might react to finding out that s/he was a “special ed” child. An example:

I became very quiet, very withdrawn, I didn’t trust a lot of people. Because if they really saw what I knew I really was they would become uncomfortable, because I couldn’t actually do the things I needed to do. *(Did that happen or did you just assume it would?)* Some people became uncomfortable so I just assumed everyone would. *(So you just got to a point where you protected yourself from everyone?)* Yep. Those are hard habits to break.

*Dating people and having friends who attended different schools* were common behaviors among the participants. It wasn’t exactly isolation, but they isolated from a specific group in order to avoid having people discover too much about them. It allowed for a more even playing field. *Erecting walls of protection* was another type of isolation and avoidance:

I don’t open my mouth unless I have a pretty good idea what I’m going to say. It’s all prepared. I hide myself real well. If I know I have to or want to get to know someone I will make the initial contact. People find me to be very hard to approach. *(Would you like to take the wall down?)* I would like to, but I probably never will. It’s kept me safe. I would like to lessen the thickness of the wall. When people get to know me they say, You appeared stuck up, extremely self-assured, really unapproachable.

“A lot of times I was the teacher’s pet and I think it was simply because I got more individual attention that way. I got more of what I needed having stuff explained.” This connection with someone also gave her some interaction and made her feel better about her situation. She still isolated herself from her peers, except for one close friend.

Certain formal situations were issues for most. *Preparing for the situation*
in some way by having an outline, having a list of questions, rehearsing, doing “homework” and knowing what kind of paperwork will be needed and what the expectations will be, were all found to be useful strategies.

Assuming too many responsibilities, becoming overloaded and overwhelmed will shut down the processing for most of the participants. “Oh man, you can’t do anything. It’s like I muddle around with a lot of things but don’t accomplish much.” They have had to learn to limit the number of activities in which they engage and set boundaries with people. “I just can’t do it and I refuse to overload myself now. I used to overload myself big time.”

Most felt that in group projects as children they often would be overly cooperative and basically succumb to the ideas of the group. Most continued to dislike group projects as adults, but some had learned to be more assertive or just basically forced themselves to speak up and include their input. A couple would behave in passive aggressive behaviors by withdrawing and “trying to make it clear that they didn’t like it.” Brenda stated specifically that she had learned to negotiate. If the other person(s) is unwilling to be flexible and negotiate she has learned to say, “Sorry, I can’t do it.” She no longer felt guilty about it and no longer worried about being rejected. At one time she just stayed quiet and avoided as many situations as possible. Others felt that at times it was easier to just cooperate or “give in.” Or they continued to avoid group settings. Forgetting the pain and ridicule of childhood continued to affect how many reacted as adults. They knew things were different and that they had more control, but those memories were difficult to forget.

Being aware of how they do things and where they were at that moment was a strategy they had all learned to utilize:

When I get excited like that, I try to really focus on what I’m talking about. Focus and keep my mind straight ahead and just like keep my
sentences—it’s not really my grammar I worry about—well used to, but now I know it’s ok—just try to keep my thoughts coherent. I try to keep them linking together so people can follow me somewhat. Otherwise I’m way out there. I’ve always got thousands of things going on in my mind.

**What circumstances helped the individuals to alleviate their challenges with interpersonal skills?**

For each participant, whether identified with learning disabilities as a child or not, *getting to a place where each really understood himself/herself* had a profound effect on their overall social competence. Understanding that they were smart, but just learned differently and did things more slowly improved their self-esteem and self-confidence. An improved self-concept helped them to make more effort in interactions versus isolating. All of the participants said that *going to college* and discovering that they were as smart as everyone else made a tremendous difference in their outlook on life. This changed outlook encouraged them to find ways to contend with their challenges in interpersonal interactions other than lashing out in anger or withdrawing and isolating. Most said that finding out that everyone was different helped them to be less judgmental of themselves and of others. They found out that everyone was different, not just that they were different. We are all probably more different than we are alike, yet this was not a message that the participants received as children. It’s a message that they had to pay a high price to receive as an adult. Why? We in America have fought wars to allow us to have individuality, and yet we systematically penalize our children and our adults because they are different.

Several participants mentioned that when their confidence and self-esteem were high and when the pressure was not overwhelming, then social
interactions were enhanced. **Finding areas of strength** (dancing, sports, or art) which allowed them a sense of worth and success gave them a setting that made social interactions easier. This provided a basis for building their self-confidence in other areas. School was a frustrating environment for all the participants to some degree. They all mentioned the importance of having outside interests and supportive environments. Most felt that these other environments and positive people within those settings were the saving grace to their social competence. Most chose activities which allowed them individual progress versus team progress, however.

**Having people believe in them** helped them to believe in themselves and that affected how they interacted socially. "If I'm in a situation or setting where people accept me as I am, validate me, respect me, then I interact well." Being provided with mutual respect and unconditional acceptance validated them and allowed them to believe in themselves. Having a difficult time interacting with people was frustrating enough without having everyone in their lives constantly belittling them. **Getting older and having more control over their lives** and with whom they associated made social interactions easier. Being able to find jobs that allowed more control over the method of completing tasks or that matched their learning styles was beneficial. Finding people who were not judgmental made interactions less complicated. Learning to **search for environments** such as work, school, etc. **where people were nonjudgmental** and accepting of their approach to doing things made life less frustrating and, therefore, interactions were less frustrating and easier. As adults the participants have learned to choose their situations to a great degree as to whether they participate or not. They have become very astute in determining the situations where they could interact effectively. Children are not allowed to choose their situations and settings as often as adults. Is it no wonder that they become so serious or so
angry about trying to “fit in” to this environment that doesn’t really want them?

Learning strategies and coming to believe that the use of strategies did not mean they were cheating also helped to alleviate social challenges. Some were made to feel that academic strategies were essentially cheating. Therefore, strategies that helped them with interpersonal interactions also were a type of cheating. For some it helped to discover that it was acceptable to make a list of questions or have the information written down on a piece of paper before going into a formal interaction. Charlie said that she had been aware of some strategies but for a long time she would not utilize them because she believed they were cheating. Utilizing academic strategies was helpful as well. Alleviating some of the academic frustrations provided the confidence necessary to initiate interactions. As adults when they attend school, school often has to be the main focus of their lives in order for them to survive. Therefore, if the academic frustrations are overwhelming and they are spending all their energy trying to cover up and protect themselves from ridicule, then that proceeds to affect nearly every interaction.

Physical performance of varying types, including running, football, and dance, allowed an outlet for channeling frustrations for the majority of the participants. The physical activities provided strength areas for building self-confidence and self-esteem, and the events involving those activities provided environments which were safe for personal interactions. Martial arts helped David and Kyle to learn manage their frustrations and anger. As children they both became very aggressive and somewhat abusive merely from the frustrations caused by being unable to do things “right”. They felt that martial arts taught them respect for themselves and others. It taught them to be assertive, but not aggressive, and to have self-control. Martial arts also increased their confidence in themselves and gave them an area to channel all
of their energies.

Do the individuals with learning disabilities perceive the educational system as a factor in their interpersonal performance?

Brenda felt that the school system compounded the social issues because everything was based upon competition. Being identified with learning disabilities and giftedness and then placed in the teacher's lounge to play ping pong, reinforced all of the frustrations and caused her to totally withdraw from the educational setting. The walls of defense were so high and so thick by adulthood that she felt they would never come down. Though she felt that the support was better at advanced levels of education, she felt that it also was like a pat on the head and somewhat condescending. Brenda said in college she continued to avoid asking questions of many professors and students even after class. If the pace in class was too quick and she felt lost, she would prefer to go spend a few hours researching the topic versus having to let people know that she was lost. Most of her reluctance stemmed from the past, but there was still that same attitude and feeling coming from people in the adult setting.

David's frustrations of being misplaced and not provided with appropriate support had an effect on his confidence and his attitude. Being told by a counselor that he should drop out and become a garbage collector also affected his self-esteem. The low self-concept, distrust, and anger caused him to withdraw and hide in class, then act out aggressively outside of class. Many of his frustrations in school as an adult originated from fears that were instilled as a child. As an adult his avoidance of drawing attention to himself persisted, because of those negative feelings of having his papers read as the bad example. Erasing the past was an unquestionable challenge.
Question eight of the final interview (follow-up questions) requested the participants to address a person without learning disabilities as to what they would like the person to hear about persons with learning disabilities and social competence. In Patrick's response he spoke to an educator:

Get to know the person with LD off of school grounds and get on their turf. Find out how they live their lives and what they enjoy doing. It frequently amazes me when people assume that everyone should learn the same things, in the same way, at the same time. When it comes to academics people often lose their compassion. After all, if academic skills came naturally and easily they wouldn't be called skills.

This is such a true statement and it should also apply to social skills as well. From numerous statements by the participants during the interviews, it is reasonable to conclude that they felt that often people are more compassionate when it comes to academics than when it comes to social interactions. People assume that social behaviors are very simple and basically innate, and that is where so much of the judgment is increased and compounded. Social behaviors also are skills and frequently need to be systematically taught. Persons with learning disabilities often have to focus on concealing more and more behaviors. As educators, we often wonder why they withdraw and isolate.

We cannot separate the academics from social interactions. People are learning to interact in the educational setting and the confidence level in that setting appears to affect the ability to interact with people in any setting. Charlie discussed how difficult it was to function in formal settings when someone was giving her a random no or being difficult in some way. "It's a closed door. You can't get any further. I guess I like to be able to go different avenues, channel different directions, network." She felt that her dislike of being told, "No, you can't do this," stemmed from her educational background.
as a child. She had educators telling her she wouldn't amount to anything and that she would never read. Those voices continued to affect her interactions, both in educational settings and non-educational settings as an adult.

**Do the individuals with learning disabilities perceive people or situations in general as a factor in their interpersonal performance?**

Supportive people in their lives, especially adults, had a positive impact on the social performance of most of the participants at some point in their lives. Parents who believed that they were smart and continually encouraged them were of major importance. This issue was discussed both by those who received this support and by those who did not. Adult family friends, friends in the neighborhood, friends from church, etc. provided them with support and encouragement and allowed them to develop socially.

Brenda felt that society in general compounded the social issues because of the creation of a picture in which everyone must fit into this round hole. Karen stated, "Slower always seemed to be equated with dumber. Everyone seems to have this view of what normal should be; the problem is that not very many people seem to match it." An additional statement made by a participant about the effects of society in general was, "What we need to do is help the LD child deal with society, because society is not going to change."

Trust was an issue with most of the participants. They appeared to be kind and sensitive but had experienced an abundance of criticism and judgment during interpersonal interactions of every kind. As a result, this had caused them to be very cautious, afraid to disclose themselves with people. The end result was that many people lost out on seeing the wonderful people inside. An example statement:

I am unable to have close friends, because I'm afraid to open up and be
vulnerable. Today I’ve been able to find people to open up with on an academic level, but not socially. Being vulnerable is frightening. I’ve tried to open up and people come back and burn me with it.

Too many times ridiculed and too many times burned is bound to cause people to protect themselves in numerous ways. Again, we can teach the persons with learning disabilities strategies for some things, but they will always do some things differently or more slowly. Another frustration for all the participants was in trying to tell others about their difficulties and their frustrations. Often they received the responses of, “Oh, everybody does that.” or “Everyone deals with that.” The response of the participants was, “I realize that everyone has certain issues, but they don’t deal with them constantly on a daily basis and I do.” They need to be taught that learning differently and doing things differently is alright. We need to teach the world around them to be a bit more accepting of those ideas as well. Society in general and educators specifically need to know that they have tried to make this a one way street: “They have the problem, let’s fix them.” “They” know that there are things with which they could use help, but “they” also know that some things are simply not broken and they would like those things to be left alone. Some of the inappropriate behaviors will take care of themselves, when “society” learns to step back and be more accepting.

What successful interpersonal outcomes have some individuals with learning disabilities experienced? To what do they contribute those successes?

As adults, assuming responsibility was a strength for eight of ten participants, an area where they were easily able to compensate for other areas of weakness. Two males within that eight said that they had always been
responsible in certain situations. They had felt irresponsible as children when it came to school. They felt that school was a punishment and/or boring and they just totally withdrew from taking responsibility for homework and other activities. The two participants who felt they had always been weak in responsibility also named areas in their lives where they were responsible. The areas in which they felt they were irresponsible had much to do with the time restraints. They took a lot longer to accomplish some tasks, so meeting deadlines was difficult. They also had a difficult time working full time and going to school full time. People had made them feel irresponsible for these behaviors, when in actuality the other participants had to make the same kind of adjustments. The other participants had simply learned to not see it as being irresponsible, but as a modification in the way they had to do things.

Self-control was a strength for seven of the ten as adults. All five girls and one boy had strong self-control as children. In fact, some felt they may have been overly controlled. They felt too serious and too controlled as children. The struggle to be good and do things right made it difficult to relax and just be children. However, self-control also kept them out of trouble and at least gave them the opportunity to connect with one or more key adults.

Half of the participants had strong verbal skills and learned to communicate well in certain settings. Certain cues were difficult to discern and specific rules were difficult to generalize, but otherwise they were able to compensate for their difficulties. Being intuitive and and sensitive to the needs of others was considered a strength by all. This allowed them to be good listeners and very compassionate as adults. This heightened sense of awareness might be one of the reasons that the participants were so sensitive to negative reactions in others. They all had a desire to be less sensitive to certain reactions. This is why it is important for educators to encourage people
to understand learning differences and to be less critical of others when they learn differently. Even if a person is not learning disabled and does not have a high IQ, being slower and lower functioning should not warrant a constant judgment. Does anyone really deserve to be labeled stupid or a dummy, especially by educators?

Patrick felt that he had always had **good social skills** on the most part. He had good verbal skills and that allowed him to cover up his written language difficulties. He was provided with support from an early age, both at school and at home. He stated, "I'm a visual learner. I'm able to observe and generalize to myself." It was difficult to discern if his skills were just strengths or if the support given was the actual reason. He did believe that that unconditional support of his parents and their adult friends had a much to do with his self-concept. However, his interactions were still based on hiding the fact that he "special ed." He felt that he lacked assertiveness and that assertive training for children with learning disabilities would probably be a good idea. Patrick felt he had a difficult time generalizing what the main rule was for regular classes. He believed that rule was to follow the schedule of the regular class teacher no matter what. In special education he had been taught to do his best despite how long it took him. He discovered through failure that this procedure did not work in regular education. He felt that this was information he should have been provided.

**To what do they contribute those successes?**

_Supportive parents_ and _other supportive adults_ were very important for several. "It was nice to be able to talk to people who would talk to you as a peer, as a friend as opposed to a student or child." It is difficult to know if the constant interactions with adults aided the verbal skills or if the verbal skills
were just a strength, but the verbal skills helped to mask the disability until writing was required.

Patrick had good observation skills and good generalization skills. He had an older brother who had poor social behaviors and he observed his brother a great deal. He decided at an early age that he did not want to suffer the same consequences.

Epilogue

Situations where behaviors and reactions spiral out of control were described repeatedly in this study. An interaction between one of the participants and myself occurred during the final interview and is an excellent example of many of the issues presented in this study. When participant Z entered the setting for the interview, it was made clear that s/he was agitated and feeling out of sorts. Though I did not discuss my frustrations, I had been feeling a heightened level of stress over the need to collect the last of my data. Additionally, I had been teaching a class at the university and had received feedback which suggested that my own “verbal challenges” as well as “organizational issues” were limiting my effectiveness. I had been doubting my abilities and my choices of study. That morning I had another interview prior to the interview with Z. In my attempts to gather all the materials needed for both interviews, I inadvertently forgot the tapes for Z. When Z and I were about to begin the interview, I discovered this fact. In my mind I suddenly began replaying the comments that I had recently read about my disorganization, etc. I apologized to Z and offered to reschedule. I also had a portion of tape remaining from the previous interview and offered to try to utilize that if Z did not want to reschedule. Z wanted to attempt to finish the interview. I was anxious to complete the interview as well but also was feeling very inadequate, very overwhelmed, and very stressed. On the outside I was behaving calmly and
exploring various solutions, but on the inside I was torturing myself.

Before the interview began, I had to make some adjustments to the tape. This frustrated Z, which was immediately brought to my attention, which caused my head to reel even more. As the interview progressed, I became worried that we were going to run out of tape and have to reschedule. This made me worry that Z would then be more upset and I did not want to be responsible for that. I could not stop focusing on the tape, which threw my train of thought where the interview was concerned. I in turn was trying desperately to not have my own processing shut down, but I was also trying to be professional and to remember Z’s issues and not walk on his/her comments or thoughts. Then Z got angry and pointed out that I was being very distracting and doing everything that everyone else always did. On the outside I was still calm and I handled the situation well for the most part. On the inside I was dying. I felt inadequate, yet I also felt angry and hurt. I felt some of the same frustrations that Z talked about. I felt like s/he was not being very understanding of my issues. Additionally, I was attempting to maintain the wisdom and professionalism I had gained over the years. In the end, Z berated me again for providing undue assistance and for completing his/her sentences excessively “just like everyone else.”

I avoided reviewing the tape immediately, because my own self-criticism weakened my ability to tolerate hearing the interaction again too hastily. When I listened to the tape, I realized that my intentions were not to aid Z. I in fact was so distraught and so overloaded that I was trying desperately to ensure that I clarified everything because my processing had basically ceased to function. I was attempting to be aware of Z’s issues, yet truthfully, my own concerns were foremost in my mind. My behavior what not a result of a desire to harm Z or of a of lack understanding. It merely was a result of my being stressed, overloaded, overwhelmed, forgetting something, and then having all of my inadequacies
brought to my attention. Z stated that I was doing just what everyone else did and all I could think was, "Yes, and you are doing exactly the same thing you have been discussing. You are pointing out all of my mistakes, when I know what they are." Yet, at the time I really was unaware of all the errors I was making. I was struggling to maintain my dignity, as was the participant.

Implications

A small number of participants as well as other concerns discussed in the limitations make it difficult to create generalizations from this study. However, the perceptions presented reveal information that warrants further investigation. All the participants found it necessary to have total concentration without any distractions when focusing on certain tasks. Secondly, they all felt frustration when required to participate in group assignments both as children and as adults. This was due to difficulty in trying to meet the demands of the group as well as the difficulty in concentrating amidst a lot of chatter. If completion of specific tasks requires solitary concentration for the majority of persons with learning disabilities, this could greatly affect the emphasis being placed on cooperative learning and inclusion in the schools today.

Female students with learning disabilities have been found to be more "at risk" for social difficulties and low peer acceptance than males (Vaughn, Lancelotta, & Minnis, 1988). This study indicated that the females tended to internalize their frustrations more and have more problems with depression and anxiety disorders both as children and as adults. They chose withdrawal and isolation as defense mechanisms more frequently than the males. As children, the girls wanted to be good and wanted to make people happy. When they were unable to do this regardless of their effort, they inwardly blamed and punished themselves. The boys more often than not acted outwardly in anger. These differences of behavior for the two genders are not unlike those for the
non-identified population. Boys have always tended to be more active and aggressive, seemingly because these behaviors have always been more acceptable for boys than for girls. The boys' strong behaviors have usually allowed learning concerns to surface more readily, while girls have always been more at risk for having their problems overlooked. Perhaps this is due to the girls spending much more time overcompensating and trying to cover-up their difficulties because of wanting to be "good."

While continuing the discussion on gender, an additional focus needs to be placed on control issues. None of the participants liked being controlled by others, yet as children most felt they just succumbed to the whims of others especially in group learning situations. As adults they tended to remember very vividly that their ideas had often been discounted when they were children. As adults, if people attempted to discount their opinions or to control the situation, all of the participants tended to become somewhat resentful. Some had learned to soften their frustrations and to assert their ideas and/or negotiate a compromise. Others sat and seethed quietly until they lost emotional control. The gentlemen tended to lose outward emotional control and exhibit explosive behaviors and the women tended to lose inward emotional control and exhibit implosive behaviors such as depression and anxiety.

The females also tended to compensate for their learning and social challenges by attempting to maintain control of each situation in their lives. They worked diligently to have control by being organized, being prompt, and being in control of their outward anger. When they felt unable to maintain control, they again turned their frustrations inward which tended to be detrimental to themselves. During this time of being emotionally distraught any attempts to appear in control were sabotaged, thus affecting their social interactions as well. They would withdraw more because of embarrassment.
In addition to the above concerns, the findings from this study shed some light onto the possibilities of why some of the intervention approaches in the area of social competence have not been as successful as researchers and educators would prefer. The contextualist model views social skills challenges to be a function of both the individual and the system (Vaughn, McIntosh, & Rowe 1991; Vaughn & Hogan, 1994). This study reinforces this concept. There are strategies and perhaps even skills that could be taught to children with learning disabilities that could help to alleviate some of their challenges and frustrations. However, it is imperative that others change their negative attitudes or the spiraling effect of behaviors will never cease. If we have educators who continue to tell our children that they are stupid, that they will never learn to read, that they will never amount to much, or that they should drop out of school and become garbage collectors, extensive social skills training will never be very effective. When teachers take a student's paper and read it to the class as an example of inappropriate writing, leave that paper on the top of the stack, and then hand the paper to the student who wrote it, they are damaging the self-concept of that student. What is the message being sent to the other students?

Every participant loved learning as an adult; their whole world was wrapped around learning new things about themselves and about the world in which they lived. College had been a new experience for all of them. A great number of the obstacles had been taken away. If they had a negative, judgmental professor, they could drop the class. If they sat beside a classmate who was unwilling to let them look over at the classmates notes occasionally to catch something missed, then they could simply find someone who was willing. All of these choices provided a learning environment in which they could succeed. Perhaps there are ways to provide more choices and more controls in the learning environment for children that would allow them the same
opportunities for success.

Children with learning disabilities were found to be shy, indifferent, or uninvolved in a situation in a study conducted by Bryan, Sherman, and Fisher (1980). The researchers stated that these behaviors evoked negative appraisals. Hoyle and Serafica (1984) found that teachers viewed students with learning disabilities to be shy, socially withdrawn, lacking in confidence, anxious, and fearful. The results from this study indicate that being shy, indifferent (uninvolved, withdrawn), are behaviors that might very easily be mechanisms created by the child in defense of previous negative reactions. The negative reactions may have come after the child attempted to communicate an idea or to tackle a task. As the behaviors, reactions to those behaviors, and defense mechanisms continue to spiral, then the child with learning disabilities becomes anxious, fearful, and less confident. S/he continues the circle of withdrawal and isolation. Does the educational setting reinforce children with learning differences to be withdrawn and isolated? If so, how can this be remediated?

**Limitations of the Study**

The following limitations are acknowledged:

1. The sample size was small due to the large amount of data collected from each participant.

2. All of the participants in this study had college degrees or were pursuing one during the data collection.

3. Most of the participants lived in the Albuquerque, New Mexico area.

4. The majority of the participants had an IQ of 130 or more.

5. Five of ten participants had one or more degrees in the field of education.

The intent of the researcher was to select a broad sampling of persons
having learning disabilities. The final group of participants, however, was not representative of the average target population. The intellectual and educational levels were high and could have influenced the perceptions of the participants and enhanced their abilities to verbalize those perceptions. The fact that half of the participants were education majors could have impacted the perceptions as well. Combining these issues with the small number and the limited location prevents the possibility of making any generalizations from this study. Despite their strengths, the participants endured much pain due to challenges with interpersonal skills. Their stories provide an excellent view of the struggles that the more average population might face. Additionally, this study builds a strong foundation for further research in this area.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

1. The sample in this study was small. More research with similar studies would be beneficial to discover if other adults with learning disabilities have similar perceptions.

2. The majority of participants in this study had IQs in the superior range. Research with more participants in the average range would provide a better range of perceptions.

3. All the participants in this study had a college degree or were pursuing one at the time of the study. Similar research with persons who do not have any higher education also would increase the range of perceptions.

4. This exploratory study was rather broad; the following questions are posed for further research:

   In what ways did the target individuals positively cope with social
challenges?

What successful interpersonal outcomes have some individuals with learning disabilities experienced? To what do they contribute those successes?

Is there a direct relationship between persons with learning disabilities being able to intuitively sense negative reactions and their being labeled anxious by others?

Would changing the educational environment of many children with learning disabilities alleviate their social challenges without social skills training?

Can children be provided with more controls in their educational choices and would this help alleviate some of the social competence challenges experienced by many persons with learning disabilities?

Should children who do not have learning disabilities receive training to increase their understanding of learning differences in order to aid in the social competence training of persons with learning disabilities?

How can we provide assistance with social competence challenges for persons with learning disabilities without overemphasizing their weaknesses? (What is the appropriate degree of information that should be brought to their attention?)
APPENDIX
CONSENT FORM
CONSENT FORM

My name is Dana Hathcock and I am a UNM student pursuing a PhD. I am conducting this study for my dissertation project. You are invited to participate in a qualitative study of the perspectives of persons with learning disabilities on issues pertaining to interpersonal skills.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to view video clips of social interactions and then discuss your intellectual and emotional reactions to the clip. Additional questions will stem from your reactions. For example, Can you describe your social interactions in group settings as a child and as an adult? Can you describe your social interactions with persons of the opposite sex as an adolescent and as an adult? You will be asked questions based on four characteristics of social interaction. Finally, an interview will be conducted with questions regarding the data collected from all of the participants. This process will be conducted in two or more sessions depending on your preference. Each session could be as short as 30 min. or as long as one hour and ten minutes. You will also have the opportunity to include any information that you feel is important to the study. Information obtained from this data may help in determining more effective ways for schools to serve students with learning disabilities who experience challenges with interpersonal skills and/or friendships.

I cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study other than a $20 stipend. The risks of participating are minimal, although some of the information gathered will be personal. If responding to the questions or watching the video clips should cause serious discomfort to you, you are encouraged to discuss your concerns with a counselor.

Any information obtained through this study and possibly identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. I will audio tape our interviews with your permission. You will not be identified by name in transcripts, and tapes will be taped over or erased once a transcript is made so there will be no record of your voice.

If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty to you.

If you have any questions, please call me at 246-9526. For additional questions, you may call Ginger Blalock, Director of Educational Specialties, at 277-5119 or Richard van Dongen, Associate Dean of the College of Education at 277-3638.

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

__________________________  __________________________
Date                                    Signature of Participant

__________________________  __________________________
Date                                    Signature of Researcher
References


Vaughn, S., McIntosh, R. & Spencer-Rowe, J. (1991). Peer rejection is a


 What strengths are we likely to see in the dyslexic? (1997, September). *The Southwest Branch of The International Dyslexia Association, 2*(3), 5.


