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# The Narrated Academic Experiences of Three Multilingual, College-Aged Students Diagnosed With Specific Learning Disabilities

Hend M. Ghouma

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THE NARRATED ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF  
THREE MULTILINGUAL, COLLEGE-AGED STUDENTS  
DIAGNOSED WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2019

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This dissertation documented and analyzed the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities. The purpose of this dissertation is to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of the participants' experiences and to draw on the pedagogical implications to better advance the educational field in general, and the field of Composition and Applied Linguistics in specific. This dissertation used narrative research as a methodology and employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection tool.

The research question of the study explored the nature of the academic experiences of the three participants and how the pedagogical implications would inform the educational field. Results of the study were presented in the form of the narrated educational stories of the three participants. The educational stories were further implemented to generate the shared thematic findings in the three stories. Results of these thematic findings generated the shared themes: (1) the positive and negative effects of living with a learning disability (LD) diagnosis on the participants' learning and social lives; (2) the significance of support elements in the participants' lives as success factors; (3) the role of the educational institutions in both empowering and hindering the participants' education; and (4) the influence of living with an LD diagnosis on the participants' educational life choices.

Finally, the academic stories of the three participants, along with the generated thematic findings, furthered the ideas of the pedagogical implications. This advancement could potentially

better inform the Composition and Applied Linguistics field and the general educational field about these pressing topics. These pedagogical findings stressed the significance of minimizing the difference created in schools due to not equally including students with LDs in the educational process. In addition, this dissertation's findings emphasized the need to include narrative work that looks into the experiences of multilingual students with LDs in the teachers' training programs. Finally, the pedagogical implications emphasize the need to move towards a universal design in the classroom to help alleviate the needs of students with LDs and to help minimize the stigma attached to LDs and accommodations needed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY

I grew up in the 1990s, in Libya, a country where English was devalued in the educational institutes due to political disputes between the government in Libya and the governments in United States and United Kingdom (Ghouma, 2015). Growing up, despite that both of my parents spoke English and Arabic, it was decided early in my life that I should only speak and be spoken to in Arabic to prevent any confusion or speech delays that, assumingly, a second language might cause. When I was in high school, with the help of my mother, I started studying English in order to pursue my dream of a college degree in Applied Linguistics.

Who we are, where we came from, our philosophies in life, and our abilities or inabilities guide our paths in life. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that one of the first things that narrative inquirers do is situate themselves “in the midst. Writing stories of one’s own experience is one way to do this” (p. 98). At this juncture, I think it is significant to share my story as a mother in academia who has a child with disabilities and how taking care of my daughter led me to my dissertation topic.

As a mother of a child with multiple disabilities, I have struggled through academia to balance my daughter’s constant needs for my care. I strived to meet the graduate school need of rigorous work and meeting deadlines. Although my struggles during graduate school might be similar to all graduate students, my experience might be different in the sense that I felt my daughter’s disability was partly mine. Caring for a disabled child takes a lot of stamina. The nature of my daughter’s disability, combined with her medical and educational needs, takes a large amount of my time and energy. My daughter’s disability has changed the way I think, function, and live my life.

I struggled to balance my responsibility towards my daughter's needs with the extensive required readings and my aspiration to a certain level of performance often expected in the academic community. As a graduate student, I had to complete all required assignments or turn in work early in case of any medical emergency with my child. I have always perceived my time to be restricted due to my daughter's medical and learning needs. Spending hours every month in therapy or the time spent in taking care of her physical and social needs extended her disabilities to affect my family as a whole. In a sense, I have adopted the disability studies lens in perceiving my daughter's disability as an experience we both are living. I do believe that such a mindset has helped me while listening to my participants' stories.

When I had my daughter ten years ago, I changed from caring for myself to caring for my daughter. The first year of motherhood was not easy. At that point, I was still not aware of my daughter's disability. Her diagnosis took me years to acknowledge, in terms of accepting the way she is, but nevertheless, I have never given up on what she can achieve.

Taking care of my daughter's medical needs over the years has changed me in that I am living the life of a disabled person to the fullest, rather than waiting for this experience to end. Being a mother of child with disabilities became part of my life, engraved in my thoughts and actions. Often, my daughter's impairments limited my ability to function "normally." For instance, beyond dressing for the weather, I must always consider her inability to stay outdoors when the temperature is too high. Moreover, her need for an accessible ramp could determine whether we can go to certain places or not.

Taking care of a disabled body goes beyond the person affected. It further affects the caregiver. I had to align my life to my daughter's physical and intellectual needs, including the need to learn and maintain skills. I could not separate myself from my daughter's disability; her

body became an extension of mine. I often had to schedule her doctor appointments, procedures, or even a surgery in times when I did not have to turn in any assignments. As I was working on my dissertation, I could not help but to think about my daughter—the struggles she has to endure throughout her day, and, among them, the struggles she has to endure as a non-verbal child. In addition, my daughter is unable to join other children in play due to her physical and intellectual challenges. Nevertheless, it baffles me how content and happy she is on a daily basis. Sometimes I think to myself that this is the way she was born. She did not learn to speak and then lose it or lose her physical ability to run and play with her peers. Maybe she does not feel that she is different or disabled after all. My daughter’s disability is part of who she is and of what she can do. It is truly “an experience” she is living.

Looking back, I have always been fascinated with disabilities and disability related issues. The first experience I remember is when I visited an institute for the “mentally disabled” during a field trip in high school in Libya. I started reading all the books I could find in my mother’s library related to disabilities and disability related issues. Ironically, one of the first books I read was an early edition of Janet W. Lerner and Beverley Johns’ *Learning Disabilities and Related Mild Disabilities*. Being a mother of a child with disabilities further ignited my passion for disability and disability related issues. As a researcher, my interest in the field of disability began when I enrolled in the Composition and Applied Linguistics Ph.D. program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. When I began working on a research project related to disability services, I came across articles on the topic of multilingual individuals with learning disabilities (LDs). At that time, my interest in the topic of multilingual learners with LDs evolved to become my dissertation topic—a narrative research study that communicates the educational experiences of three multilingual college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs.



The aim of my dissertation is collecting and analyzing the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs that affect their reading and writing skills. While looking at the literature on students with disabilities, I have realized there is a relatively small body of narrative research on this population of learners. I have chosen to adopt narrative research as my methodology because narrative research is about enlightening and enriching one's understanding and about providing an interpretation of an individual's story. I adopted the disabilities studies tenets' stance, which is identified by the American Education Research Association. In adopting such tenets I am:

- 1) Placing people with disabilities central to theories of disability;
- 2) Privileging knowledge derived from the lived experience of people with disabilities;
- 3) Working with people with disabilities as informed participants or co-researchers;
- 4) Valuing disability as a natural part of human diversity, rather than a dysfunction; and
- 5) Supporting disabled students in the development of a positive disability identity (Conner, 2012, p. 1010).

Disability studies' core tenets align with the use of narrative research in examining the educational experiences of multilingual college-aged students with LDs. This study focuses on multilingual college-aged students with LDs as valued members of the community who have the utmost knowledge of their lived realities. The purpose of studying the academic experiences through adopting narrative research as a methodology is to understand those experiences as a natural part of human difference, rather than as deviant from the norm.

My perspectives in terms of adopting the disability studies framework and my positionality as a researcher originated from years of developing my identity as an academic multilingual mother of a child with disabilities. As a researcher, I position myself in the

disability studies framework. Therefore, I am conducting this study as a “passionate” researcher in disability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that with any given paradigm inquiry, three questions must be answered. First is the ontological question: “What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109) Second is the epistemological question: “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower, and what can be known?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109) Last is the methodological question: “How can the inquirer ... go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109). From an ontological worldview, I argue that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon. When individuals with disabilities navigate the world, they encounter obstacles that hinder or limit their ability to function to the best of their potential capacity (Linton, 2008). In addition, I believe that individuals have different ways of learning and, thus, cannot all adopt the norms that were created for certain minds and bodies (Dunn, 1995).

From an epistemological point, conscious that I have not been diagnosed with any LDs, I consider myself an outsider to the phenomenon of LDs. However, as a multilingual person, and as a mother with a child who is diagnosed with multiple disabilities, I consider myself an insider to the fields of disability and multilingualism.

Many researchers have dwelled on the insider versus outsider roles in conducting a research study (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Cummins, 2000). On one hand, researchers argued that the “in-sights” of the insider cannot be “duplicated by those who gaze...from the outside” (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Cummins, 2000, p. 1). In contrast, the role of an outsider to the phenomenon can also be accredited to the ability to perceive certain aspects that often are not

recognized by those who are living them (Cummins, 2000). Hence, the voice and the perspective of both the insiders and the outsiders to this study complement each other. Finally, from a methodological perspective, through adopting narrative research to collect and analyze the participants' educational stories, I am implementing what Linde (2001) emphasized as the role of narrative—"a central mechanism by which social knowledge is conveyed" (p. 160).

### **Overview of Chapter One**

*Humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narratives is the study of the ways humans experience the world...education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories.*

—Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin, "Stories of experience and narrative inquiry educational research."

There is a dearth of narrative research on stories of persons with LDs in the educational field (Polo, 2010; Rodis, Garrod & Boscardin, 2001). Often, when people with LDs are included in research, it is in order to diagnose or provide accommodations and services "with little input" from those who are affected (Polo, 2010, p. 16; Price, 2001). In addition, until recently, "disability" in research is often portrayed using the medical model of disability that places a deficit on the individual and excludes the difficulties that were created by social or classroom contexts (Polo, 2010; Price, 2001).

Using narrative research methodology, this study documents the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs. The study adds to the narrative research on the experiences of multilingual college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs. The study enriches the understanding of the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual college-aged students with LDs. It also analyzes these experiences in order to understand the themes in these stories and to potentially provide

implications for the Composition and TESOL programs. Ultimately, this study helps better serve multilingual individuals with LDs through the understanding of their narratives.

Chapter One provides an overview of the phenomena of multilingualism and LDs. In this chapter, the background and context of the study, the problem statement, and statement of purpose are presented. In addition, the research approach, the research question, and the researcher's perspectives are identified. Chapter One concludes with detailing the significance and the rationale behind the study.

### **Background and Context of the Study**

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) (2004), a child with a disability is defined as:

- 1) Having intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance ... orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and
- 2) Who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (n.p)

This broad definition of disability includes disabilities that affect one's ability to do every day life activities, including but not limited to, visual and hearing impairments, epilepsy, and cerebral palsy (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). On the other hand, mental health and emotional disabilities, or often known in the medical field as mental disabilities are disabilities that affect the mental, emotional, and/or psychological well-being of individuals and their ability to function in life. Mental disabilities include medical conditions, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, autism, and LDs, among others. Though some mental disabilities have been attributed to physiological causes, the causes of LDs are still a subject of debate. Nonetheless, with that

being said, there has been consensus that LDs are life-long impairments that cannot be cured (Cortiella & Horowitz, 1994; Lerner & John, 2012; Smythe, & Everatt, 2000).

Several definitions have been documented defining the term “LDs.” However, the definition listed under IDEA (2004) is used in the diagnostic evaluation of LDs and, thus, determines the services needed for an individual with LDs. “Specific Learning Disabilities” under IDEA (2004) are defined as:

A disorder in one or more 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, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. (n.p)

LDs are one of the most common types of disabilities recorded in US schools. According to the US Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics report (2014), the percentage of students with LDs who are receiving special education reached, in the 2012-2013 academic year, 4.6 % of the total population of school enrollment. However, a small percentage of students with LDs enter college. According to the National Longitudinal Transitional Study (2011), it was found that only twenty-one percent of students with LDs enter four-year colleges, in contrast to forty percent of students from the general population (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

### **Multilingualism and LDs**

Multilingualism and LDs are two areas in the educational field that are fraught with controversies. The simultaneous presence of both phenomena, LDs and multilingualism in learners, poses a dilemma for educators in the fields of special education and second language

teaching. The dilemma arises from issues, such as diagnosis of multilingual, learning-disabled students, and types of services and accommodations provided.

It must be mentioned here that the literature I am referencing in my dissertation used different terms to refer to multilingual individuals with LDs, such as: “English language learners (ELL),” “limited English proficient (LEP),” “language minorities,” in addition to “bilingual” and “multilingual learners with LDs.” In this dissertation, I have adopted the term “multilingual with LDs” to refer to all the above mentioned individuals. This choice was made to help minimize confusion that could be caused by shifting between the aforementioned terms. However, this does not mean neglecting the differences in the original language, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds of multilingual college-aged students with LDs. In other words, using the term “multilingual individuals with LDs” to refer to the participants of this study is in no way a means to treat them as a homogenous group, but rather, to examine their individual experiences.

Identifying multilingual students with LDs remains a controversial issue among researchers. Identifying LDs in multilingual learners can be problematic due to the overlapping characteristics of second language acquisition and LDs (Mytkowics, 2010; Ochoa, 2006; Ortiz, 2007). In addition, some learners’ limited English speaking abilities also add to the difficulties in identifying LDs (Ortiz, 2007). Identifying multilingual students with LDs is proven to be challenging due to the difficulty among some teachers and educators to distinguish disability from language differences (McCray & Garcia, 2002; Ortiz, 2007). Diagnosing students with LDs is often delayed until students develop a degree of English language proficiency. Educators believe learners can be tested in their first language to avoid the quandary arising from having limited English proficiency, since an LD is a neurological disorder that affects languages and individuals to different extents (Mykowitz, 2010). However, due to the stigma often associated

with special education, it is warranted that educators are more hesitant to recommend multilingual students for special education (Ochoa, 2006).

This dissertation documents the academic experiences of three multilingual college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs, which affect their reading and writing skills. The purpose of the study is to collect and analyze the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who are diagnosed with specific LDs. The significance in collecting such stories is represented in adding to the scarce narrative research and in enriching the understanding of the academic lives of the participants. The significance in deepening such understanding would further contribute to the fields of Composition and Applied Linguistics and to the field of disabilities studies.

### **Problem Statement**

Much of the research that has been conducted on individuals with LDs focuses on the diagnosis, the identification, and assessment (Berninger & Swanson, 2013; Christo, Davis & Brock, 2009; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007; Geva, 2000; Kane, Walker, & Schmid, 2011), the characteristics of their learning differences, and the classifications (Bender, 2009; Chung & Ho, 2010; Fletcher, Stuebing, Morris, & Lyon, 2013). Some studies focused on faculties' attitudes toward students with LDs (Baker, Boland, & Nowik, 2013; Jensen, McCrary, Krampe, & Cooper, 2013), while other studies documented the efficacy of the program designed to assist students with LDs in their transition to college (Conner, 2012; Gregg, 2012, 2013; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002), or to enhance service provided and college life experience (Berger & Lewandowski, 2013; Garcia & Tyler, 2010). However, in the field of narrative research, the academic experiences of students with LDs have rarely been studied.

McCray and Garcia (2002) reviewed the literature of 550 studies focusing on major ethnic/racial groups, including “Latina/o,” “Asian-Americans,” and “Native Americans,” between 1975-2001 in four main areas: “learning disabilities,” “emotional and behavioral disorders,” “mental retardation,” and “speech and language impairments” (p. 603). McCray and Garcia observed the scarcity of literature written on these populations of learners, stating that only five percent of the articles published during a period of twenty-seven years were on issues related to special education. In their review, McCray and Garcia declared that the majority of articles regarded ethnic/racial backgrounds and disabilities as single entities and did not pay much attention to the differences among ethnicities or the type and level of disability severity. The researchers added that “Latina/o” represented only eighteen percent of the literature on students with disabilities. On the other hand, only three percent of the studies were on “Native Americans” and “Asian Americans.” In terms of the types of disabilities, LDs and speech/language disabilities received the highest occurrence with twenty-one and twenty-six percent, respectively. Studies on identification and assessment of disabilities registered highest in frequency with thirty-two percent. Issues related to services, including intervention and treatment, comprised nineteen percent, and teacher education constituted fourteen percent. Finally, quantitative studies exceeded qualitative with a ratio of 3:1.

Different studies used narrative research to document the life of individuals with LDs, such as Polo (2010) in her dissertation titled *Andi’s story: An oral history of a woman labeled learning disabled*. Biographies and autobiographies have been used in documenting the educational experiences of college students with LDs. A number of studies documented the experience of college students with LDs, such as Rodis et al.’s book *Learning Disabilities & Life Stories* (2001). The authors collected written autobiographies from thirteen college students from



different cultural and social backgrounds, some of whom were diagnosed with LDs, and others with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These autobiographies documented the participants' life struggles and accomplishments throughout their school years. A number of themes have arisen from these collected autobiographies, such as issues of segregation, stigma, social marginalization, and feelings of inferiority to peers. In contrast, the study's participants who succeeded and graduated college spoke of the support of some of their families and teachers.

In a different study, in her book, *Learning Re-abled: The Learning Disability Controversy and Composition Studies*, Dunn (1995) wrote about her experience as a composition teacher and her first encounter with a student with an LD. Dunn provided a detailed analysis of written samples of several of her students. Dunn had her students who were with and without LDs implement disability studies lens in their composition course. Further, in her book, Dunn documented the experiences of three college students who were diagnosed with an LD using an interview based qualitative study to examine how students viewed issues related to the "learning-disabled" label.

While Rodis et al. (2001) and Dunn's (1995) works were very informative and thought-provoking in contemplating and understanding the lived experiences of monolingual individuals with LDs, their renditions do not capture the experience of multilingual individuals. The missing voices of multilingual individuals with LDs are observed in the narratives of the captured stories of college students with LDs.

The scarcity of narrative research documenting the stories of multilingual individuals with LDs is perceived in the literature on LDs (Geva, 2000; Lindgrén & Lain, 2011). In examining the scarce research on multilingual individuals with LDs, the absence of the voice of

college-age learners with LDs was evident (Lindgrén & Lain, 2011; McCray & Garcia, 2002). In general, stories of individuals with disabilities are rarely documented. Ware (2001) stated:

Although conversations about disability occur in schools every day, for the most part, they are restricted to procedural issues of identification, referral, and placement in special education, or they focus on related problems of staffing, curriculum, and inappropriate student and parent behavior. (p. 118)

Moreover, disability studies scholars and advocates have argued that disability is often viewed in society from a medical perspective as a “problem” that needs to be “fixed” or “cured” when it should be viewed as a “mode of human difference, one that becomes a problem only when the environment or context treats it as such” (Polo, 2010; Price, 2001, p. 4). Contrastingly, in studies that documented the experiences of individuals with disabilities, in general, different standpoints were taken by these individuals in viewing their disability identity. For instance, while some students with LDs chose to hide their disability from their classmates or teachers, fearing the label of “the others” or stigma, in general (Petersen, 2006; Rodis et al., 2001), others identified themselves as “disabled” and expressed pride toward having a disability, whether it was a mental disability (Price, 2001) or a physical disability, such as the deaf community (Kelly, 2010). In the last two decades, there has been a shift in the disability studies field to focus on disability from the social-cultural perspective. In other words, instead of studying disability in itself, research worked towards identifying the social and cultural barriers that impede the lives of individuals with disabilities.

This study draws the attention to the experiences of three multilingual individuals with LDs. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) stated that in sharing collective stories, we “create a public space requiring others to hear what they don’t want to hear” (p. 415). Hence, this study functions

as a platform to facilitate the voices of multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs. Considering this research project as a platform for multilingual, college-aged students with LDs to share their educational life stories is to help articulate and expand on the power relation in the educational institution that has been a call for many (Cummins, 2001; DiGiorgio, 2009; Vickers & Deckert, 2010). Furthermore, the inclusion of the voices of individuals with LDs is a necessity to the educational process (Lubelska & Matheaws, 1997). Such inclusion would help to challenge the power relation and what is deemed the source of knowledge in defining these experiences (Dunn, 1995; Polo, 2010; Lubelska & Mathews, 1997). Eventually, the study draws on pedagogical implications from these academic narratives, which could potentially better serve some multilingual individuals with specific LDs.

### **Statement of Purpose**

In doing narrative research, it is never the purpose to ascertain a single truth or to generalize (Hanauer, 2000; Polo, 2010), but rather, the purpose of such narrative research has always been to enlighten and enrich the understanding of such stories and to provide interpretations of these lived experiences (Roberts, 2002). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted that narrative research is not implemented to “define and find... a solution” but rather, to “search,” “re-search,” and “search again” (p. 124).

The dissertation facilitates the voices of three multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs and adds to the scarce narrative research on multilingual individuals with LDs. The purpose of this dissertation is enriching the understanding of these individuals’ experiences through sharing and analyzing the nature of the participants’ experiences. Furthermore, the study identifies the shared themes that emerged from the three narratives to ultimately articulate the pedagogical implications that can be understood from these experiences. Such understanding is

accomplished through listening to participants' narrated academic experiences and through employing a disability theory lens that perceives disability as an experience, rather than as a deficit.

### **Research Question**

One major research question is guiding this study:

- 1) What are the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs?

In the next section, I present the research approach and researcher perspectives, and I visit the significance and the rationale behind this study.

### **Research Approach**

Atkinson (2012) stated that the need for narrative research on underrepresented individuals arises from the necessity to create a balance in the literature that has been used to produce findings and theories on these individuals. Similarly, Frank (2013) argued, "we need to create an environment where research participants trust that they will be heard" (p. 366). To understand the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual college-aged students with specific LDs, I have adopted narrative research as my research methodology. Most research on multilingual individuals focused on ethnicity, race, and/or the culture of certain groups. In this study, I focus on the narratives of individuals who share their LD diagnosis and what they experienced as individuals with an LD (Hanauer, 2000), rather than looking at the participants as a group from a certain ethnic, racial, or cultural background.

In documenting life stories, researchers often focus on the life stories in a particular setting and on a specific topic within these stories, such as literacy within immigrant communities (Hanauer, 2000), studying poverty dynamics in developing countries (Kothari &

Hulme, 2004), and studying the challenges that incarcerated women encounter in life after their release (Richie, 2001). Due to the nature of this study, I was not be able to cover the everyday life stories of my three participants and, thus, the foci of the study is on specific elements, namely participants' narrated academic experiences in relation to their LD.

The recruited participants are three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs that affect their reading and writing skills. Pseudonyms were used in documenting and presenting the participants stories. The first participant, Amelia, was from a northwestern public university, and the two other participants, Mia and Ciera, were from northeastern public universities. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection tool in this dissertation.

### **Researcher Perspectives**

In this dissertation, I adopt narrative research as my methodology to explore the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs, namely, Amelia, Mia, and Ciera. This dissertation is theoretically grounded and positioned within disability theory viewpoint, which perceives disability as a difference, rather than as a deficit (Creswell, 2013; Price, 2001).

A disability studies' framework honors disability as an experience; it provides those in the disability community with a sense of belonging to a culture that is defined not in its incapacity, but rather, on its view of the world. Sharing stories of individuals with disabilities contributes to the disability studies' notion held that what they lived and experienced must be taken into account, must be studied and researched. Plummer (2011) argued:

Life stories can only be told once a societal framework becomes available for them to be told...can only be told once a social framework has emerged which helps organize them

and make them more accessible. Many stories and histories simply cannot be told when the social frameworks are not there. And here the local community, and a sense of belonging to a culture, may become keys to unlocking such frames. (p. 235)

The reality perceived by the participants represented in their narrated academic experiences is the foci of this dissertation. Although the use of a certain framework could restrict, limit, or even opionate the reading of these stories, adopting the disability studies framework is used only to “help to analyse how the tellers shape the telling of their experiences of particular events, how the ‘reality’ for them is formed through the account” (Roberts, 2002, pp. 7-8).

### **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study is portrayed in providing a platform that facilitated the voices of three multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs and enabling others to hear such stories. Riessman (2008) argued that for decades, scholars comprehended the “empowerment potential of research” (p. 196). For instance, feminism, oral history, and critical theory scholars seek research as an empowerment tool (Riessman, 2008). In addition, social movements, in general, have often used storytelling and narratives to argue their cases (Riessman, 2008).

Perceived as the “closest” way to study experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.188), narrative research has been adopted as the methodology in this study. Narratives are individuals’ experiences that are organized and told in a manner that constructs what has been made meaningful and significant to these individuals and conveyed to an audience in a connected manner to make such stories and experiences meaningful to the audience (Atkinson, 2012; Riessman, 2008). The purpose of narrative research was never to generalize findings; hence, in

this dissertation, I do not seek to present any findings for the purpose of generalization, but rather, individual and personal experiences are accentuated.

This study's distinctiveness is specified in its focus on multilingual, college-aged students with LDs. This study adds to the scarce narrative research on college students with LDs, in general, and multilingual, college-aged students with LDs, specifically. The use of narrative research in documenting the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs can contribute to many contexts, including:

- 1) Disability studies and its advocates' views on disability as an experience, rather than as a deficit;
- 2) The educational system, in general, which concerns general homeroom teachers, educational therapists, special education teachers, and disability services;
- 3) To advance teaching preparation programs and the Composition and Applied Linguistics field; and
- 4) Potentially improving the educational and life quality of multilingual students with LDs through a better understanding of their educational stories.

### **Overview of the Dissertation's Chapters and Organization**

This study examines the narrative academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs through employing narrative research. This study provides a discourse that helps to understand the nature of the academic experiences of these individuals. The description of academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students with LDs, as told by them, offers a phenomenological perspective of what participants' lived experiences are like. These experiences further provide essential descriptions for disability related services tailored to these individuals.

In Chapter One, I provided a brief overview of this study's background and context. I also provided an overview of this study's problem statement and statement of purpose. In addition, I identified the research approach and the researcher's perspectives. Finally, I concluded the chapter with the study's rationale and with the significance of this study.

In Chapter Two, I present my literature review, which provides a review of a collection of narrative experiences using narrative research and with a review of LDs related research. In Chapter Two, I discuss the state of LDs and issues surfacing in the literature on multilingual individuals with LD, such as classification and identification of multilingual individuals in the educational system. In addition, I address issues pertaining to the diagnosis of an LD and the controversy surrounding the services and accommodations provided. I conclude Chapter Two with issues related to LDs and disability identity, and I rationalize the social model view of disability.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology of the dissertation. In Chapter Three, the rationale for choosing narrative research as the methodology is provided. In addition, a complete illustration of the research question, the recruited participants, and the data collection methods are presented. Chapter Three concludes with issues of trustworthiness and limitation and delimitation of the study.

Chapter Four is comprised of three sections. In the first section, I answer my research question through presenting the narrated academic experiences of the three participants. The second part of Chapter Four examines the structures of the three narratives in light of the element of coherence. Finally, the third part of Chapter Four identifies the emerging themes of the three participants' narrated experiences. In the last chapter of this dissertation, Chapter Five, I



presented the pedagogical implications for this study. Chapter Five concludes with a list of recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Overview of Chapter Two**

This dissertation collected and analyzed the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs. This study is significant because it provides a platform for sharing the voices of the three participants in this study. In addition, this study is of significance because it adds to the scarce narrative literature on multilingual individuals with LDs.

The purpose of this study is to enrich an understanding of these individuals' experiences through the sharing and analyzing of their experiences. This study identifies the shared themes that emerged from the three narratives to articulate the pedagogical implications, which are drawn from the participants' experiences. Ultimately, the study's purpose is to cultivate an understanding of those experiences and to provide implications to the educational field on how to enhance the learning process for students with LDs. At this point, it is vital to revisit the research question for the study:

- 1) What are the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs?

In Chapter One, I presented the general scope of this dissertation, including the context of the study, the problem statement, and the statement of purpose. In addition, I briefly discussed the research approach of this study, the researcher's perspectives, and concluded with the significance and rationale behind conducting this study. In this chapter, Chapter Two, I present the literature review.

In collecting the literature review, research articles were identified using several key words, including: “multilingual, college-aged students with learning disabilities;” “bilingual college students with learning disabilities;” “multilingualism and dyslexia;” “bilingualism and dyslexia;” “English as a second language and learning disabilities;” “English as a second language and dyslexia;” and finally, “college students with learning disabilities.” Different search engines were used, including EBSCOhost, which includes more than 7,300 peer-reviewed journals and databases, like ERIC, PsychInfo, and PsychArticles. In addition, the search engines, Google and Google Scholar, were utilized to identify additional related studies. This search was confined to a time frame to include articles published in the last 19 years, 2000-2019. The search was further limited to peer-reviewed journals.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the literature on the use of narrative research as a methodology, in general, and in studying the phenomena of LDs and multilingualism. Next, a description of the state of LDs in K-12 and postsecondary institutes is provided. In addition, Chapter Two presents a definition of LDs, different types and causes of LDs (with a focus on the LDs related to the reading and writing skills), and the types of diagnostic measures used in diagnosing LDs. This section delves further into the educational history of multilingual, college-aged students with LDs. The historical analysis looks into the literature on the diagnoses and services provided for multilingual learners at the K-12 level and at the postsecondary level. Finally, Chapter Two concluded with a view of disability from a social model perspective.

### **Collecting Narrative Experiences Using Narrative Research**

The use of narrative research in documenting individuals’ lives has gained momentum in the last few decades (Plummer, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Many studies employed oral history, life story, biography, autobiography, or life history to document the lives of individuals. In

Ojermark's (2007) literature review documenting studies that have used life history as their research methodology, Ojermark stated that the focus of these studies were often on topics, such as: "gender," "feminist issues," "migration," or "poverty" (p. 2). Ojermark (2007) added that feminists used life history to highlight the diversity in women's experiences and to give voice to ignored issues in women's lives; on the other hand, research that focused on migration and poverty used a life history approach because it "reflect[s] temporality and life trajectories" (p. 3).

Different studies have been conducted using forms of narrative research, such as oral history (Polo, 2010), biographies, autobiographies, (Park, 2006, 2013; Petersen, 2006; Johnson, 2002; Richards, 2016; Wang, 2014) life history, and life stories (Behar, 1993; Hanauer, 2000; Richie, 2001). What these studies have in common is sharing the narratives of their participants and presenting their stories as "one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2012, p. 3). However, these studies varied in their methods and whom they chose to study.

Different disciplines used narrative research, in general, and life story or life history to document the experiences and lives of individuals (Behar, 1993; Richie, 2001). For instance, Behar's (1993) art piece, *Translated women: Crossing the border with Esperanza's story*, told the story of a Mexican street peddler, whom Behar chose to describe as:

*...a thinker, a cosmologist, a storyteller, or even a novelist working within that embedded literary tradition which, in the absence of schooling and access to the means of production, consists of the living stories that she and her mother have lived and told, and the stories that her daughters have yet to live and tell. (p. 27 emphasis in original)*

Behar grappled with calling her work a life history, arguing that she chose to consider her research piece a life story rather than a life history to "emphasize the fictions of self-

representation, the way in which a life is made in the telling” (pp. 224- 225). The subjective reality of Esperanza cannot be used as a mirror to the lives of Mexican women in that period. Separating fiction from truth in Esperanza’s story became difficult due to the irrelevance of such concepts when it came to narrating subjects’ stories. In documenting life stories and life histories, whether the researcher realizes that the story-teller is keeping some part of the truth hidden or is altering it to present it in a way that is true to them, it remains that truth is the accurate reading of this story, especially when story cannot be juxtaposed with any missing part of a reality (Riessman, 2008).

In another study, Richie (2001) carried out a life history interview-based study to describe the challenges that forty-two incarcerated women encountered in their community after being released from prison. The study used in-depth interviews and grounded theory methods to analyze the data. The study focused on the gender and cultural aspects of the incarcerated women’s challenges.

On the other hand, several studies in the educational field have undertaken the task of examining the educational experiences of multilingual individuals, whether they are teachers or students (Johnson, 2002; Park, 2006; Petersen, 2006). In her doctoral dissertation study of the educational experiences of five East Asian women’s teaching experiences in the TESOL program in the US, Park (2006) documented the educational stories of five multilingual women using a time frame of the past, present, and future. Utilizing narrative inquiry, Park examined their experiences, implementing data collection tools, such as in-depth interviews, autobiographies, and electronic journal entries. The finding of her study contributed to a deep understanding of the intricacies of the educational life stages of these five women, as well as serving as a dialogue opener to help improve TESOL programs in the United States.

In another study of multilingual academics' experiences, Wang (2014) documented the autobiographical narrative renditions of four multilingual academics. In these autobiographical narratives, the participants' life-long English learning experiences in the US were documented. Wang employed in-depth interviews to understand the academic experiences of multilingual academics in the US and their stories in learning English, yielding findings that urge a "reconceptualiz[ation of] English education as a form of symbolic empowerment rather than linguistic imperialism" (p. iii).

Other studies used narrative research to record the experiences of individuals diagnosed with physical and intellectual disabilities. In a study documenting the experiences of individuals with physical disabilities, Perrier, Smith, Strachan, and Latimer-Cheung (2014) examined how athletic identity is re-developed after acquiring a disability. The participants were seven women and four men, aged 28-60, who had acquired a physical disability. Nine of the participants had a spinal cord injury, and the majority of participants were paraplegic. Narrative research was used as the research methodology, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the data revealed three narrative types: 1) physical changes of the body are the reason for a diminished athletic identity; 2) behavior changes diminished athletic identity; and 3) athletes focused on their sport involvement and did not perceive themselves as different from other athletes without disabilities. Such findings, as argued by Perrier et al. (2014), could inform rehabilitators on how to help individuals with acquired disabilities focus on their behavior and commitment to compete in sports, rather than focusing on past experiences.

In addition, other studies have used different forms of the narrative approach to document the experiences of individuals with LDs (Dunn, 1995; Mytkowics, 2010; Petersen, 2006; Polo, 2010; Rodis et al., 2001). In a study that focused on the educational experience of an

adult “African-American” woman with an LD, Petersen (2006) employed a qualitative study in presenting the story of one woman who has been diagnosed with an LD. Using what she referred to as “fragmented narratives,” Petersen shared her participant’s educational experience and answered the research question: “What were the educational experiences of an African-American woman labeled as having ‘a learning disability’?” (p. 722). In this study, Peterson tackled the interaction of race, identity, and gender with the disability identity. In the findings of her study, the researcher offered how the understanding of the participant’s story would empower individuals with multiple and intersecting identities.

In a similar study, Polo (2010) shared the story of a woman, whom she had known for thirty-two years, in her dissertation, titled, *Andi’s story: An oral history study of a woman labeled learning disabled*. In this oral history study, Polo answered a number of research questions, including: “What does Andi’s story reveal about the existence of a disability culture?”; “What has it been like, from Andi’s perspective, to be labeled learning disabled and to negotiate the special education system?”; and “How does Andi’s experience, [Polo’s experience], and her official story differ/mesh?” (p. 24). At the end of her dissertation, Polo made the argument that, “Andi’s voice is worth listening to and taking seriously. Her story allows the reader to better understand the interaction between her and the social context within which she participated and to perhaps question the idea that learning disabilities reside *solely* within persons so labeled” (emphasis in original, p. 64). Polo (2010) examined the social context of disability through Andi’s story and posed the question of whether disability is a socially constructed phenomenon.

On the experiences of multilingual individuals with LDs, Mytkowics (2010) documented the biographies of four multilingual, college-aged students who were diagnosed with LDs: an immigrant, an international student, an adoptee from another country, and a refugee. The

participants were enrolled in a program at Curry College, called Advancement of Learning for Multilingual Students (PML). The program focuses on multilingual learners with LDs by offering a wide range of services, such as one-on-one mentoring and technical accommodations, in addition to helping students develop an understanding of course requirements and expectations of their future college programs. The historical analysis captured the participants' educational and personal struggles. Mytkowics acknowledged the uniqueness of each story and how it could better the educational institute, in general. The focus of this study was the challenges Mytkowics (2010) encountered in working with these multilingual, college-aged students who had LDs. The study concluded with a number of intervention strategies that could be implemented to better serve multilingual individuals with LDs, such as: "establishing a mentoring relationship; introducing students to on-campus support systems, encouraging ... self-advocacy, and independence, and helping students connect with relationships between commitment, personal responsibility, and results" (p. 126).

Broadly speaking, narrative research is experiencing an increased use in educational field. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) argued that "[i]n understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life's narratives are the contexts of making meaning of school situations" (p. 3). Hanauer (2000) stated that narrative research as a methodology that focuses on individuals' perspectives of their life events and stories functions as a "good research method" in studies that focus on the meaning of personal experiences (p. 2).

Generally, narrative is defined as "the telling of a story to explain and analyze events and human agency in order to increase understanding" (Tamura, 2011, p. 150). In these narratives, not only the personal experiences of an individual are told, but also, "the language, social



relations, communities, conventions, rules, beliefs and the discourse of the individual” are embedded (Hanauer, 2000, p. 1).

The focus of this dissertation is the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs. This study is significant because it provides a platform for sharing the voices of the three participants in this study. In addition, this study is of significance because it adds to the scarce narrative literature on multilingual individuals with LDs. The following section provides a review of the major findings in literature on the phenomenon of LDs, in general, and in relation to multilingualism.

### **Review of LD Research**

Multilingual, college-aged students with LDs, with their firsthand experience, are the most qualified to communicate the phenomenon of LDs because they have long-lived the controversial reality surrounding LDs (Dunn, 1995; Rodis et al., 2001). In this section, I define what this research adopts as the definition of “a multilingual individual,” and I examine issues related to the identification and the classification of multilingual students in the US educational system.

### **Defining Multilingualism**

In using the terms “multilingualism” and “bilingualism,” there has been much debate about the phenomenon of multilingualism and whether it should be distinguished from bilingualism in research. Some researchers favored the distinction between the two phenomena, arguing that research in the neurological field established a difference between bilingual and multilingual in areas related to word retrieval, metacognitive abilities, and even a larger size of grey matter—part of the brain that is responsible for speech—in the brain of multilingual individuals compared to monolingual and bilingual individuals (Aronin & Jessner, 2015; Jessner

& Kramersch, 2015). On the other hand, many researchers used the term, “multilingual,” to refer to individuals who spoke more than one language (Canagarajah & Liyanage, 2012; Guron & Lundberg, 2003; Lindgren & Lain, 2011; Mytkowics, 2010). This broad definition of multilingualism is adopted in this research to refer to multilingual individuals. In general, individual multilingualism is defined as having an “advanced competence in [the] different languages [that] one speaks...” (Canagarajah & Liyanage, 2012, p. 50). Multilingualism, as a social and an individual phenomenon (Canagarajah & Liyanage, 2012; Cenoz, 2013), draws its significance as an “integral part of the new economy” (Duchene & Heller, 2012, p. 369) and opens venues in the job market.

In the realm of multilingualism, different terms have been used to refer to multilingual learners, such as “English language learners,” “limited English proficient,” and “non-native speakers.” The use of some of these terms has been contested (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2007; Quintana et al., 2012). For instance, terms, such as “non-native speakers,” were initially created to suggest that these learners are still not native speakers and are still learning the language; as a result, the term was used to temporarily refer to their condition (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2007). However, the reality is that the term, “non-native speakers,” is a “permanent” one, dooming these individuals to be viewed as “deficient communicators” and who can only aspire to become “near-native speakers” at the most (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2007, p. 908). Moreover, despite the wide criticism to the term Limited English Proficient, it is still being employed in US government documents (Quintana et al., 2012).

People who are considered bilinguals by one definition can be referred to as multilinguals under another definition (De Groot, 2011). Despite the difference between bilinguals and multilinguals, often, when researchers are conducting studies on bilingual or multilingual

individuals, they are more concerned with differences in comparison to monolingual minds (De Groot, 2011). Hence, in this dissertation, I chose the term, “multilingual,” to refer to individuals who use more than one language, either in only its spoken form, or in both the written and oral systems. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized at this point that not all “bilingual” individuals can be blended in one homogenous group (Cline, 2000).

As previously mentioned, diagnosing multilingual students with LDs remains an area of controversy among researchers. Initially, the term, “learning disabled,” was created to help solicit services for students with disabilities. Classifications of students according to their race or ethnicity, on the other hand, are designed to help allocate funds and monitor segregation and discrimination against ethnic groups. In the following section, I briefly examine the history behind the use of certain classifications and the issues surrounding these terms.

### **Issues With Classification and Identification in the Educational System**

In the educational system, students are identified according to their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Categorizing individuals according to their race is often initiated to monitor any issue of discrimination or segregation towards certain minorities, in addition to issues related to a division of federal funds (Carey & Farris, 1996). In this section, an examination of terms used to refer to multilingual individuals in the US public school system is provided.

There is a presumption that racial groups are grouped according to their shared genetics and biological and physical features (Davis, 2006b). However, such claims have not been supported scientifically, leading researchers to argue that race is a socially constructed phenomenon (Davis, 2006b; Quintana et al., 2012). Multilingual ethnic groups often share the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, they might have come from the same geographical origin, such as in the case of those identified as “Asian Americans.” Quintana et al.

(2012) stated that The American Psychological Association (APA) defined ethnicity as a “category that reflects a group’s common history, including national origin, geography, language, and culture” (p. 10). Further, ethnic minorities can be immigrants or non-immigrants. Multilingual minorities can include “indigenous language speakers,” such as the Navajo in the US, and immigrants who speak their first language and the language of their place of residency, such as some of those identified as “Hispanics” and “Asians Americans” (Cenoz, 2013; McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D’Emilio, 2005).

There have been many terms used to refer to “language minorities”; some are contested, such as the terms “Hispanics” and “American Indians.” In addition, other terms are commonly used to refer to two heterogeneous groups, such as the term “Asian Americans,” which refers to Eastern and Southern Asian Americans. Often, students from ethnic or racial backgrounds, other than European Americans or Whites, are referred to using terms, such as “minority language learners”. The term, “minority language,” is used in contrast to “majority language” or the “dominant,” “national,” “official,” or “state” language (Gorter & Cenoz, 2012, p. 184). Other terms are used to refer to specific language minorities, such as “heritage,” “indigenous,” “dominated,” “threatened,” “endangered,” or “ethnic” (Gorter & Cenoz, 2012, p. 184). However, the term, “minority language learners,” is a subject of controversy. In her work, May (2005, 2008) declared that advocates of the rights of minority groups argued that the use of the terms “majority” and “minority,” is not unsystematic; instead, they came to establish “language hierarchies” and a “historically, socially, and politically *constructed* process” (cited in May, 2012, p. 133, emphasis in original). In a way, the term, “minority language,” insinuates marginality, as opposed to the more dominant or a majority language.

Remarkably, multilingual “minorities” living in the United States have found ways to teach their children their first language in an academic setting by joining school programs or weekend schools. Some of these school programs are privately funded, and some depend on volunteers (Reagan, 2009). According to Thomas and Collier (2002), such after-school programs are considered a bilingual approach to learning, similar to when students start to receive academic instruction in a second language at the fifth and sixth grade. For example, in the state of New York, a number of “minority” language groups implemented these types of schools, such as Asian minorities, including Chinese and Japanese individuals, in addition to Polish and Ukrainian individuals, among others.

Historically, studies have documented teachers referring students from multilingual backgrounds to English as a second language services instead of special education services (Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez-Lopez & Damico, 2013; Ortiz, 2007). The issues related to potential misdiagnosis of multilingual minorities could be attributed to “overlapping characteristics of second language acquisition and LDs” (Mytkowics, 2010, p. 114; Ortiz, 2007). Some researchers argued that “minority” language learners are underserved due to the difficulties in distinguishing learning differences from LDs (McCray & Garcia, 2002). However, other researchers have shown that difficulties attributed to language learning can be distinguished from those related to LDs by different methods, such as looking at the students’ first language development (Mytkowics, 2010) or testing for phonological awareness (Guron & Lundberg, 2003; Hutchinson, Whitley & Smith, 2000), which could help identify certain types of LDs, such as dyslexia.

Research indicating that valuing the learners’ diverse home language increases their chances of success (Dagenais, 2008). Cummins (2000) stated that in the US, “diversity has been

constructed as [the] ‘enemy within,’ far more potent than any external enemy in its threat to the fabric of nationhood” (p. 3). It has been established that schools have a history of “communicat[ing] a sense of shame...rather than a sense of affirmation and pride” to “minority” language groups and cultures (Cummins, 2000, p. 33). Wiley (2002) stated that in the US, the right of “minority” individuals to speak their language or dialect is perceived to be a “peculiar idea” for those who claim the need for one common language and for those who believe a common language is crucial to the unity of the nation (Reagan, 2009; Wiley, 2002, p. 40). May (2012) attested to such devaluing conditions of “minority” languages, stating, “national languages came to [be] associated with modernity and progress, whereas their less fortunate counterparts were associated (conveniently) with tradition and obsolescence” (p. 134, emphasis in original).

Such contradictory stances toward multilingualism led to the surfacing of two types of multilingualism. The first is termed, “additive bilingualism,” and occurs when an individual learns an additional language while at the same time maintaining and continuing to develop one’s first language (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Cenoz, 2013). Additive bilingualism emphasizes the view that a minority language is an asset that children use to develop English language learning (Genesee, 2008; Reagan, 2009). The second type is termed, “subtractive bilingualism,” and refers to the case of a learner who learns an additional language that replaces the first language. An example of “subtractive bilingualism” is when children of immigrants learn the language of the resident country without receiving any formal or informal teaching of their first language (Cenoz, 2013). The aim of “subtractive bilingualism” is the replacement of the first language in favor of a more dominant language towards monolingualism (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Advocates of multilingual education argued that delivering academic instruction

in the students' first language in the early years provides them with an opportunity to learn the academic content and close the achievement gap with their peers while working on their English language skills (Cummins, 2000).

Both types of bilingual approaches have been adopted in the educational system. In the public school system, several programs were implemented to serve the population labeled as, "English language learners," or, "limited English proficient." These programs range from "traditional, pullout English as a Second Language (ESL) or content-based ESL services, to various types of transitional (K-3 only) and maintenance (K-6) bilingual programs, and even dual-language or dual-immersion programs" (Quintana et al., 2012, p. 38). In the next section, a closer look is provided to what constitutes an LD and how LDs are diagnosed. In addition, the section discusses types of LDs, the services and accommodations provided to students with LDs, and the controversy surrounding LDs.

### **The State of LDs**

There has been consensus among professionals in different fields on the overall nature of LDs. The nature of LDs is manifested in the difficulties in reading, writing, and/or in mathematical skills (Fletcher et al., 2013). It is also exhibited in the unexpected underachievement in reading and math (Fletcher et al., 2007). In addition, research has affirmed that LDs are life-long impairments (Berninger & Swanson, 2013; Dunn, 1995; Rodis et al., 2001).

Many studies documented the causes of LDs, the identification, and accommodations of students who have LDs. Many researchers studied the causes of reading difficulties. While some research documented the accounts of individuals with LDs, who attested to reading difficulties sometimes as a result from "the lag between seeing and recognizing familiar words" (Rodis, et

al., 2001, p. 149), others attributed the reading difficulties to difficulties related to phoneme segmentation (Smythe, 2003). Other causes affecting the individual's ability to read and write include: difficulties in sequencing and organizing thoughts and words (Cottrell, 2003; Rodis, et al., 2001) and difficulties in learning foreign languages (Rodis et al., 2001). Researchers argued that often, reading could prove an exhausting task to dyslexic learners (Cottrell, 2003; Rodis, et al., 2001); nevertheless, tasks involving a higher level of thinking and meeting college requirements are found to be much easier than school requirements (Cottrell, 2003).

In the next section, a close examination of the nature of LDs is provided. In this examination, the definition and causes of LDs, the types of LDs, the diagnosis of LDs, and the services and accommodations provided for LDs are reviewed at the K-12 and the postsecondary levels.

### **Definition and Causes of LDs**

The Individuals with Disability Educational Act (IDEA) (2004), previously known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was initially signed into law in 1975. The act requires all school districts to provide free and appropriate education to all students, including those with LDs. IDEA provides a definition for specific LDs, describing them as disorders manifested in difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, and in doing mathematical calculations. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (1990) defined LDs as:

...a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of 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. (p. 65)



Different researchers dwelled on what it means to have an LD. Many researchers have challenged the term, “learning disabilities.” Witherell and Rodis (2001) stated that having an LD does not mean that a person is incapable of learning; on the contrary, it means that a person is capable of learning “via routes more carefully planned, structured, and demanding than the ones most other students have the option of using” (p. 168).

The underlying causes of LDs have been a subject of controversy among researchers. Research has been divided on whether a neurological difference can be established and used in diagnosing students with LDs. On one hand, advocates of the neurological base of LDs have argued that certain types of tests prove the difference in the neurological structure in the brains of those with LDs when compared to typical individuals without LDs (Dulude, 2012; Smythe, 2011; Verpalen & van de Vijver, 2015). Proponents of the neurological base of LDs supported their opinion with evidence from neurological studies that documented the difference between typical brain neuroimaging and those who have dyslexia. Research had shown that the brain images of children with developmental dyslexia—a type of inherited dyslexia—have shown reduced “parietotemporal cortex activity,” which is responsible for word analysis, when compared with same age children (Hoeft et al., 2006). Additionally, Smythe (2011) did not dismiss the neurological aspect and attested that certain parts of the brain had shown abnormalities in children diagnosed with LDs, as obtained through electroencephalogram (EEG) imaging. Often, the neurological cause of LDs is associated with the medical model of disabilities that treats disability as “a deficit” that needs to be cured (White, 2002).

On the other hand, others have diffused such claims on the basis of their inconsistency in diagnosing those with LDs, as those neurological structures are found to change after students receive educational interventions, which can disguise an LD (Eden et al., 2004; Smythe, 2011;

White, 2002). In a study comparing a phonologically trained group of adults with developmental dyslexia to a group of untutored adults with dyslexia, Eden et al. (2004) discovered that those who received the training demonstrated improvement in their performance; at the same time, their performance was synchronized with changes in brain activities typically found in normal readers. However, neurologically based causes of LDs remain an understudied field (Eden et al., 2004; Lyon & Weiser, 2013).

Genetically, researchers traced the cause of dyslexia to fetal development during pregnancy. During the development of the fetus, neurons, which initially start traveling from the ventricles towards the cortex, end up travelling too far and “crash,” forming an “Ectopias,” or an “excess [of] unorganized gray matter around the left middle temporal gyrus in the brain,” which is typically observed in dyslexics (Dulude, 2012, p. 23). Moreover, research has attested to the hereditary aspect of dyslexia (Lyon & Weiser, 2013; Smythe, 2011). Studies reported that dyslexia or reading disabilities are found in twenty-three to sixty-five percent of children with parents who have dyslexia, and in forty percent of siblings (Lyon & Weiser, 2013).

Despite the biological causes of LDs, advocates of the social model of disability argue that disabilities are impairments that are socially constructed (White, 2002). The social construction of disability will be further examined under the disability studies heading at the end of this chapter. In general, LDs are divided according to the nature of difficulties they represent. In the following section, some of the most common types of LDs are discussed.

### **Types of LDs**

Often, when students are diagnosed with LDs, difficulties are experienced in more than one manner (Christo et al., 2009; Cottrell, 2003). For instance, students with dyslexia have difficulties in reading, such as word decoding and word retrieval, or in remembering the meaning

of certain words. In addition, research has documented cases of learners where more than one type of LD occurred, such as dysgraphia and dyslexia (Berninger, Richards & Abbott, 2015).

LDs are defined, in general, as difficulties experienced in listening, reading, writing, and mathematical skills. These difficulties have been documented in various forms, such as difficulties in: phonological awareness and phoneme segmentation, word decoding, reading, in general, and reading comprehension, difficulties in writing, memory sequencing, and organization and difficulties related to mathematical skills. In this sub-section, I am providing a detailed synopsis of the types of LDs that are the focus in this dissertation, namely: dyslexia, dysgraphia, language LDs, and non-verbal LDs.

**Dyslexia.** Generally speaking, dyslexia is an LD that affects reading and writing skills. The controversy in LDs extends to one of the most common types of LDs, dyslexia. Dunn (1995) argued that in the educational field, “equally educated people” embraced different opinions of dyslexia (p. 2). The Orton Dyslexia Society defined dyslexia as:

... a specific language-based disorder of constitutional origin characterized by difficulties in single-word decoding, usually reflecting insufficient phonological processing....

Dyslexia is manifest[ed] by variable difficulty with different forms of language, often including, in addition to problems with reading, a conspicuous problem with acquiring proficiency in writing and spelling. (Rodis, 2001, p. 233)

Though a subject of debate, dyslexia is often perceived as “an impairment in reading and writing” (Dulude, 2012, p. 22; Berninger & Swanson, 2013). Others have viewed dyslexia as “literally, difficulty with reading” (Dunn, 1995, p. 15), or “a reading disability” (Siegel & Mazabel, 2013, p. 187). The International Dyslexia Association (2002) defined dyslexia as, “*a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties*

*with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities”* (n.p., emphasis in original).

Phonological processing difficulties have been documented as one main feature of dyslexia. Such difficulties are often manifested in difficulties in word decoding, and orthographic form storage and retrieval, distinguishing between letters such as “b” and “d,” and breaking words into phonemic segments (Berninger & Swanson, 2013; Christo, Davis & Brock, 2009; Chung & Ho, 2010; Dulude, 2012; Guron & Lundberg, 2003; Sarkadi, 2008; Smythe & Everatt, 2000). Dyslexia is also manifested in other difficulties related to poor memory and attention span, and poor reading and writing skills (Christo et al., 2009; Dunn 1995; Rodis et al., 2001).

Dyslexia is more prevalent in languages where the spoken and written forms of a language do not correspond, or what is known as, “opaque” languages (Dulude, 2012, p. 22; Jacey & Sun Koay, 2014; Lindgrén, 2012; Sarkadi, 2008; Smythe, 2011). Research indicated that more “native speakers” of English, a language with an “opaque” written system, are diagnosed with dyslexia, in comparison to Italian and Spanish speakers, where the spoken and written forms of the Italian and Spanish languages do not carry much difference (Dulude, 2012. p. 22; Smythe, 2011). As a result, it might be more challenging for learners with dyslexia to learn English, a language with a deep orthographic system (Sarkadi, 2008).

Researchers have argued that multilingual individuals learning two languages with similar orthographic systems have an advantage over their monolingual peers. Similarities in the written system of languages play a significant role in facilitating skill transfer and learning the second language. Phonological awareness, such as sound recognition, can be transferred in two alphabetic languages (Bialystok, Luk & Kwan, 2005; NG, 2015). Decoding words—represented in the ability to make meaning from written words and sentences—on the other hand, is not a

transferrable skill and has to be learned separately in each language (Bialystok et al., 2005), which might explain the difficulty that some students with LDs find in learning a new language.

In their writing, students with LDs experience different difficulties, including but not limited to, delay in copying material, hand writing that is unclear, poor quality writing, such as using a mixture of capital and small letters, and reversing letters in writing (Dunn, 1995). Furthermore, students with LDs might show some difficulties in spelling, proofreading, and in forming outlines. These difficulties are linked to their inability to develop ideas, and which result in short poor quality writing (Lerner & John, 2012; Shannon, 2009).

**Dysgraphia.** In addition to dyslexia, other types of LDs are identified that affect the individuals' ability to write, such as dysgraphia and oral and written language LDs (OWL LD). Dysgraphia manifests as experiencing difficulty with writing, such as during lectures and exams (Cottrell, 2003), or in storing and processing written words and letters and “orthographic loop” (Berninger & Swanson, 2013, p. 314). This type of LD often “affects fine motor skills and handwriting” (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2016, n.p.). Dysgraphia is sometimes also manifested in difficulties in writing at speed, such as note taking and during tests (Cottrell, 2003). In their writing, students with LDs experience different difficulties, including but limited to: delay in copying materials; hand writing that is unclear; poor quality of writing, such as, using a mixture of capital and small letters, and reversing letters in writing (Dunn, 1995). Furthermore, students with LDs might show some difficulties in spelling and in proofreading and forming outlines, which are linked to their inability to develop ideas (Lerner & John, 2012; Shannon, 2009).

**Oral and Written Language LD (OWL LD).** This type of LD refers to language-learning disabilities, or specific language impairments (Berninger & Swanson, 2013; Berninger

et al., 2015). OWL LD is characterized by difficulty in oral language, listening comprehension, and written language, and is often confused with dyslexia (Berninger & Swanson, 2013). OWL LD affects the morphological word form of words and syntax storage. For instance, students with OWL LD experience difficulties in combining sentences (Berninger & Swanson, 2013; Berninger et al., 2015).

The Learning Disability Association of America (2016) listed other types of specific LDs, which include:

- 1) Non-Verbal LDs: Difficulty in understanding facial expression and body language and Visual Perceptual/Visual Motor Deficit: Difficulty in copying material or drawing and in interpreting and understanding visual information;
- 2) Dyscalculia: Difficulty associated with math, such as counting, comprehending math symbols, and memorizing numbers (Dunn, 1995; Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2016); and
- 3) Auditory Processing Disorder: Difficulty in the ability to process and interpret sounds in the brain.

In diagnosing students suspected of having an LD, different measures have been implemented. The following section defines the most common types of diagnostic measures used at the K-12 and postsecondary levels.

### **Diagnosis of LDs at the K-12 Level**

IDEA (2004) outlined the regulations developed by the US Department of Education in diagnosing individuals with LDs. IDEA defined a specific LD as a disorder that affects an individual's ability to process and understand information using language in the spoken and written form. It also affects an individual's listening, speaking, thinking, reading, writing,

spelling, or mathematical skills. The definition included difficulties caused by “perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia” (IDEA, 2004, n.p). However, IDEA excluded learning difficulties that were a result of “visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage” (IDEA, 2004). Hence, conditions, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism, are treated and accommodated as disabilities under different categories. The diagnosis process is usually carried out by a team consisting of the student’s parents, a teacher, and a professional, such as “a school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, or remedial reading teachers,” as defined by IDEA (2004, n.p.).

IDEA requires using a scientifically based approach in identifying students with LDs. A student is initially referred for an evaluation by a teacher or parents if the teacher or the parents suspect the student has an LD. The diagnoses of LDs, in general, have been marked with certain delay due to many reasons. Students often get diagnosed in the second or third grade, because it is when children are expected to be able to read (McGrady, Lerner & Boscardin, 2001). Similarly, diagnosis of LDs in multilingual individuals is often delayed due to their delay in learning English (Ortiz, 2007, Mytkowics, 2010). It is often believed that students have to develop English language skills in order to be assessed for any language difficulty. Hamayan et al. (2013) responded that though such skills might take three to seven years to develop, it is necessary to wait that long to provide services for these students. Moreover, research indicated that it is not necessary to wait for the development of English in multilingual learners to be assessed for LDs. Some researchers argued that multilingual learners could be assessed in their first language (Durgunoglu, 2002; Mytkowics, 2010; Ortiz, 2007; Smythe, 2011), as LDs prevail across all learners’ languages.

On the other hand, other researchers argued that multilingual students could be tested in the majority language using phonological awareness tests to identify whether they have an LD (Guron & Lundberg, 2003). Supporters of the latter argument base their judgment on students' abilities to transfer skills, such as phonological awareness, from the first language in learning their second language. Guron and Lundberg (2013) conducted a study on monolingual Swedish speakers and multilingual learners who spoke Swedish as an additional language to examine whether reading proficiency and phonological skills could be assessed in the majority language in dyslexic multilingual students. Results of the study indicated that both monolingual and multilingual students were equally capable of identifying sub-words units and of holding those units in their memories. Guron and Lundberg (2013) concluded that phonological awareness includes "metalinguistic" cognitive skills that can be transferred from the first language and has not necessarily been learned separately when acquiring a new language (p. 80). However, in the case of multilingual students who have not developed full competency in either language, it would be more difficult to get an accurate identification of an LD (Ochoa, 2006). Certain measures have been taken to address the delay in diagnosing children, such as implementing screening as early as kindergarten; in addition, procedures, such as documenting a student's progress, have also been widely applied in schools to monitor for any learning delays or difficulties, whether related to LDs or not.

In diagnosing students with an LD, two main models have been identified: the IQ-achievement discrepancy model and the Response to Intervention Model (RTI). In using the IQ-Achievement discrepancy model, students' IQ and academic achievement in reading and math are measured using standardized tests, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC)-Third Edition (WISC-III), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R), and



the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery-Revised (WJ-R). A person is diagnosed with dyslexia using the “discrepancy definition,” basically by comparing a person’s reading score to one’s IQ score. For example, if the reading score is significantly below the predicted level of the standard reading of an IQ score of 90, then a person is diagnosed with dyslexia (Siegel & Mazabel, 2013).

Despite its widely questioned validity, the IQ-achievement discrepancy model is still implemented by some school districts (Restori, Katz, & Lee, 2009). The use of the discrepancy model in diagnosing dyslexia has been criticized (Guron & Lundberg, 2003; Siegel & Mazabel, 2013). According to Siegel’s (1992) study, research-based evidence demonstrated that when comparing children with dyslexia and poor readers, both scored significantly low on the reading test, but the poor readers’ scores were not as low as predicted by their IQ test. As a result, Siegel concluded that it was not possible to provide a clear-cut answer to whether poor readers have a reading disability or not (Siegel & Mazabel, 2013). Moreover, the lack of any federal guidelines to the discrepancy has resulted in variation among different states (Bender, 2009).

In diagnosing multilingual learners, the use of an IQ-Achievement test was initially criticized because it was administered in English. In *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970), a lawsuit was brought against the State Board of Education in California State in using results of an IQ test to determine the placement decision of nine Spanish-speaking students in a special education classroom (Childs, 1990). Initially, when Spanish-speaking students were given the IQ test in English, they scored poorly; however, when the test was re-administered by a bilingual psychologist and the students were allowed to use either English or Spanish, their scores improved. The case was settled before entering court. The settlement required schools to test students using both languages (Childs, 1990).

The validity of using certain tests that were designed initially for monolingual learners to test multilingual learners has been a subject of scrutiny and dispute in the research field. Diagnostic tests are often used to evaluate students with LDs; these tests are translated to the student's first language, if the language is other than English. However, Peer and Reid (2000) questioned the validity of translated tests, arguing that the translation of these tests often alters the syntax and structure and results in cultural and linguistically biased tests that render their results inaccurate. Deponio, Landon, Mullin, and Reid (2000) emphasized that while the discrepancy can be used to diagnose dyslexia in monolinguals by monitoring the discrepancy between verbal skills and reading and writing skills, it is not possible in multilingual individuals because their verbal and writing skills are developing at the same level. Cummins (2001) stated that it takes multilingual learners between five to seven years to close the gap with their monolingual peers. Thus the discrepancy in the academic performance of multilingual individuals is a normal stage rather than an indication of a reading disability.

The second model, namely the Response to Intervention Model (RTI), is defined according to The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) (2006) as the “practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying child response data to important educational decisions” (p. 2). The RTI model is gaining widespread use in schools, and it is considered a scientific intervention process directed initially toward at-risk students. Basically, the RTI operates on two main principles: The first is assuring that students are receiving “high-quality instruction,” and if the students fail to make academic progress, further intensive instruction is provided to target areas of weaknesses (The National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2006, n.p). The second principle

involves referring those who fail to thrive after implementing intensive instructions to be evaluated for special education services (Christo et al., 2009; Hallahan, Pullen & Ward, 2013; Sparks & Lovett, 2009). However, researchers expressed their concerns with the type and quality of the educational instruction (Hallahan et al., 2013). Measures have been taken to remedy such expressed shortcomings of using the RTI model through implementing different models of what is known as the “multi tier services delivery” (MTSD) (Koveleski & Black, 2010, p. 23). MTSD is defined as a “structure for planning and organizing the provision of increasingly intense interventions delivered in general, remedial, and special education” (Kovaleski & Black, 2010, p. 23). These types of services are basically comprised of “team-based” efforts of teachers and other specialists that function as support structures to the RTI model (Koveleski & Black, 2010).

On the other hand, tests of phonological awareness have been gaining momentum. Some researchers note similarities in phonological awareness and decoding skills among multilingual students in tests designed for monolingual learners (NG, 2015; Hutchinson, Whitley & Smith, 2000). Researchers suggest that phonological awareness tests can be equally used with multilingual individuals to test for reading difficulties (Hutchinson et al., 2000). However, rhyming awareness tests might have a cultural bias aspect to them (Hutchinson et al., 2000). At the same level, the absence of skills, such as phonological awareness in students’ first language, could be an indication of an LD (Durgunoglu, 2002).

### **Diagnosis of LDs at the College Level**

Diagnosing students at the college level is arranged through disability offices that are located at universities or through private psychologists. Usually, students with LDs are identified through diagnostic interviews, aptitude/IQ testing, academic achievement testing, information

processing testing by a licensed psychologist, and the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual for Mental Disorders DSM IV-TR, as developed by the American Psychiatric Association.

At the postsecondary level, it is mandatory to students with disabilities to disclose their disabilities to the disability office in order to receive any services. Wagner et al. (2005) stated that there are a lower number of students in postsecondary education who receive accommodations, compared to students in high school. Such discrepancy is attributed to the fact that more than half of students with disabilities, once they transition from high school to postsecondary education, do not think of themselves as disabled, and, as a result, do not disclose their disability to their institutions (Wagner et al., 2005). However, when students enter postsecondary education, they are met with higher demands in reading and writing; such demands exceed the expectation of high schools and leave students with LDs with even more amplified loads (Conner, 2012).

There is a dearth of research on identifying college-age students with LDs (Gregg, 2007; Kane et al., 2001; Lingren & Lain, 2011; Sparks & Lovett, 2009), and on the diagnostic and assessment criteria developed (Gregg, 2007). In a literature review study, Sparks and Lovett (2009) documented studies that focused on the type of criteria used in classifying students with LDs at the college level. In the 400 study literature review, Sparks and Lovett (2009) stated that only thirty percent were empirical studies. Among these studies, different criteria were adopted in the classification of students with LDs. Most cited were discrepancy criteria. The finding points to “a lack of consensus and lack of knowledge among diagnosticians and researchers on how an LD should be diagnosed and also show[s] that college students classified as [having] an LD demonstrated average achievement, despite scoring below their classmates” (p. 494). In addition, Sparks and Lovett (2009) argued that there was no significant evidence of the presence

of LD related difficulties among college students, since the discrepancy between their IQ and achievement level were within the standard score range, except for written language skills, which registered slightly below other skills.

Moreover, several studies documented faculties' concerns in providing equal educational opportunities for students with LDs and legitimacy of the accommodations provided (Jensen et al., 2013; Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss & Dugan, 2010; Rao, 2004). However, Jensen et al. (2013) declared that with the increase of awareness of LDs, faculty are becoming less reluctant to accommodate students with reading and math disabilities. However, some faculty members met difficulty in foreign language learning with more skepticism. For instance, the need to substitute foreign language courses with other courses at the college level has been met with reluctance. One of the most recognized cases in requesting foreign language course substitution is the case of *Guckenberger v. Boston* (1997). In 1995, a number of students with LDs filed a lawsuit against University of Boston, arguing that the recent policies of the university violated the American with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504. Initially, University of Boston declared a number of policies related to diagnosing and accommodating students with LDs including: 1) denying of foreign language course substitution, 2) mandating the screening of LDs students by personals with doctoral degrees, 3) stipulating a procedure inquiring students with LDs to submit a report documenting their LDs every three years and, 4) have those reports further reviewed by the university's dean at that time to either accept or deny accommodation to students with LDs. Between the years 1995-1996, although 480 students reported having an LD at University of Boston, only seven were accommodated based on a decision made by the Dean. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs on the account that the university violated students' rights to be accommodated by implementing such rigorous screening of students with LDs;

however, the court maintained that the university has the right to deny substitution of course requirements if such substitution affects the nature of specialty.

The percentage of students with LDs in college has risen between the years of 1988 and 2000 from 16.1% to 40% (Parker & Banerjee, 2007). According to Lerner and John (2012), attending college for students with LDs was not an option a few years ago. However, due to the development of intervention programs, more students with LDs are joining college today (Shannon, 2009).

### **Services and Accommodations**

Once students are diagnosed with an LD, they become eligible for what is termed, “special educational services.” IDEA (2004) defined special education as, “specially designed instruction...to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (n.p.). According to IDEA, specially designed instruction entails adapting the content, and methodology and instruction to fit the needs of learners diagnosed with a certain type of disability, in addition to accommodating students with LDs to reach the academic level of their non-LD peers. Moreover, the passing of The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 required all school districts to “ensure that all students are appropriately assessed; included in the accountability system; and prepared to attain grade level proficiency in reading and math...The goal being to advance equal access and opportunity for all students” (Monroe, 2007, p. 21). At the K-12 level, the role of teachers in helping students with LDs starts from the diagnosis process, when teachers refer students who they suspect have an LD. Once a student is diagnosed with an LD, an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) is developed, and special education services are initiated. Often, a special education teacher would be responsible for helping the learning disabled, and a homeroom teacher’s role will be limited to accommodating the needs of an LD learner during tests. Often, students with

LDs are pulled out of regular classrooms and relocated in what is known as “remedial rooms” to learn with the help of a special education teacher. Providing multilingual students who have LDs with special education is part of what is termed as, “bilingual special education,” which Baca and de Valenzuela (1998) defined as, “the use of the home language along with English in an individually designed program of instruction provided to a student with exceptional education needs for the purpose of maximizing his or her learning potential” (cited in Ochoa, 2006, p. 360).

Federal legislation requires partly and fully federally funded universities to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities; examples of types of accommodations provided include: extended time during tests and for completion of a degree; course substitutions; auxiliary aids, such as taped texts, readers, or note-takers; allowing for part-time rather than full-time study; or seating accommodations, such as for those with hearing difficulties (Ganschow, Schneider & Evers, 2000; Sparks & Lovett, 2009).

At the college level, according to Gregg (2012), typically, four types of accommodations are frequently provided:

- 1) Presentation Accommodation: Provides access to content “by an alternative means (e.g., screen reader, access assistant [reader]), alternative media (e.g., electronic text, tape recorder), language structures (e.g., simplified syntax), and font format (e.g., large print)” (p. 50);
- 2) Response Accommodations: Provides students with the ability to respond with alternative modes, such as oral recording and using speech-to-text software tools, including word processors;
- 3) Scheduling or Timing Accommodations: Provides students with flexibility, in terms of time to complete assignments, extended time on tests, and frequent breaks; and

- 4) Setting Accommodations: Provides students with the opportunity to change the place of a test to a private quiet room.

In addition to the above-listed types of accommodations, other services are provided to students with LDs prior to and after enrolling in college and universities, such as transition services.

Prior to enrolling in postsecondary education, students with LDs receive transition services mandated by federal legislations, and implemented to help students with disabilities transition from high school to the postsecondary level. Such services help students to develop self-advocacy skills and allow them to build on their areas of strengths. In addition these services would further help with making career decisions (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). However, different studies document that students with LDs have not been prepared to self-advocate for their accommodation needs at the post-secondary level (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Rodis, et al., 2001).

Different programs, including tests and theoretical-based practices, are implemented to help students with disabilities through the transition process, such as college-level examination programs, bridge programs, college preparation courses, and the concept of Universal Design (Gregg, 2007). These programs offer students with LDs preparation and cultural integration courses. Some of these programs are offered after graduating from high school, such as Program for Advancement of Learning (PAL), or prior to graduating high school through partnership between K-12 and postsecondary education institutions, such as Georgia P-16 Initiative. Several programs have been implemented in private and public universities across states for students with LDs. While these programs vary in their length, they all aim at helping students with LDs transition from high school to college. Examples of these programs are The Strategic Instruction



Model (SIM), initially developed and implemented at University of Kansas, which targets specific skills that students need to succeed in schools and colleges, and PAL, which is based on “the idea of strength-based instruction that leads students to a metacognitive awareness of their own potential” (Rooney, 2002, p. 3). PAL offers a wide range of services, such as one-on-one mentoring and technical accommodation, in addition to helping students develop an understanding of course requirements and expectations of their future programs. Several universities, such as Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts, and Saint Leo University in Saint Leo, Florida, offer PAL. At Curry College, the program targets multilingual students with LDs. According to Rooney (2002), the first-year retention rate of students enrolled in PAL at Curry College reached seventy-four percent, exceeding the college rate of sixty-seven percent.

Other types of programs, such as bridge programs, were initially developed to serve diverse populations, from “African American,” “Latina/o,” and “Native American” ethnicities (Gregg, 2007). These programs cover a wide range of populations, including, “Limited English Proficient students” and students with disabilities, according to the US Department of Education (2016). The main focus of these bridge programs is to help underrepresented populations in postsecondary education (Gregg, 2007) by providing an array of services, including mentoring and courses in math, composition, literature, foreign languages, and cultural enrichment, among others (US Department of Education, 2016).

On the other hand, another concept has been adopted in colleges to better provide for students with disabilities, namely, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which is defined as a set of conceptual frameworks that aim at providing educational services to all learners, including those with LDs, hence eliminating the need for any accommodations (Dolmage, 2008, 2015; Gregg, 2012). UDL has been gaining momentum in the educational field in the last few years

(Dolmage, 2015; Gould, 2007). Many higher education institutes have begun implementing UDL in their educational environments. University of Washington, for instance, is one of the leading examples in the use of UDL (Dolmage, 2015; Gregg, 2012). However, UDL is often listed in the form of a checklist, which, as argued by Dolmage (2015), negates the idea behind this conceptual framework as a “way to move” (p. 1). Price (2001) argued that “true accommodations are not *added on* to a classroom environment; they are *built into* its infrastructure, with flexibility and ongoing revision part of its very foundation” (p. 102, emphasis in original). Dolmage (2008) compared accommodations to a “retrofit,” in that accommodations are often viewed as add-ons. He argued that disability was often ‘*reacted*’ upon (p. 23, emphasis in original).

While college and universities allow students with disabilities to utilize the use of accommodations, the use of accommodation has been a subject of controversy, in terms of its eligibility and effectiveness. Accommodations initially designed to provide assistance to students with LDs in order to help them achieve similarly to their peers often “invent or increase differences among students” (White, 2002, p. 728) and create a feeling of need and inferiority (Dunn, 1995).

### **The Controversy Surrounding Accommodations**

Many studies have questioned the validity and effectiveness of certain types of accommodations, such as the use of extended time on tests and the use of technology. In their study of different types of accommodations requested in colleges, Lewandowski, Cohen, and Lovett (2013) indicated that both students with and without LDs benefited from extended time. Moreover, students with LDs, when given extended time, especially when they were provided double the time given for their peers with no LDs, outperformed their non-LD peers. Thus, the use of extended time on tests as an accommodation has been proven invalid because it does not

fit the requirement of providing students with LDs an opportunity to perform similarly as their peers; conversely, it actually led them to surpass their peers' performance, rendering this type of accommodation compromising to the educational status due to its bias (Lewandowski, et al., 2013).

Similarly, the use of technology as an accommodation has been challenged. In their study, Berger and Lewandowski (2013) examined the effect of using a word processor versus hand writing in writing essays on a sample of college students with and without LDs. Among the participants with LDs were students with writing difficulties. Results of the study indicated that students from both groups performed the same in both types of essays, in terms of writing fluency, essay quality, and length. Berger and Lewandowski (2013) concluded that using the word processor did not help students with LDs, nor did the word processor help boost their performance. However, contradictory to Berger and Lewandowski's findings, Ganschow et al. (2000) stated that for students who have writing difficulties, using a computer has proven useful in editing, note taking, and test taking.

Inspecting the eligibility of different accommodations warranted to college students, Weis, Dean, and Osborne (2016) conducted a study examining the types of accommodations provided for community college students diagnosed with LDs to determine whether those accommodations were based on observations or data obtained from diagnostic test results. Results indicated that many clinicians recommended similar instructional and test accommodations, in addition to requesting a change in the grading or methods of evaluations to all learners despite their areas of difficulty, which compromised tests scores' validity (Weis et al., 2016). ). The unwarranted use of certain types of accommodations under such circumstances compromises the learning process.

Lovett (2014) pointed out that there is “sizable empirical literature on the tendency to feign or exaggerate symptoms of disorders [such as LDs] that often lead to testing accommodations....” (p. 86). In contrast, college students with LDs have sometimes resented the need for accommodation. In their book, Rodis et al. (2002) reiterated how participants-students with LDs at the college level regarded their need for accommodations. Garrett (pseudonym), a college student with LDs, resented his needs for accommodations, arguing that asking for accommodation felt like “cheating the system” (p. 107). Another participant, Kevin (pseudonym), expressed his dislike of accommodation, stating “I did not like the image that these accommodations represented. The last thing that I wanted from the testing was to learn that I was needy” (p. 119). Rodis et al. (2002) further captured a contrasting experience of another learning-disabled college student, Pelkey (pseudonym), who did not resent accommodations and described them as “good,” in addition to teaching her how to self-advocate for herself (p. 26).

### **Multilingualism and the Case for LDs**

The field of multilingualism and LDs is still riddled with misconceptions and false beliefs, such as that “raising a child to be bilingual will hurt the child’s development” (Dulude, 2012, p. 28) or will “overtax” learning disabled children’s linguistic system (Dulude, 2012; Paradis, 2007, p. 551). Researchers, such as Korkman et al. (2012), who disagree with these beliefs, state that though learning two languages might reduce the speed of learning vocabularies in both students with and without LDs, it does not “aggravate specific language problems” (p. 964). Korkmen et al. (2012) added that multilingual children’s vocabulary “may be seen as distributed over two languages rather than being restricted” (p. 951). In contrast, Quintana et al. (2012) stated that even after exiting English for second language programs, “English language learners” still lag in their academic performance when compared to their peers.

Evidence from research indicated that though “minority” students with “special education needs” performed lower in English than “minority” students without “special needs” in the dual language programs, they “had faster rates of development, suggesting that they were actually closing the gap with the typically developing students” (Genesee, 2008, p. 41; Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008). In addition, research indicated that majority language students with LDs in dual language programs outperform their peers in monolingual programs while performing lower than their non-disabled peers in both programs (Genesee, 2008). Furthermore, studies on students from multilingual backgrounds with dyslexia indicated that they outperformed their monolingual peers with dyslexia (Dulude, 2013). However, educators have expressed their concerns on educating students with LDs, both from “majority” and “minority” language backgrounds, in dual language schools (Genesee, 2008). Proponents of this argument believe that minority students with LDs should not be educated in dual language programs because it is considered “unethical” to slow their language development and to hinder their progress (Genesee, 2008, p. 39; Paradis, 2007). “Minority” students are more encouraged to enroll in monolingual programs to learn the society’s dominant language (Cummins, 2001; Genesee, 2008; Reagan, 2009). However, if including students with LDs in dual language programs is considered “unethical,” then it is equally “unethical” to exclude and “deprive them of the opportunity to acquire valuable language and cultural skills that would benefit them in their current personal and future professional lives” (Genesee, 2008, p. 39).

Cline (2000) proposed a positive way of viewing an LD in a multilingual program. He argued that reading in another language could provide a dyslexic multilingual student with a reading experience that will enable him/her to eventually “engage successfully with print, generalizing from [one] form to another” (p. 8). At the same time, Genesee (2008) emphasized

that a “decision to exclude individual students can be justified only by well-documented difficulties [that] are likely to be remedied or avoided if they participate in monolingual native language programs” (p. 41).

However, in general, disparity in educational outcomes has been documented among some “ethnic minority” students in dual educational programs. Research indicates that achievement of “minority” students from different socioeconomic backgrounds has been disparate in dual language programs (Genesee, 2008; Gregg 2007; Quintana et al., 2012). For instance, in Spanish/English dual language programs, students from lower socioeconomic levels perform lower in reading and writing than students from higher or considerably advantaged backgrounds (Genesee, 2008). Gregg (2007) stressed the significance of socioeconomic factors on the achievement of students with LDs, arguing that little research investigated its effect. Gregg argued that whenever students with LDs fail to thrive, it is often ascribed to factors other than socioeconomic issues, such as “inadequate motivation or ability” (p. 219). In general, the literature on multilingual with LDs is marked with scarcity and controversy. Through examining the literature on students with LDs and with disabilities, in general, a number of issues were observed, such as the use of labels, which will be examined in the following section.

### **Issues Related to LDs and Disability Studies**

In this section, I tackle issues that surfaced in the literature on individuals with LDs, such as the construction of the disability identity, and the stigma associated with the use of labels. In addition, in this section, I further provide an examination for the view of disability as an experience through the social model lens.

## **The Construction of the Disability Identity**

For the past decades, people with disabilities have been regarded as “mad,” and have been regarded as “medical maladies, objects of charity, and deviants” (Johnstone, 2004, n.p.). Moreover, despite the push from disability studies advocates in the last two decades to activate the social model in the viewing of disability as a normal experience, the influence of the medical model is still dominating the educational and the research field. Medicalization of disability makes disability a physiological problem or a deficit that has to be “fixed,” thus denying individuals with disabilities “the complex relationship of disability, culture and identity” (Linton, 2008, p. 42; Ware, 2001). The absence of narrative research documenting the experiences of individuals with disabilities points to the impact of the medical model of disability that perceives the “problem” within the individuals with disabilities. The medical model does not focus on the effect of the barriers represented in the classroom environment and society on the individuals with disabilities (Polo, 2010, p. ii).

Johnstone (2004) argued that in the literature there is no single definition of disability identity; however, multiple definitions have been accumulated and categorized according to the similarities among them. In general, the disability identity can be viewed as an attempt “to make meaning of self in the world” (Johnstone, 2004, n.p.). Murugam (2009) stated that although the “self” has an important role in the construction of an identity, such identity could be affected by social and cultural predispositions. To understand how the self has developed and evolved over time, Atkinson (2002) suggested the use of life story narratives. Linde (1993) added that narrative helps in “creating and maintaining personal identity,” and in communicating that self to others (p. 99).

On the other hand, disability, from a socio-cultural context, is defined as “a barrier to participation of people with impairments or chronic illnesses arising from an interaction of the impairment or illness with discriminatory attitudes, cultures, policies or institutional practices” (Booth, 2000, as cited in Murugam, 2009, n.p). The view of disability as an obstacle originates from the society structure that requires its individuals to adapt to certain norms that are assumed to fit all. From a medical model perspective, the inability to fit into such structures would deem the disabled individual incapable of living a “normal” life and would lead to the viewing of his/her disability as an obstacle that deprives the opportunity to lead “a normal” life (Linton, 2008; Murugam, 2009). Such view places the disability within the individuals themselves, instead, with the society. In contrast, when one’s disability is viewed as part of a human experience that could not be cured or fixed, then society is responsible for altering its construction to help individuals with disabilities fit into what is deemed the “norm.”

The idea of “normalcy,” which is a socially constructed phenomenon, is challenged when those who do not fit the standards of those norms push for a new reconceptualization of what is deemed normal. The fact that most people could become disabled one day due to illness or age, and the fact that everybody, in a sense is disabled in that there is something that they are unable to perform, challenges the definition of what is deemed as “normal.” Thus, “self-identity, hence, becomes a product of a conscious action that questions identity dominated by social ascription” (Murugam, 2009, n.p.).

Individuals with disability lives are challenged by a society that does not meet their needs. Often when they face these challenges, especially at a young age, decisions in the form of accommodations and activities are made for them (Murugam, 2009). Often, when the disability identity is influenced by the negative connotations by others in the media, it leaves little



opportunity for individuals with disabilities to discover their own identity (Johnstone, 2004; Zhang & Haller, 2013).

Murugam (2009) stated that for individuals to form an identity, they need to do so as “a matter of choice not compulsion,” suggesting that through narratives, people can reflect on the construction of their identities and “choose,” “ignore,” or even “reject” identities that do not align with their views of their selves (n.p.). The constructed identities are subject to change due to the fact that the self evolves due to changes in time, space, and the sociocultural context. As a result, the identities individuals develop are regarded as permeable (Linton, 2008; Murugam, 2009).

Developing a disability identity involves several stages that often result from reacting to the disability and interacting with the environment surrounding them. These stages often start prior to the diagnosis. Rodis (2001) identified seven stages that people with LDs go through in the development of their disability identity:

- 1) The Problem-Without-a-Name Stage: Age 0 - Time of Diagnosis: In this stage, an individual experiences difficulties in learning, such as difficulties in reading and or writing, and realizes that there is a cause underlying these difficulties but lacks the knowledge as to what is the nature of the cause.
- 2) The Diagnosis Stage - Typically Ages 8-Early Adolescence: Once the diagnosis is determined, it can bear both negative and positive consequences to the individual with an LD (Dunn, 1995; Rodis, 2001). Often, when diagnosed, individuals find relief in the fact that “the problem is not with the self, but with some part of the machinery of the brain” (Rodis, 2001, p. 302). The negativity is experienced among adolescents who resent the imperfection that a diagnosis with an LD brings.

- 3) The Alienation Stage - Typically Early to Middle Adolescence: The alienation stage is experienced by many individuals with LDs, despite how different they might react initially to the diagnosis. Rodis (2001) stated that it is common for individuals to resent themselves for not being able to live up to their peers.
- 4) The “Passing” Stage - Typically Early to Middle Adolescence: Rodis (2001) compared this stage to the historical phase experienced by different minorities and people of color in their efforts to pass as white, for instance, due to the compelling social factors of those times. Often concealing one’s identity provides for some form of social acceptance (Rodis, 2001). Linton (2008) referred to the act of hiding a disability as “passing.” Linton (2008) provided a number of reasons that might cause individuals with disabilities to reach this stage, such as, to avoid discrimination or ostracism. It could be unconscious to deny one’s reality or bodily state, or to protect oneself from the loathing of society. The author talks about the consequences of both “overcoming” and “passing” of a disability.
- 5) The Crisis and Reconfrontation Stage - Typically Late Adolescence-Early Adulthood: The denial stage, or the hiding of one’s true disability identity, often leads to a “life crisis.” (Rodis, 2001, p. 303) However, this crisis might have a beneficial weight in helping individuals with LDs reconsider their identities and perhaps embrace “portions of their identities.”
- 6) The “Owning” and “Outing” Stage - Typically Late Adolescence, Early Adulthood: Subsequently, individuals with LDs reaffirm their LDs as part of their self and social identity. Such stance provides persons “with an empoweringly clear marker for their sense of motivation, struggle, socio-political position, and philosophy of life” (Rodis, 2001, p. 219).

- 7) The Transcendence Stage: During this stage, those with LDs learn to accept their identity. Though many acknowledge the stigma attached to it, some see it as a “blessing in disguise.” (Rodis, 2001, p. 221)

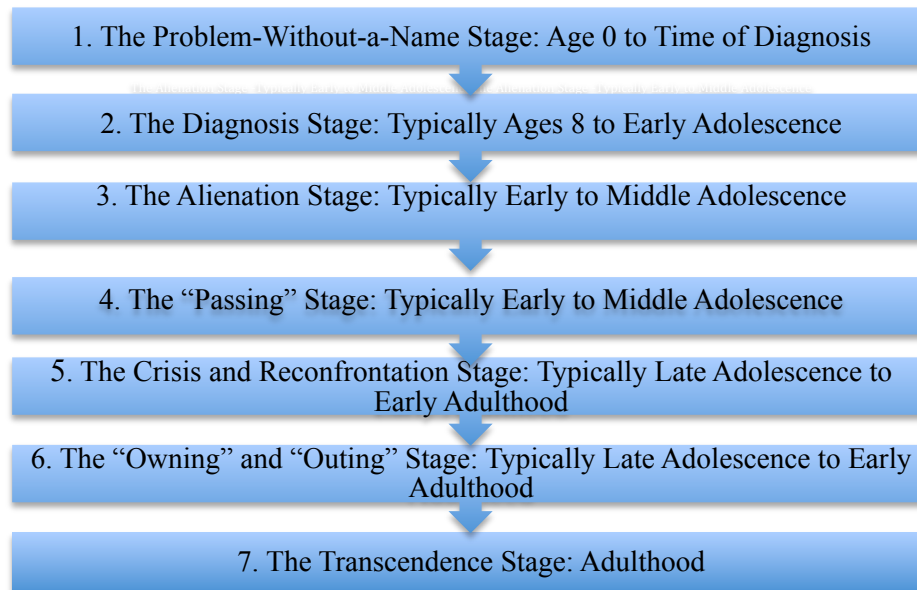


Figure 1. The developmental stages of the disability identity.

Individuals with disabilities often find themselves navigating the world around them and trying to make sense of their disabilities. Examining the development of disability identity in individuals with disabilities through implementing narrative research methodology provides for an opportunity to navigate the certain “turning points,” “tensions or interruptions,” in the participants’ lives that helped shape their stories (Denzin, 1989a, as cited in Creswell, 2013).

The perception of disability as a characteristic of a person would help in viewing such a characteristic as omnipresent among all individuals taking different shapes and forms, which leads to normalizing the experiences of disability and distancing it from concepts, such as deficit. As a result, “impairment should be seen as part of the human condition rather than a basis for setting someone apart, or a characteristic diminishing one’s humanness” (Murugam, 2009, n.p.). However, this normalization approach to disability might complicate who can be considered a

disabled under this view (Murugam, 2009). One way to protect individuals with disabilities is to list disability as an identity, similar to gender and ethnicity. As a result, it would be illegal to discriminate against individuals with disabilities under title law VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a federal law which prohibits employers from discriminating based on a person's sex, race, color, national origin, and/or religion (Gilman, 2012).

Furthermore, disability, as part of a human's characteristic, is created because of the obstacles in one's social-cultural context. The view of disability from a social-cultural perspective helps in empowering individuals with disabilities to develop a strong-positive disability identity that enabled them to potentially fight for their rights "first as a person and secondly as a member of a group of persons in similar circumstances" (Murugam, 2009). In addition, when such positive disability identities are formed and defined through individuals' experiences, it helps in turning these individuals into communities with common experiences (Johnstone, 2004); such communities further empower these individuals and help accentuate the normalcy of such experiences. However, it must be mentioned that though such disabled communities do exist, not all individuals with disabilities ascribe to them as individuals go through difference experiences in the development of their disability identity (Johnstone, 2004).

### **The LD Label**

The effect of labeling an individual as "learning disabled" varies among LD students and educators. Often, students with LDs are given a certain label in order to initiate services (McGrady et al., 2001). However, the realization of the diagnosis can carry both negative and positive connotations for individuals with LDs. The positive are often manifested in the students' relief in knowing that they are not "stupid" or an "odddity," but rather, that their difficulty is caused by their brain's neurological structures, and, thus, brings back their sense of self-worth

(McGrady et al., 2001, p. 178). However, the term, disability, itself, has been contested. Price (2008) argued that the word, “disability,” suggests falsely that these students are incapable of learning at all.

While having LDs could provide an explanation to students’ learning difficulties, it could also imply their inability to learn in certain ways. Discovering the learning disorder’s diagnosis could further instill feelings of helplessness and despair within an individual (Conner, 2012). The LD label, initially created to spare children from discrimination and to provide them the acceptance of society, has turned out to be the same label that inflicts a state of inferiority on these children (Dunn, 1995).

Being diagnosed with a disability can be further stigmatizing. Coleman (2006) defined stigma as “a set of personal and social constructs...of social relations and social relationships” that “mirror culture and society” (p. 141). According to Coleman, stigma is, in fact, a relationship developed between those who consider themselves superior as they inflict devaluing concepts on those who they perceive as inferior. Broadly speaking, stigma is often attached to individuals with certain types of characteristics that are devalued. For instance, stigma is often associated with certain types of bodies, such as the disabled, or with a lower status, such as English language learners (ELLs). Hamayan et al. (2013) reported that the language and culture of refugees, immigrants, and ELLs born in the US are devalued and marginalized. However, being born in a foreign country and/or not having English as a first language does not always necessitate low achievement in English; data on the identified as “Asian American” students showed that “Asian Americans” outperformed those identified as monolingual “Whites” (Quintana et al., 2012).

Studies documenting the experiences of students with LDs, which attest that often being labeled as an LD brings about issues of segregation and stigma (Dunn, 1995; Rodis, et al., 2001). For instance, students with LDs describe the feeling of stigma associated with going to classroom tailored to special needs education. In addition, students with LD become subject to discrimination, and social marginalization often associated with having an LD. Moreover, students further testified feeling inferior to their peers and being bullied at school (Rodis, et al., 2001). Often, students with LDs decide not to disclose their disability in postsecondary education because they do not want to be associated with the label, having experienced its consequences at the elementary and high school levels (Janiga & Costendbader, 2002). Beart (2005) attributed the cause of not disclosing a disability for not seeing the identity of learning disabled as significant due to the painful emotional experience that this label inflicted on individuals with LDs.

Nevertheless, the stigma does not necessarily come with being diagnosed with a disability, but rather, from feeling the gap between students with learning difficulties and their peers. In their case study on a college student with dyslexia, Riddel and Weedon (2014) documented Jean's (pseudonym) experience in feeling the stigma associated with her learning difficulties in elementary and high schools, though she had not yet been diagnosed at that time. Jean stated that she and her teacher had to hide the fact that she was getting help. Jean also spoke of how the stigma associated with not knowing how to read and write made her hide her disability from her friends and family. Gould (2007) argued, on a positive note, that special education provides "access to specialized services; specially designed, individualized and small group instruction; and, individualized curriculum" (p. 33). In contrast, being "disabled" creates a sense of unity and belonging to a certain community, namely "the disability community." Such belonging has not been always viewed negatively; for instance, some "deaf" individuals

expressed pride and rejoice in belonging to their community and did not perceive deafness as a deficit.

Enrolling in colleges is about success, achievement, and for the purpose of securing future jobs. Research indicated that a number of students with LDs have recanted their need to ask for accommodations or to disclose their disability in college due to the stigma associated with disability. Receiving accommodations at the college level is somehow not accepted on the part of some faculty members and those labeled as disabled. Disability studies advocates argued for the necessity to replace such institutional barriers and to provide better educational access that is free of stigma and that values difference.

The use of certain labels, such as “disabled” in special education, is carried out for financial reasons (McGrady et al., 2001), such as to allocate federal funds for these services. Disability studies advocates continue to challenge labels and notions particularly used in reference to disability. For instance, disability studies shifted the problem from the disabled body to attitudes and institutions, arguing that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon (Price, 2008; Walters, 2014; Ware, 2001). From a disability studies perspective, disability only becomes a problem when society fails to accommodate the needs of its individuals (Walters, 2014). Davis (2006a) argued that most studies on disabilities focus on the “disabled person as the object of study,” similarly to the study of race, which focuses on the person of color. Scholars have recently diverted their attention to “whiteness” in studies on race; similarly, studies on disability should shift the attention to what constructs normalcy (Davis, 2006a).

Misconceptions, such as, giving labels would lead to a cure, often cause disappointment and frustration among educators when it is not the case (McGrady et al., 2001). Disability studies advocates have challenged the use of certain terms, arguing that they imply meanings that are

inaccurate or prejudiced. The term, “disabled,” for instance, suggests lacking the ability to learn, whereas the learners are still capable of learning, just not in conventional ways. Linton (2008) discussed how the term, “disability,” can “signify something material and concrete, [a] physical or psychological condition considered to have predominantly medical significance” (p. 175). Linton (2008) argued that such naming is arbitrary. In her book, Dunn (1995) explained her choice of the word “re-abled,” arguing that “so called disabled people do have abilities, which have been disabled in part by a society and school system that insists on a way of learning convenient or familiar to a majority of learners” (p. 7). Disability studies advocates believe that disability becomes a problem due to the environment, which includes society and its institutions that create barriers and turn the experience of disabled people into a problem (Davidson, 2006; Price, 2001; Walters, 2014).

Similarly, the use of phrases, such as “overcoming one’s disability,” are often perceived to be a positive indication of a disabled person’s success in certain life circumstances, whether educational or vocational (Linton, 2008). However, the phrase carries other significant meanings, which might not be as positive in nature. For instance, overcoming one’s disability suggests that disability is the person’s problem and that he/she can “overcome” it, instead of perceiving disability as a socially constructed obstacle to which society must respond to enable this individual (Vidali, 2008). Linton (2008) stated that the term, “overcoming a disability,” is often used to refer to someone who sees disability as a hindrance, or that he/she accomplished something that is expected to be beyond her/his capacity. Linton (2008) argued that it is “physically impossible to overcome a disability,” (p. 165) and that to say someone did, is to assume that he/she has moved beyond other disabled individuals and is no longer thought of as disabled. Such an assumption makes the disabled group seem inferior to that person or incapable



of accomplishing the same task. Linton stated that if a corner on the street is not wheelchair accessible and a wheelchair-user is told to overcome his/her disability by jumping the curb, it suggests that individuals need to overcome their disability instead of having society provide for their needs. The concepts associated with overcoming disability, such as hard-work and talent, are not a problem in their own, as stated by Vidali (2008). Rather, the fact is that society made of the responsibility of a person with disability to “overcome” his/her “tragic” is what disability studies scholars find problematic (Vidali, 2008, p. 46). Vidali (2008) declared that to make overcoming disability the responsibility of individuals with disabilities is to withdraw such obligation from the institutions and to provide them with the excuse for failing these individuals. Trying to overcome one’s disability might lead to adverse reactions. Gillman (2012) argued, for instance, when stutterers try to block the stuttering or hide it in their speech the emotional stress can be greater and the stuttering condition gets more severe.

In addition, the use of the term, “people with disabilities,” has been contested on the grounds that it feeds on the medical model that locates deficits within individuals themselves, instead of as a result of social and physical barriers (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 198). Linton argues that some “nice” terms for those with disabilities include: *physically challenged, able disabled, handicapable, and special people/children*. These terms are often used by those agencies who control people with disabilities’ lives. The term, “physically challenged,” as argued by Linton, is making the obstacle to the participation physical, rather than social. In addition, the term, “challenged,” is used in jokes, such as saying “vertically challenged” when referring to a short person. The term, “abled disabled,” and “handicapable,” as argued by Linton, are “defensive and reactive terms rather than terms that advance a new agenda” (p. 175). Furthermore, Linton (2008) stated, “often individuals who are deemed not normal are devalued and considered as a

burden or problem;” in contrast, “individuals who are considered as normal are highly valued and considered as a potential resource.” (p. 180). In addition, the terms, “normal” and “abnormal,” are often used to distinguish between normal children, for instance, and hearing impaired children, without any clear definition of what is “normal” that is often implied and spoke of in “assumed agreement between the speaker and audience” (p. 181).

In the social model, disability is a result of social barriers, which includes discriminatory and physical barriers. The social model shifted the focus to society in its obligation to remove such barriers, instead of blaming disabled individuals and placing pressure on them to “overcome” what is perceived as their “deficits” (Shakespeare, 2008).

### **The Social Model of Disability**

The medical model of disability had its first impact when the LD movement tried to help locate services by establishing LDs as a neurological problem (White, 2002). Without a neurological dimension to difficulties, students with LDs might be denied services and deemed to be simply poor readers (White, 2002).

The medicalization of disability makes disability a physiological problem or a deficit that has to be “fixed,” thus denying individuals with disabilities “the complex relationship of disability, culture and identity” (Linton, 2008, p. 42; Ware, 2001). Jones (2011) argued that many teacher preparation programs, which embrace the special education perspective, view disability through the medical lens, instead of looking at disability as a “social justice issue” (p. 218). Disability service advocates challenge the medical model that sees disability as a deficit, perceiving disabled bodies as they are located in the social and political environment and how they interact, making disability identity not a problem of a certain body, but rather, a socially and politically constructed issue. They also view disability as a “mode of human difference,” rather

than as a deficit that has to be cured (Linton, 2008; Price, 2001, p. 4; Walters, 2014). Price (2001) stated that disability studies is a “social and political perspective” that aims at focusing on the disabled effect of the institutions and attitudes on people with disabilities. Disability studies adopts the social model towards perceiving disability from the point of view of how the institution as a system “produce[s] human oppression as well as privileges” (p. 5).

The social model of disability perceives disability as an impairment, rather than as a deficit, and is defined disability as the “product of social discrimination rather than the physical, cognitive, or sensory differences of individuals” (Meyers, 2014, p. 403). Social model advocates have argued that the attitude towards these two different concepts, disability and impairment, should be different, stating that instead of trying to cure the impairment, it should be accepted and removed from disability (Shakespeare, 2008). “Disability” and “ability,” as argued by Walters (2014), should be understood using a disability studies framework that values the experiences as a mode of human difference.

### **Summary of Chapter Two**

LDs are identified as a disorder that affects a person’s ability to read, write, spell, and do mathematical skills. It spans across languages and is known to have a life-long effect. There have been many studies that focused on the causes, identifications, and accommodations of student with LDs; however, such literature is marked with the paucity of documentation of the experiences of multilingual individuals with LDs.

The abundance of studies on the nature and causes, identification of LDs, in addition to the services and accommodations provided, has drawn the attention to issues that continues to aggravate the stance of learners with LDs. The use of certain labels, the negative connotation associated with the LDs diagnosis, and the contested accommodations have been brought into

attention through accentuating the role of the environmental barriers in augmenting the needs of students with disabilities. Moreover, the introduction of the social model of perceiving disability has been proposed by disability studies advocates as a way to value the experiences of individuals with LDs as a mode of difference. All such factors have carved the way to conduct narrative research study, which looks deeply into the experiences of multilingual individuals with LDs and to understand the pedagogical implications that such understandings can bring.

Chapter Two presented a review of the literature pertaining to the study, specifically to the field of multilingualism and LDs. In the literature review, a description of the studies that used narrative research to document individuals' life stories was provided. In addition, a cumulative description of different aspects found in the literature on individuals with LDs, in general, was offered.

In the next chapter, Chapter Three, a detailed description of the methodology of the study, including data collection methods and participants, is provided. This description is preceded by a rationale behind choosing narrative research as the research methodology for this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Overview of Chapter Three**

This dissertation documents the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs. Privileged with the opportunity to document my three participants' academic experiences, I am humbled that my dissertation serves as a platform to share the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students. In adopting narrative research as the methodology this study adds to the scarce narrative research on multilingual individuals with LDs. The purpose of this study is to 1) enrich the understanding of the narrated educational experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students with LDs, and to 2) analyze these experiences to potentially provide implications for Composition and Applied Linguistics programs, which can ultimately better serve multilingual individuals with LDs through the understanding of their narratives. In my dissertation, I answer the following research question:

1) What are the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs?

In this chapter, I expanded my description of the research methodology of the study. In the description, I justified my choice of adopting narrative research as my methodology. Subsequently, in Chapter Three, I defined the context of the study, my participants, the data collection method and procedures, and how I safeguarded my data. Issues of trustworthiness and limitations and delimitations for this study followed. I concluded Chapter Three with a brief summary of what was presented in this chapter.

In this dissertation, I have adopted narrative research as my methodology. Using a disability studies lens allows readers of this work to understand the academic experiences of multilingual, college-aged students with LDs. Creswell (2013) stated that research is warranted when pre-existing theories prove “partial or inadequate...for certain populations,” or when theories “do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem” (p. 40). The problem addressed in this research is demonstrated in the need for the narrative research field to focus on the stories of multilingual, college-aged students who are diagnosed with specific LDs that affect their writing and reading skills.

The use of narrative research to investigate the academic experiences of multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs is essential due the scarcity of narrative research on the lived experiences of these individuals. The dialogic nature of narrative research could potentially help to “fill a void in existing literature, [could help to] establish a new line of thinking...or [could help to] assess an issue with an understudied group or population” (Creswell, 2013, p. 102). Furthermore, the use of narrative research as a research methodology has provided an opportunity to observe closely the interaction between the micro aspect of these experiences represented in the participants’ agency and the macro aspects exemplified in the social structure (Richie, 2001). In addition, Ojermark (2007) stated that life histories enable the researcher “to examine the relationships between the cause and effect, and agency and structure” (p. 2). In this dissertation, examining the interaction between the agency and the structure is fundamental in viewing disability from a disability studies perspective as a lived experience.

Narrative research created a platform to discuss any potential issues related to social justice and social change. Such a platform was produced by using audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews to reflect on critical incidents in the educational paths of the participants.

Finally, narrative research methodology provided the participants with a platform to become co-researchers by inviting their collaboration in providing their feedback on the constructed written narratives.

### **Defining my Narrative Research Methodology**

Narrative, in general, is defined as a “sequence of events told in words, and the events are ordered chronologically” (Labov, 2006; Vandesepp, 1995, p. 196). People are “storytelling species” (Atkinson, 2012, p. 2) who “lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). In narrative research, the story of an individual “has within it the language, social relations, communities, conventions, rules, beliefs and discourse of the individuals” (Hanauer, 2000, p.1). As a result, narrative research “provides data on the individual’s perspective on her/his life history” (Hanauer, 2000, p. 1), and it offers insights into how the society influences those narratives (Vandsemb, 1995). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated that it is the narrative researcher’s responsibility to collect and write these experiences to reflect the realities of these storytellers. In narrative research, different types of narrative approaches, such as biographies and autobiographies, and oral history and life history, among others, are identified (Atkinson, 2012; Creswell, 2013). According to Plummer (2011), terms, such as life narratives, autobiographies, biographies, oral histories, personal testaments, and life documents, are used to refer to stories that are written by people who are living them; on the other hand, life story, life history, and biography are written by others.

Researchers implemented different types of narrative approaches according to their areas of research and their research needs. Terms, such as “life story” and “life history,” are often used interchangeably (Roberts, 2002). However, Roberts (2002) distinguished between the two, stating that in “life story,” the story is narrated by an author, and in “life history,” the story is told

by a researcher who would additionally interpret and present the story. Riessman (2008) stated that often, the term, “narrative,” is used as a synonym with “story.” In addition, in the past, the reference to a historical timeframe has been used in studies of life histories; however, such references are no longer adopted (Riessman, 2008). On the other hand, Plummer (1983) emphasized that “life history cannot be told without a constant reference to historical change, and this central focus on change must be seen as one of life history’s great values” (p. 70).

In her book, Behar (1993) detailed how she initially explored fitting her study participant’s story, Esperanza, in a historic or economic framework:

*I found that I couldn’t easily place Esperanza’s life story in the economy, in politics, and in history, which I felt duty-bound to do as an anthropologist. At first, as I listened to Esperanza, I was troubled by the thought that maybe her historias were not ‘historical enough,’ at least not in the sense that I had been taught to think about what constituted history in the Anglo-American academy. (p. 269, emphasis in original)*

However, Behar (1990) argued that the use of life history allows for the examination of the social and cultural systems as individuals interact with them and reflect on them.

The turn to narrative in investigating people’s experiences and life stories has been explained in the nature that these narratives reveal the “truth about human experience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). Miller (2000) defined “life history” as “a series of substantive events arranged in chronological order,” adding that “‘life story’ still refers to the account given by an individual, only with emphasis upon the ordering into themes or topics that the individual chooses to adopt or omit as s/he tells the story” (p. 19). Life history studies revolves around an aspects in a person’s life, such as migration, divorce, and school grades (Ojermark, 2010; Rubin



& Rubin, 2005), where the interview questions are generally questions about each stage in a person's life (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 134).

The use of narrative research has been implemented in a wide range of disciplines, such as history, psychology, anthropology, religious studies, literature, sociology, and education (Atkinson, 2012). From one perspective, in constructing narrative research, Clandinin and Huber (2010) defined the approach of narrative inquiry as “a way of thinking about, and studying experience” (p. 1). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that their terms in discussing what constituted narrative inquiries, namely: *personal* and *social* (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of *place* (situation). This originated from Dewey's view of experience “particularly situation, continuity and interaction” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50, emphasis in original). They further argued that these three terms created “a metaphorical *three dimensional narrative inquiry space*,” where “temporality” is one dimension; “the personal and the social” represent the second dimension, and “place” represents the third dimension. Clandinin and Huber (2010) explained that the temporality dimension is represented in constant change and that the temporal transition is represented in the “the past, present and future of people, places, things and events under study” (p. 2). The second dimension is embodied in the “milieu” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). These stories take place represented in the “cultural, social, institutional and linguistic narratives,” and in the “personal hopes aesthetic reactions and moral disposition,” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). These stories are also represented in the social interaction between the researcher and the participants (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 2). The last dimension represented is place, which “draws attention to the centrality of place, that is, to the specific concrete, physical, and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2012, p. 40).

## **Mapping of Narrative Research**

Narrative events vary according to how respondents “sort life events” and interact with their surroundings; for instance, what might be a sad event at one point in a person’s life might turn into a comedy or a tragedy (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 163). Narratives are told in lines of ups and downs. The interpretations of those narratives can take many forms; for instance, narratives can be projected as trajectories of “happy and unhappy” or “highs and lows,” as portrayed in many aspects, including economic or emotional reasons in looking at different life events, such as pregnancy and illness (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 163). An analysis of such histories can be formed according to these narrative accounts and historical lines according to how participants evaluate and label certain life events (Sandelowski, 1991).

This dissertation adopts an eclectic method, narrative research. This method includes elements borrowed from life history, life story, and narrative inquiry. As a methodology, narrative research allows me to explore the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs. The storied lives of my participants are an ongoing narrative that does not stop when this dissertation is completed, but rather, it continues as these individuals continue to live. This dissertation presents the narrative experiences of the three participants that took place prior to starting this research project, and continues to take place during and after this research is completed.

In adopting narrative research as my research methodology, I used elements of life stories and life histories to construct my participants’ experiences. Such use was demonstrated in using open-ended questions in my semi-structured interviews, as it is the method in life stories, and in arranging my participants’ stories in chronological order. I would further recount the themes within the participants’ narratives, as it is the method in life histories research. Similar to life

history interviews, this dissertation's interviews are "structured through a small number of main questions, one for each stage of a persons' life" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 143). In presenting my participants' educational experiences, I followed the approach of including my own reflections, which is an element that is usually adopted in life history research. Life history research links the participants' lives to wider political, historical, social, and environmental context in order to make sense of these stories (Adriansen, 2012). Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry of three dimensions (e.g., the past, present, and future) were implemented to retell the academic stories of my participants.

This dissertation documents and analyzes the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs in order to understand their experiences. In exploring the academic life stories of multilingual college students with LDs, I focused on how these individuals construct their disability identities and perceive their experiences. I used the disability studies framework that views living with LDs as "an experience," rather than as a "deficit," while examining those experiences.

### **Research Setting and Context**

This narrative research study took place at three public universities in the United States (US). One university was in the northwestern side of the country, and two universities were in the northeastern side of the US. The recruited participants, Amelia, Ciera and Mia (pseudonyms) were three current college students at public universities who met the following inclusion criteria:

- 1) The participants were aged 18 years or older;
- 2) The participants have completed at least one year in college;
- 3) The participants speak more than one language; and

4) The participants have been diagnosed with an LD that affects their reading and/or writing skills.

For this study, I have implemented semi-structured interviews as my main data collection tool.

### **Recruiting and the Challenges of Locating Research Participants**

Upon obtaining the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval letter, (Appendix A), the recruitment process was initiated. To recruit participants for the study, I created a study invitation email (Appendix B), in which I stated the study's introduction and purpose and what was expected from potential participants during the period of their participation. I also included a link to a Qualtrics survey to determine whether any responders met my study's population criteria. The Qualtrics survey contained demographic questions to determine the eligibility of any participants, such as age, number of college years completed, type of disability, and a request to participate in the study. An Informed Consent form was attached at the end of the survey (Appendix C). Due to the nature of the participants' disability that might affect their reading abilities, all recruitment materials were accompanied by an audio component. Potential participants were asked at the end of the Qualtrics survey to read/listen to the consent form and to print their names if they agreed to take part in the study. Upon the completion of the Qualtrics survey, I received a notification in my email.

I started the recruitment process by sending a request to the disabilities offices at the selected universities. I also sent my request to students' organizations, such as Alpha Phi Omega, to forward my study invitation email to any potential participants. I emailed 170 universities spanning across the US Only seven universities agreed to forward my email, three of which requested that I complete their institutions' IRB.

After a period of six months, and upon not receiving a sufficient number of replies from any potential participants, I filed for a modification to my IRB. This modification allowed me to reach additional potential participants via other routes, such as Facebook. I posted advertising to recruit participants for my study on several Facebook pages, including on LD organizations' Facebook pages across different states and in closed-groups dedicated for individuals who are diagnosed with LDs. At the end of the recruitment process, only three participants who responded met my population's criteria.

The challenge in recruiting participants via disability offices was due to the lack of a database for multilingual students with LDs. The lack of response on Facebook might have been due to the nature of social media, in that such a platform is often viewed as unreliable and untrustworthy. For instance, in one of my closed-group Facebook posts, the administrator of the group commented on my post by warning others not to share any bank account information, which casted uncertainty on the legitimacy of my study.

### **Research Population**

The participants solicited for the study were determined according to an inclusive criterion. This criterion included: being a multilingual, college-aged student diagnosed with specific LDs, and having a learning disability associated with reading and writing difficulties, such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. In addition to this criterion, in order to participate in the study, the three participants had to have completed a year at their college.

#### **Participant 1: Amelia**

Amelia is a nineteen year-old college student at a northwestern public university who just started her second year in college around the time we met. Amelia speaks both English and Spanish. At the age of nine, Amelia was diagnosed with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and attention

deficit disorder. Amelia's LDs manifested in difficulties with reading, writing, and math. Amelia stated:

I read a lot slower. Things like math – I will mix up symbols like for positive and negative signs and mix those up a lot. Reading comprehension is more difficult for me; tests take longer – that is just dyslexia. And then dysgraphia, just my handwriting is not very good, and then, I will mix up the letters, like write the word 'the' TEH instead of – or HTE, and then I won't recognize that it is wrong until I re-write it.

Amelia is majoring in biology and wants to become a physician assistant. She wants to continue her studies after obtaining a bachelor's and a master's degree. I met with Amelia on FaceTime for three initial interviews and two follow up interviews. The total number of minutes for Amelia's interviews was 161 minutes.

### **Participant 2: Mia**

Mia is a nineteen year-old college student at a northeastern public university. Mia was born to an American mother and a Filipino father. She grew up speaking both English and Tagalog. Early in her life, Mia was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette's. When Mia was in high school, she was diagnosed with a non-verbal learning disability (NVLD). According to Mia, her learning disability affects her on many levels. She stated that NVLD:

is on the autism spectrum, and it makes things difficult for me to understand. Things that are non-verbal, as it is called...so any facial expressions, anything, like humor, sarcasm. It makes reading comprehension really hard for me to understand the big picture. I focus on the small details, but I don't always see the big picture. I have a hard time in math and science because it is very visual. Sports are really hard for me too. I lack bilateral and

hands on coordination, and it really affects my relationships with people and makes it harder to make friends and communicate and understand what people are saying to me.

In the summer of 2018, Mia completed her first year in college, majoring in social work. When I first met Mia, she was on her summer break going into her second year of college. Three initial interviews and one follow up interview were conducted via FaceTime. The second follow up interview was in person. The total minutes of the five interviews were 130 minutes.

### **Participant 3: Ciera**

Ciera is a twenty-three year-old college student at a northeastern public university. Ciera has a bachelor's degree in psychology. When I met Ciera for our first interview, she was in her first year of graduate school working on her master's degree in student affairs. Ciera grew up speaking Spanish and learned English in school. When Ciera was seven years old, she was diagnosed with a learning disability. Ciera's learning disability affects her ability to read and write. She explains that her learning disability "affects the more specific areas of reading, writing, processing speed, and sensory motor."

Ciera wants to work on campus after graduating with her master's to help students with finding resources and with adjusting to college life and requirements. I met with Ciera on FaceTime for three initial interviews and one follow up interview. The total number of interview minutes was 135 minutes.

The following table summarizes the three participants demographic information.

Table 1

*The Three Participants' Characteristics*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Year in School</u>	<u>Location of School</u>	<u>Major</u>
Amelia	19	Second year in college	Northwestern side of the US	Biology
Mia	19	Second year in college	Northeastern side of the US	Social Work
Ciera	23	First year in a Master's Degree Program	Northeastern side of the US	Psychology

**Data Collection Methods**

Many researchers adopted interviews as their main data collection tool to document individuals' stories (Behar, 1993; Horn & Moss, 2014; Kothari & Hulme, 2004). A number of researchers used interviews to collect the life stories of individuals with LDs (Force, 2007; Issacs, 1997; Polo, 2010; Sampson, 2009). In qualitative research, often, three types of interviews are used: the structured, standardized, closed questions interview, the unstructured, open-ended interview (Seidman, 1998), or the semi-structured interview, which often resembles a conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2000). Although this "conversation" has the elements of an everyday conversation, such as "turn-taking, relevance and entrance and exit talk," it requires longer turn taking (Riessman, 2008, p. 24). In addition, it requires more systematic questioning to establish a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The nature of interviews that allow for accessing individuals' experiences and "overcoming distances both in space and time" made many qualitative studies adopt interviews as its main data collection tool (Peräklä & Ruusuvoori, 2011, p. 529). Seidman (1998) stated, "interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language" (p. 13).

This dissertation aims at collecting and analyzing the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were adopted as the main data collection tool



to document the participants' experiences. In the semi-structured interviews with main questions, follow up questions and probes were developed in the process of collecting the academic experiences of the three participants. Following Rubin and Rubin's (2005) suggestion, the main questions were used to cover the major parts of the research agenda. The follow up questions were used to elicit further details and explanations on the events narrated. Finally, the probes were used throughout the interviews to help "manage" the interviews and to help redirect the interviews to the topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 19), as well as asking for more details and depth.

### **Developing Interview Questions and Field Testing**

In narrative research, often, interview questions are developed around the different stages in a person's life, such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, or around the experiences being documented, such as before, during, or after certain experiences (e.g., motherhood and immigration) (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Ojermark, 2007; Park, 2006; Plummer, 2011). In developing the interview questions, I avoided structuring my questions around different life stages or different experiences to give my participants the choice to select what they wanted to share about their experiences. However, it was essential to choose a starting point in time; thus, I chose to offer a general question, which was developed following Rubin and Rubin's (2005) recommendation: "to get a conversation going on a specific matter and [to] ensure that the overall subject is covered" (p. 13). The general questions were developed providing an example of a starting point, which was the first day in school. I further field-tested the general questions with a colleague. During this testing trial, I interviewed my colleague using my interview questions prior to initiating the interviews with the participants to ensure the clarity of my questions and to test the time allotted for the interviewees to tell their stories. I used a timer to

determine whether the time designed for each interview was sufficient. Finally, following the recommendation of my colleague, upon completing field-testing with my interview questions, I rephrased some of my questions to help promote the understanding of my questions.

During the course of interviewing my participants, I used keywords from participants' narratives to develop follow up questions and probes to gain further details and insights into the stories of my participants. (For a copy of the initial interview, follow up interviews protocol, and guide, please refer to Appendix D).

### **Consent**

The nature of the disabilities that the recruited participants have affected their ability to read and/or write. Their disabilities could have further affected their ability in sequencing and organization. However, the participants of the study who are diagnosed as "learning disabled" are not considered incapable of making an informed decision on whether or not to participate in the study. According to IDEA (2004), LDs are psychological disorders that affect the individual's ability to read, write, speak, and/or do mathematical problems. Hence, the nature of LDs does not limit or diminish the cognitive ability of any of the participants to consent to the study and/or to understand its nature and what it involves.

Upon receiving copies of completed Qualtrics Surveys, accompanied with a digitally signed form of the Informed Consent form in my email, I initiated participant contact. At the beginning of the first interviews, each participant was emailed an unsigned digital copy of the Informed Consent form for her records. In addition, during the first interview, I reviewed the key points mentioned in the Informed Consent form. I have reviewed the following information with each participant: 1) Brief introduction about the study, and 2) participants' rights and responsibilities during their participation in the study. None of the recruited participants had any

questions in regards to the Informed Consent form. Upon reviewing the Informed Consent form, the data collection process was initiated with the first interviewee.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews: Initial Interviews**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that several elements impact the nature of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, including how the “interviewer acts, [what] questions [are asked,] and [how the interviewee] responds in an interview” (p.110). In addition, elements such as, “the place and time ...and the degree of formality established” further affects the relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 110). During the initial interviews, I reflected on the above-mentioned elements and attempted to establish an interview environment that fostered ease and informality and allowed for a degree of comfort for the interviewees. For example, in addition to scheduling a day and time that was chosen by the participants, I always emphasized to the participants that they could cancel if they were not ready to share their stories at the scheduled day and time. I further reminded the interviewees at the beginning of the interviews that they had the right to not answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. I also asked my participants at the beginning of each interview if they had any questions regarding my study or about myself as a researcher. However, I refrained from sharing my personal reason for choosing this topic until asked to avoid any coercion.

The data collection process spanned over a period of seven months. A series of three initial interviews were conducted with each interviewee. Each interview took approximately 30-45 minutes. The three initial interviews were utilized to collect the narrated academic experiences of the participants. The participants were asked questions to help them think back and narrate those experiences.

## **First Interview: Getting to Know Each Other**

In the first interview, I emailed each participant an unsigned digital copy of the consent form and made sure they understood what the study entailed. I also made sure that my participants understood that the interviews were going to be audio-recorded, and during the interviews, I placed the recorder where it was visible to the interviewees. During the first interview, I asked each participant if she wanted to choose a pseudonym for herself, and I offered a list of proposed names. While Mia picked a name from my list, Amelia and Ciera chose their own pseudonyms.

The first interview was also utilized to collect the demographic information of the participants. During this time, I collected the participants' age, years in college, and type of learning disability. One general question was used in the first interview to start collecting the narratives of each participant. The following question was used: *I would like to take you back to your school years, as early as you can remember (e.g., first day at school), and I want you to start telling me what your memories were of school years?*

At the end of the first interview, I thanked each participant for her time and informed her that she would be receiving a written and audio-recorded narrative of the first interview to review before meeting for the second interview. Each participant was informed that the purpose of this narrative check was to look for any missing information she would like to add and/or correct. The narrative checking process will be further detailed later in this chapter.

The interview process was emergent, allowing each participant to tell their story as they saw fit. I used prompts to further explore areas that the participants mentioned in their stories but left unelaborated. I refrained from any direct questions or impositions and let the participants

direct the narrative. However, I resorted to redirecting the participants back to the interview when the narratives seemed to get off topic.

### **Second Interview: Memorable Academic Life Experiences**

The second interview was scheduled approximately a week after the first interview with each interviewee. At the beginning of the second interview, I reviewed the narrative of the first interview with each participant. I also reminded the interviewees of what we last spoke about in the first interview and asked them to continue their story. Upon completing their narrative, I voiced to each participant the following: *Take your time and think back to your educational journey and tell me of three memorable events or scenes you remember.* Participants were encouraged to use paper and pen to jot down their ideas. I informed the participants that I could call them back on FaceTime, or I could sit back and wait for them to write down their ideas. The three participants chose to stay online. However, while Mia chose to tell her three scenes without utilizing any writing, Amelia chose to type on her laptop, and Ciera chose to jot down her ideas on a piece of paper. Each participant was given ample time to decide on her three scenes before starting to share them.

The three memorable scenes were chosen to add more evidence to the participants' told stories. In each scene, details, clarity, and evidence were added. Follow up questions and prompts were employed as well. For each scene, I asked the following questions:

- 1) Where did this scene take place?
- 2) Who was involved?
- 3) What happened?
- 4) What made this scene or moment significant?
- 5) Any other thoughts that this scene might have triggered?

At the end of the second interview, interviewees were thanked for their time and for sharing their stories. During this time, I also reminded each interviewee that the second interview narrative would be emailed to them. The interviewees were also reminded that we would meet for a third interview.

### **Third Interview: College Life and the Future**

The third interview was scheduled approximately three weeks after the second interview for both Mia and Amelia. Ciera, on the other hand, was scheduled a week after the second interview. At the beginning of the third interview, and after completing member checking for their second interview narratives, I asked the participants the following interview question: *Describe a day in your college life.* At the end of the third interview, interviewees were thanked for their time and were thanked for sharing their stories. I then reminded the interviewees that the third interview narrative would be emailed to them.

### **Follow-Up Interviews**

Interviews help in providing an access to participants' experiences (Peräklä & Ruusuvuori, 2011). Moreover, interviews provide ample, detailed accounts of these experiences (Riessman, 2008). According to Van Manen (1990), interviews can be used "as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (p. 66).

Follow-up interviews are organized in order to follow up on the participants' narratives. The follow up interviews for this study were arranged online via FaceTime, except for one follow up interview, with the second participant, Mia. Mia's follow-up interview took place at a public library that was conducive to audio recording. Using scheduled FaceTime interviews provided the interviewees a certain degree of privacy to converse freely.

The use of the employment of follow up interviews and narrative member checks allowed the participants to reflect on the stories they told as presented in my interpretation. Clandinin and Connelly (1991) perceived the process of storying and resotrying as a “fundamental method of personal growth” (p. 2; Narayan & George, 2003). They argued that narrative inquiry as a process involves “storying and restorying and restorying again” (p. 14). The collaboration between the researcher and the participants allowed the participants to see the change in their stories (Clandinin, 1989, as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1991).

Each follow up interview took approximately twenty minutes. During the follow-up interviews, I reviewed the narratives and asked follow up questions on certain areas in the participants’ stories. I asked for instances in the data that were left either unexplained or lacked in depth, details and completed any missing information. At the end of the last follow up interview, each participant was emailed an amount of twenty-five dollars in the form of a gift card or a check. The twenty-five dollars were a monetary thank you for participating in the study.

### **Member Narrative Checks**

The process of member narrative checks was completed throughout a series of steps:

- 1) The participants were emailed a written and audio recorded constructed narrative of each interview to provide them with ample time to check the narrative;
- 2) At the beginning of each second, third, and follow up interview with each participant, I spent approximately 10-15 minutes to review the previous interview constructed narrative to check for the accuracy of the narratives; and
- 3) Participants were given time to comment on each narrative and to add to it.

The only changes that were made to the narratives were to correct a few words that were misheard and to clarify a fact that was misunderstood.

Engagement with the participants can affect the researcher, especially at an emotional level, leading to a certain degree of influence (Morrow, 2005). Such influence can be limited to the maximum extent possible by completing member checks and by employing the concept of “reflexivity.” (Riessman, 2008, p. 193) Riessman (2008) stated, “practicing reflexivity strengthens the case of validity” (p. 193). Member checks were carried out to ensure the accuracy of the narrative constructed and to strength the validity of the stories presented as accurate representations of the participants’ academic lived experiences. In the next section, I explore how I used my journals during my data collection period to reflect on my influence as a researcher and as a mother in academia with a child with a disability.

The following table summarized the duration and topic of each interview conducted with each of the three participants.



Table 2

*Summary of the Topics and Duration of the Three Participants' Interviews (Int.)*

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Int.1</u>	<u>Int.2</u>	<u>Int.3</u>	<u>Follow Up Int.1</u>	<u>Follow Up Int.2</u>
Amelia	1. Demographic information. 2. Early school memories (45 minutes)	1. Member's check. 2. Continue early school memories (44 minutes)	1. Member check. 2. Continue early school memories 3. Three memorable scenes. (40 minutes)	1. Member check. 2. College life (29 minutes)	1. Member check. (3 Minutes)
Mia	1. Demographic information. 2. Early school memories. (45 minutes)	1. Member check. 2. Three memorable scenes. (39 minutes)	1. Member check. 2. College life. (20 minutes)	1. Member check. (9 minutes)	1. Member check. (17 minutes)
Ciera	1. Demographic Information. 2. Early school memories. (45 minutes)	1. Member check. 2. Continue early school memories. 3. Three memorable scenes. (45 minutes)	1. Member check. 2. College life. (36 minutes)	1. Member check. (9 minutes)	N/A

**Researcher's Journals**

The notion of reflectivity is based on adopting two types of strategies, recorded journals, and peer debriefing (Morrow & Smith, 2000; Noble & Smith, 2015). I have implemented the use of the first notion by recording journals throughout the study to document my experience, emotions, assumptions, and decisions that experienced during the data collection process (Morrow, 2005; Noble & Smith, 2015). These journals captured “experiencing the experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 89), and they documented how the study was unfolding. The

main purpose of writing these journals was to keep track of any aspects pertaining to the data collection and analytical processes.

Pavlenko (2007) discussed two types of influence that narrative analysis might become subjected to: the “global or the macro-level” and “the contextual or the mirco-level” sources (p.175). At the global level, influence might arise from issues, such as “historic, political, economic, and cultural circumstance of narrative production,” and, at the contextual level (which refers to the context of the interview), such impact might arise from “language choice, audience, setting, modality, narrative functions, interactional concerns, and power relations on ways in which speakers and writers verbalize their experiences” (p. 175). I tackled these influences as they arose, as Pavlenko recommended. In tracking such instances, I employed the use of my written journals and indicated the impact on the study in the form of collecting and presenting the data to provide a level of transparency.

Another influence that might occur in doing narrative research, according to Pavlenko (2007), happens when the culture and the linguistic background of the researcher are different from those of the participants. The researcher might find understanding the narrative of participants unclear due to cultural differences in constructing narratives. For instance, variation in presenting these narratives might lead the researcher to “silence” voices that do not conform to the researcher’s shared narrative norms (p. 215). Pavlenko (2007) stated that such influence could be mitigated by having more than one researcher collect the participants’ stories and by having researchers work with participants from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, because this approach could not be implemented in this study, I am utilizing another method to fully understand the narratives of my participants. This method is through checking the constructed narratives with my participants. Checking the accuracy of the data with the

participants, and ensuring that the participants are satisfied with how their identities were protected in the data collected (Riessman, 2008) are means followed in this study to ensure the privacy of my participants and the accuracy of the data collected.

Establishing rapport with participants is a critical step to supporting the validity and accuracy of data collected and to enhancing the quality of the study's evidence. Building rapport and trust with the participants has helped me "to ground the study in the culture and the context of the participants" (Morrow, 2005, p. 256). To build trust, several key steps were undertaken, such as spending sufficient time with the participants and "immersion" in the context of the study, which, primarily, took place during interviews (Morrow, 2005). In addition, constructing myself as a "passionate" inquirer during the data collection process, borrowing Guba and Lincoln's term (1994), potentially helped my participants to recognize how much I am investing in listening to their narratives (p. 115). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated that interacting with the participants in "a meaningful way" and engaging in their realities helps the researcher to understand such realities (p. 28).

Finally, the journals I wrote were written for the purpose of sharing my experience during this research process as a mother of a child with a disability. Chase (2011) argued that often, researchers include their own experiences in their inquiries. Such inclusion serves two purposes: (1) to "create a more equitable relationship" with the interviewees and (2) to "explore a topic... more fully by including the researcher's experiences" (p. 423).

### **Writing Academic Narratives**

Atkinson (2002) stated, "telling stories...is so basic to our nature" and that we "think," "speak," and "bring meaning to our lives" through narratives (p. 121). In this study, I collected the academic narratives of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs.

During my data collection, I transcribed each interview after completing it using a combination of Bucholtz's (2000) and Du Bois's (1991) transcription conventions (Appendix D). The transcription was carried out for the purpose of "creating a representation in [the] writing of a speech event" for this dissertation and for any future discourse research (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 72). Upon transcribing each interview, I started organizing and arranging the responses of each interview for the purpose of a member check. Following Seidman's approach (1998) in writing narratives, I organized different passages that shared the same theme. For instance, when I asked a follow up question to an interviewee about a specific theme, such as about their difficulties in writing, I included the interviewee's answer with the paragraph where it was mentioned previously. Further, I omitted certain characteristics of oral speech, such as "uhm," "ah," "like," and "you know," which, according to Seidman (1998), "do not do the participant justice in a written version of what he or she said" (p. 124). Additionally, I inserted my words between parentheses to indicate, for instance, what the interviewee was referencing. I also used ellipsis to indicate omitted speech. Upon completing the members' checks, I organized all responses in one document and read the new version several times. I then removed any repetitions in the stories told. I further eliminated all storied events that my interviewees did not witness or experience first hand, such as stories that were told to them and that were not directly relevant to their experiences. I started writing the final narratives by "stitch[ing] together the events" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 200), and by organizing the stories according to a chronological order (i.e., from childhood to college).

During the transcription and narratives writing process, I followed a thorough approach towards protecting the confidentiality and privacy of my participants. Hence, all identifying information that could lead to disclosing the identity of the participants was removed in the

transcribed data and in the written, constructed narratives. In the following section, I examine in detail the methods I followed to safeguard my data.

### **Safeguarding the Data**

The nature of this study posed no risk to the participants, other than the everyday emotional experience. Moreover, several procedures were implemented to ensure the participants' right to participate, right to confidentiality and anonymity, and right to be protected from any potential risks.

To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, I stored the copies of the digital informed consent forms and all interview recordings in password protected files on my personal computer accessed only by the principal investigator. In addition, in the transcribed interviews and written narratives, all information that might disclose the identity of the participants, such as names of people, cities, and universities, were removed, and only pseudonyms for the participants were used. The same procedure was applied in coding the analyzed data; none of the participants' real names appeared anywhere on the transcripts or the data analyzed.

In order to analyze the narratives of my participants, I adopted the notion of coherence that examined the narratives structure to look for elements of detailed, in-depth, and comprehensive narratives. In the following section, I provide an examination of the characteristics of the elements of coherence used to analyze the collected narratives.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Rubin and Rubin (2005) stated that in interviews, researchers collect the interviewees' experiences. During the analysis process, a researcher "stitch[es] together [a] description of [the told] events into a coherent narrative" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 200.) A researcher further

develops a discussion based of those narratives. In this dissertation, I collected the experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with LDs to understand their experiences through analyzing them. I have adopted the element of coherence to examine the structure of my participants' constructed narratives.

### **The Construction of an Academic Research Narrative**

People often tell of their experiences in narrative form (Atkinson, 2002), a narrative that is comprised of a “story, plot, characters, themes, genres and points of view” (Plummer, 2011, p. 187), and “understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Plummer (2011) identified a number of elements necessary to construct a coherent life narrative, including:

- 1) A sense of ordering—usually linear—of events;
- 2) A sense of a person behind the text—a kind of stability of identity and continuity;
- 3) A sense of voice and perspective belonging to a narrative. Someone has to tell the story, and that someone should be identifiable; and
- 4) A sense of causality: if this, then that... People are motivated to do things, there are reasons things happen—even if sometime the reason becomes ‘chance’ (p. 196).

In the following section, I examine the concept of coherence and its elements of causality, continuity, and chronology, which include components of character and voice.

### **Coherence**

Coherence is defined as “a property of texts; it derives from the relation that the parts of a text bear to one another and to the whole texts” (Linde, 1993, p. 12). Coherence can be recognized on two levels: the word level and the text as a whole. On the word level, words, phrases, sentences, and the larger discourse units must have a “proper relation to one another and

to the text as a whole” (Linde, 1993, p. 12). The second level is represented in that “the text as a whole must be seen as being a recognizable and well-formed text of its type” (Linde, 1993, p. 12). In this second level, the content of the narrative must be understood and be in good stand to the prior text. The events of the narratives are arranged to give “a sense of linearity and even inevitability” (Sandelowski, 1991. p. 163).

Linde (1993) argued that the coherence system is governed by beliefs that hold the narrative together. These beliefs are derived from the “expert system,” which Linde (1993) defined as, “beliefs and relations between beliefs held, understood, and properly used by experts in a particular domain” (p. 163). The beliefs derived from the expert system are originated from fields and theories, such as psychology, feminism, or the medical or social model of disability. In addition, these beliefs could originate from what Linde (1993) referred to as the “common sense system” and defined as “the set of beliefs and relations between beliefs that speakers may assume are known and shared by all competent members of the culture: it consists of beliefs that purport not to be beliefs, but to be a natural reflection of the way things really are” (p. 222). In addition, life stories have plots, which provide coherence and make the story interesting. A life story, as argued Plummer (2011), is linear and organizes the plot around major themes and turning points—“a plot takes a sequence—a beginning, middle and end” (p. 187)

The construction of the narrative is governed by the three main principles of coherence: causality, continuity, and chronology. Such principles help transform an experience into a narrative.

**Causality.** The element of causality is salient to the coherence of a narrative. Causality is linked to an adequate exercise of agency by the narrator and is defined as the acceptable reasons established for a certain sequence of events (Linde, 1993; Vandsemb, 1995). However, according

to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), this does not necessarily mean that the narrative is derived from “a model of cause and effect,” but rather, is understood as a whole (p. 7), as causality can be established through contexts as well (Vandeseemb, 1995).

Linde (1993) indicated that the element of causality could be established through different ways, including but limited to:

- 1) “*Character as a form of adequate causality*”: The character of the narrator is the strongest form of adequate causality to a narrative. Ascertaining the protagonist’s character is a key element to development of events and to providing adequate reasoning;
- 2) “*Establishing a chain of causality*”: The accounts of narrators must be created with a balanced degree of causality;
- 3) “*Richness of an account as a form of adequate causality*”: This can be established through “cover[ing] along period of time” (p. 135); and
- 4) “*Multiple noncontradictory accounts provide adequate causality*”: The use of multiple accounts to explain a cause provides adequate causality if the accounts do no contradict (emphasis in original, p. 140).

However, there is also one way to present events without the need to define a cause when describing life choices that were made by “accident,” or, in other words, were not based on a calculated reason (Linde, 1993).

**Continuity.** Dewey perceived experience as an educational inquiry. He recognized experience as both personal and social. Dewey emphasized that people’s experiences should be understood as individual experiences, as well as situated in the social context. Dewey’s criterion of experiences is “continuity.” An experience is a result of other experiences and lead to others;



where the past, the present, and the future are the continuum to move on from the personal and to the social context of individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In the case of events that lack adequate causality, Linde (1993) argued there are two types of relations: accident and discontinuity, both of which are due to “a deficient degree of intention and/or agency by the protagonist” (p. 140). Sometimes, a narrator might explain the reason of a certain event as accidental; in other words, the narrator did not connect the event to any cause, and, as a result, viewed it as an accident.

Discontinuity, on the other hand, is perceived when the narrator changes the course of life choices abruptly without justification. Linde (1993) emphasized that such discontinuity must be accompanied with some type of explanation. Different types of strategies can be employed to fill in a void of not having a direct cause, for example:

- 1) “*The strategy of apparent break*”: Sometimes in narrative events, when there is break, the narrator can provide some commonness between the previous event and the subsequent one that will allow for such seeming discontinuity;
- 2) “*Strategy of Temporary Discontinuity*”: This occurs when an event occurs that has an explanation that goes back in time and does not show in the sequence of events (p. 153). This latter strategy is linked to finding character traits that provide a motivation for this type of discontinuity.
- 3) “*Strategy of Discontinuity as Sequence*”: Discontinuity as sequence can be identified when a two-sequenced event shares certain qualities, despite the speaker not seeing or rejecting any;

- 4) “*Strategy of Self-distancing*”: This type of strategy is deployed when the speaker sees a two sequencing event as discontinuous and accepts this discontinuity on the base that he/she is a different person when the new event has happened;
- 5) “*Strategy of Discontinuity as Meta-continuity*”: This type of discontinuity appears when the speaker takes the role of someone who sees discontinuity as his/her norm for the simple “desire for multiplicity, change, or the like” (p. 158); and
- 6) “*Discontinuity Without Account: One Thing Leads to Another*”: This type of strategy is similar to the “accident,” in the sense that the speaker does not provide any type of management for the discontinuity, other than discussing its nature. It is different from the “accident,” in terms of number, whereas an accident is one of the discontinuities, and the discontinuities involve more than one event. However, Linde (1993) describes this strategy as a shortcoming on part of the speaker. In narrative work, it is significant to comprehend what happened to the interviewee and how she reacted towards her experience (Adriansen, 2012).

**Chronology.** Chase (2011) stated that narrative theorists defined narrative as:

A distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time. (p. 421)

Timeless makes narratives incomprehensible (Plummer, 2011; Sternberg, 1990), or even more invisible (Sternberg, 1990). Hence, the narrative must adhere to a certain order to make sense – an order that both the narrator and the audience can comprehend (Linde, 1993). This temporal order makes the narrative coherent. However, such order can be taunted in terms of

“appropriate delays and twists and surprises en route, if not pockets of darkness and ambiguity to the end ” (Sternberg, 1990, pp. 903-904).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed the concept of “temporality,” arguing that we often find ourselves thinking about an event in terms of time—“it has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future” (p. 29). Life experiences are often told in reference to historical changes, hence providing the element of time by linking life events to external incidents (Plummer, 1983). Asking individuals to tell a narrative that adheres to a chronology, as argued Connelly and Clandinin (1990) is “manageable task” (p. 9).

In this study, I asked my participants to tell me about their experiences and to start from the earliest recollection they had of their school. My participants’ academic experiences are located in the past and narrated in the present. Their experiences may have some implications for the future. My participants’ stories are ongoing, as my study started and will continue after this study would end. In the upcoming section, I examine issues pertaining to the use of narrative research as my methodology and examine the limitations and delimitations of this dissertation.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research aims at developing “methodological strategies to ensure the ‘trustworthiness’ of the findings” and to ensure rigor (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 34). It has been argued that novice researchers, such as myself, could find it challenging to establish rigor in research due to the absence of consensus on specific criteria or standards to evaluate a qualitative study (Rolfe, 2006). Given the current established standards, to the extent possible, I would like to define how I applied certain standards to reassure that this narrative research dissertation reached its potential at this given time.

## **Narrative Research and the Issues of Trustworthiness**

Riessman (2008) argued that historians often stressed the importance of checking the accuracy of stories with “factual truth” (p. 186). However, stories that are found inconsistent do not necessarily indicate inaccuracy or falsehood (Plummer, 2011; Riessman, 2008). On the contrary, these stories are observed as the “most interesting, indicating silenced voices and subjugated knowledge” (p. 186). Hence, the only “factual truth” that matters is the story as told by the participants. It has been argued that life accounts are merely a representation of life, rather than life itself; in addition, this representation is a retelling of the factual life and a reconstruction of the story to reach a certain outcome (Plummer, 2011; Sandelowski, 1991). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) stated that objectivity, in reality, could not be achieved and that we only “know a thing only through its representation” (p. 5). In seeking lived experiences from individuals, the main concern is to document the events of these life stories, as the storytellers perceived them.

In doing narrative research, I acknowledge the fact that in sharing their stories, my participants might have chosen not to share certain aspects of their life due to one reason or another, such as bringing back “painful memories, denial or lack of readiness” (Plummer, 2011, p. 78). Hanauer (2000) argued that narrative itself, generally speaking, is not “unproblematic as a source of information”:

A personal narrative ...includes factual elaborations, omissions and inaccuracies. It is the story I tell about myself rather than a factual record of my life's events. ...Throughout life you retell and revise this story. Accordingly, any particular retelling of the story at a specific time and place is the understanding of your life at that particular time and presents a temporary rendering of the narrative. (p. 1)

Following basic measures in conducting a research adds to the transparency of the study.

Some of these basic measures include: following the detailed steps in conducting the study as it is outlined in the methodology section of the study; identifying how the findings and interpretations were reached; and sharing some of the data collected in the study in a form of the participants' narratives "where appropriate" (Riessman, 2008, p. 196). Reliability of any scientific research depends on applying a scientific approach towards developing appropriate research questions and executing the study in a manner that can be "logically and rationally explained" (Lyon & Weiser, 2013, p. 120). In attempting to do so, I have provided a detailed description of the research question, paradigm, and data collection methods and analysis. In addition, I have explained, in detail, the rationale behind each step taken.

In narrative research, it is fundamental to establish trustworthiness. The researchers' findings and interpretations, along with assumptions and predispositions, must be aligned and made transparent to the readers. Hence, I have recorded my journals during the data collection process of this study to help establish how my positionality helped in arriving at the findings, thereby establishing applicability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1995; Noble & Smith, 2015).

In addition, I have also acquainted myself with the views on different aspects related to the phenomenon. Morrow (2005) stated "that a greater grounding in the literature militates against bias by expanding the researcher's understanding of multiple ways of viewing the phenomenon" (p. 254). In-depth reading in the literature on the aspects related to the dissertation topic has potentially helped me to realize the various and often contrasting views in the literature.

This narrative research based study serves as a platform to share the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs that affect their reading and writing skills. The aim of sharing and analyzing such

experiences is to understand the lived realities of these participants. These narrative experiences represent one reality—that of its participants—which cannot be generalized to other participants. Instead, the study’s findings could be implemented to further explore and understand the lives of multilingual, college-aged students with specific LDs.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

In this section, I discuss how I addressed external conditions that might have limited or weakened the outcomes of the study. In addition, I outline the parameters I established to restrict the scope of the study. Initially, the nature of the data collection tool, namely interviews, could have possibly weakened the study due to the dialogical nature of these tools. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), a researcher might “make cultural assumptions that influence what they ask and how they construe what they hear” (p. 29). However, steps were established to minimize the influence that could have arisen from implementing such a data collection tool. For instance, I implemented strategies, such as member checking and the use of a researcher’s journal, to limit influence to the greatest extent possible.

In terms of the study’s delimitations, several criteria have been implemented to ensure the feasibility of carrying out this study. In terms of the scope of the study, I focused my research on two main areas: multilingualism, combined with LDs. I excluded any participants who did not speak more than one language due to the nature of this research, which focuses on multilingual individuals. I narrowed disabilities in general to LDs and further narrowed further my focus to LDs associated with difficulties in reading and writing, such as dyslexia and dysgraphia, and excluded LDs, such as dyscalculia, which is related to mathematical difficulties. The participants of this study are defined further as college-aged students, thus excluding any participants that were not been enrolled in college. The study further excluded any minors.

The low turn out of individuals who were interested in participating in this study might have been due to the nature of the study, which is based on interviews. Other approaches could be implemented to ensure including more participants in the future, such as the approach adopted by Luttrell (2011). In her study, Luttrell discovered that selected populations were not interested in talking about their experiences during in-depth interviews. Hence, Luttrell (2011) had her participants take part in activities, which included “weekly journal writing; ...media collages; improvisational role plays of their ‘pregnancy stories’; and a collaborative book of self-portraits accompanied by texts” (p. xiv). Such measures can be implemented in future studies to help in recruiting participants.

### **Summary of Chapter Three**

This dissertation’s methodology borrows its elements from life story, life history, and narrative inquiry to help understand the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs. The participants’ experiences were documented through semi-structured interviews that allowed the participants to share their stories as they saw appropriate. To ensure the coherence in the construction of the participants’ stories, an analytical framework was identified to apply to the academic stories of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera. Such analytical framework determined the establishment of the elements of causality, continuity, and adequate chronology in the stories collected. Finally, certain steps were followed to establish the trustworthiness of the study, such as keeping research journals, conducting member checks, and following rigor in executing the methodology of the study.

In this chapter, different aspects, in relation to the methodology of the study, were examined. In this chapter, I explained the reasons behind choosing narrative research as my methodology. I provided a synopsis of my three participants, and I detailed how I conducted

interviews as my data collection tool. I further explained how I stitched together the stories. Finally, I discussed issues of trustworthiness and how I addressed them. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of the limitations that could have weakened the study, followed by a discussion of the delimitations necessary to conduct a feasible study.

The next chapter, Chapter Four, answers the research question through presenting the three participants' academic journeys. In addition, Chapter Four explains the analytical framework used in establishing the element of coherence in the stories collected. Finally, Chapter Four provides a thematic analysis of the three journeys.



## CHAPTER 4

### DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

#### **Overview of Chapter Four**

This dissertation documents the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs. The purpose of the study is to enrich the understanding of the participants' experiences through the sharing and analyzing of their stories. This dissertation aims further to provide implications for the Composition and Applied Linguistics fields to better serve multilingual individuals with LDs through the understanding of their narratives.

In the previous chapter, Chapter Three, the methodology of this study was presented with discussions about participants, the data collection process, and the proposed analytical framework to analyze the constructed academic experiences of the three participants. Chapter Three further detailed the limitations and delimitations of this study. This dissertation is guided by one research question:

- 1) What are the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs?

To answer the research question, in this chapter, the three participants' academic journeys are presented.

Furthermore, Chapter Four provides the analytical framework represented in the element of coherence of the constructed academic narratives of the three participants. Finally Chapter Four provides a thematic analysis of the three academic journeys. Chapter Four concludes with a summary of the chapter.

In this dissertation, I adopted the use of a semi-structured interview narrative research as my methodology. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that we comprehend the world narratively and that it “makes sense to study the world narratively” (p. 17). In collecting and analyzing the stories of my participants, I approached each story while embracing disability studies as my framework. From a disability studies perspective, disability is viewed as an impairment, rather than as a deficit, and is perceived as “the product of social discrimination rather than the physical, cognitive, or sensory differences of individuals” (Meyers, 2014, p. 403).

In employing the disability studies lens, I am valuing my participants’ stories as a reflection of different realities. The use of such lens has further enabled me to contrast the effects of the medical and social models of disabilities on my participants’ experiences. The disability studies lens has also allowed me to study my participants’ embodied experiences and to observe the cultural, historical, and individual understandings of their disability. One of the main objectives of using narrative research as my methodology is enabling the participants to not only share their lives and discuss their experiences, but further, to allow them to weigh in on their “social, economic, and political spaces” to “communicate how structure and agency intersect to produce the circumstances of a particular person’s life, and capture processes of change” (Ojermark, 2007, p. 3).

I entered the data collecting process with the assumption that each participant has a unique story to tell, which represents the reality of what happened in their lives. I refrained from analyzing any data until the data collection process was completed to avoid any unconscious attempts to create a theme thread while interviewing my participants.

To answer my research question, “What are the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs?” I present the academic

journeys of my three participants, Amelia, Mia, and Ciera. In these accounts, the participants' journeys document the academic life experiences from the first day of school until the time when the last interview was conducted. These collected academic journeys spanned over a period of twenty-one years, specifically from 1997 until 2018.

### **Amelia's Academic Journey (2002-2018)**

Amelia is a nineteen-year-old undergraduate student majoring in biology. Growing up in the northwestern side of the US with her parents and younger sister, Amelia spoke English and learned to speak Spanish while at school. At the age of nine, Amelia was diagnosed with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and attention deficit disorder. Amelia's father was diagnosed with dyslexia as well. During her school years, Amelia had difficulties with math, reading, and reading comprehension, in addition to difficulties with handwriting and copying notes in school.

When I first met Amelia, she was on summer break and was going into her second year of college. The interviews that I conducted extended over a period of three months. During our last interview, Amelia was in the second week of her sophomore year in college. All interviews with Amelia were conducted via FaceTime. In the first interview, and upon reviewing the consent form and completing the demographic information related to the study, I asked Amelia, "What were your memories of your school year?" Thinking back to those memories, Amelia started telling her story.

#### **Early School Years**

When Amelia was in kindergarten, she started noticing that she was "different" from the other children in her class. At that time, Amelia became aware of her inability to complete class work within the same time frame as other students. She recalled those struggles:

There were a set of twins in my class, and they could add really well, and it took me so much longer. Then, in first grade, I had a teacher who was very not nice. We weren't allowed to use the restroom until we completed our assignments. With writing and reading, it would take me more time than anyone else. So I ended up having to sneak out of the classroom to use the restroom because I couldn't finish them in time. (Amelia, first interview)

During the first and second grade, Amelia's learning difficulties affected her on many levels. In terms of reading, Amelia read at a slower level than her peers. She experienced difficulties understanding what she read, and that affected her during tests. Moreover, Amelia's handwriting was "not very good," as she often misspelled words, and would not recognize that they were spelled wrong. Her writing difficulties have further affected her ability to copy from the board. When copying notes from the board, Amelia described the letters as "just kind of jump[ing] around." She felt that copying was "one of those things that everyone just assumes kids know how to do." In relation to her mathematical skills, Amelia confused positive and negative signs and took longer than other students when solving problems and completing math sheets. In general, Amelia noticed how the students in her class would complete class work ahead of her.

Generally speaking, Amelia's learning difficulties affected her ability to spell, read, and write. Aggravated by her learning difficulties, Amelia tried to hide her inability to function at the level of her classmates. Amelia was assigned books that were at a lower level than her peers, which caused her to feel embarrassed. She used different strategies to fill the gap she noticed in her academic performance when comparing herself to her peers. For instance, Amelia would pretend to read and guess words while reading to conceal her inability to read them. She would

also choose books from a higher-level reading section, and Amelia would pretend to be able to read them by flipping the pages and looking at the pictures to guess what the books were about.

Amelia was able to hide her inability to read from her teachers by using these strategies.

However, while reading to her mother, Amelia's mother would stop her and make sure she was reading some words she tended to skip over when reading due to her reading difficulties.

During second grade, Amelia was diagnosed with LDs, namely dyslexia and dysgraphia, in addition to attention deficit disorder. Due to the fact that Amelia's school did not have a program for dyslexic students, Amelia's parents decided to transfer her to another school.

**Changing schools.** After completing the second grade, and because Amelia's school did not have any resources for students with dyslexia, Amelia's parents decided to transfer her to another public school near their home. Having to change school weighed heavily on Amelia's self-esteem, and it made her realize how her LDs are affecting her life, not only on the academic level, but socially, as well. Amelia had to start going to another school, and, as a result, she lost the company of her best friend. The time when Amelia learned of her parents' decision to transfer her stood out clearly in her mind:

We [had] just gone on this big hike to this ranch. My dad ... a lot of my friends, and their dads, we all had gone to this couple of days backpack trip into this ranch.... So we had been there for a couple of days when my mom and my dad kind of took me aside and explained that next year, I was not going to be able to go to the same school because I was dyslexic. For me, my kind of first thought was like 'Oh, I'm too stupid to go to my current elementary school, so I got to go to an elementary school for stupid people.' ... I think the hardest part was that my kind of best friend in the world at that point wasn't changing schools with me.... We had been through preschool through the second grade

together. We did absolutely everything together. It was really hard for both of us.

(Amelia, third interview)

The transfer from one school to another and losing the company of her best friend was a difficult time for Amelia. The new start was equally challenging. On her first day at the new school, Amelia was paired with “a buddy” to help her with the transition. However, for an unknown reason, that assigned buddy did not want to be with Amelia after their first day. Due to the unwelcoming atmosphere at the new school, it took Amelia almost a year and a half to make friends. Amelia remembered that it was a difficult time for her mother as well, because her mother knew of the challenges Amelia had with making new friends.

Amelia’s social struggles at school with making friends led to her staying indoors during recess. She tried to hide the fact that she did not have any friends by staying in the library and reading comic books, working on a computer, and/or just wandering the hallways by herself. At the same time, Amelia started getting more help with reading at her new school. The school assigned her a tutor, who would pull her out of classes to work on her reading. However, the time Amelia was usually taken out was when a guest speaker was coming. Amelia’s school used to invite scientists as guest speakers. Amelia loved science and was frustrated that she had to miss these speeches to work on her reading. Amelia “hated” going to the Special Education reading classes and felt resentment towards her Special Education reading teacher.

During the third grade, as Amelia continued to struggle with learning and making friends, the school arranged for a disability fair. At this fair, a number of individuals with different disabilities came to the school to share their experiences with the students. Amelia recalled this fair as a turning point in her life. At the fair, in addition to learning about different disabilities, it was the first time she met with an adult with dyslexia, other than her father.

**The disability fair.** At the fair, Amelia and her classmates met individuals who had different physical and LDs and learned about the nature of those disabilities. Amelia and her classmates met with a woman who had a service dog that was able to detect the woman's seizure before they happened and fetch her medicine. They also met with an individual who had dexterity issues and could not tie her shoes. Amelia found the disability fair very informative, as she and her classmates were put through a variety of simulation experiences to imitate a dexterity issue through wearing rubber gloves and trying to tie their shoes. They also met with a person who was diagnosed with dyslexia; such an encounter stood out in Amelia's mind. Amelia watched her classmates as they experimented with having dyslexia. The experiment required the students to read from a paper while looking at its reflection in a mirror.

Amelia was glad that her classmates were able to simulate a dyslexic person's experience—an experience she was living. Many of her classmates, who were diagnosed with dyslexia, were “ashamed” of having dyslexia and would not speak about it. As for Amelia, she was not ashamed to share with a dyslexic person who took part in the fair that she has dyslexia. Amelia thought to herself, “Wow this is a thing I have, so just for [her] it was more of a fact than a point that [she] could be ashamed of.” Meeting a person with dyslexia was a significant moment for Amelia, because it was around that time when she started to learn more about her LDs and how they would impact her life:

I knew I had dyslexia and the only way they explained it to me was my brain was wired backwards, and that didn't really make a lot of sense.... It was the first time that kind of physiological problems of dyslexia were explained to me in a way that I could understand because any way anyone ever tried to make me understand, it just didn't work. (Amelia, third interview)

Despite not fully understanding the nature of her LDs, Amelia was aware of how they affected her life. After transferring to her new school, and as Amelia advanced in grade levels, her LDs continued to be manifested in difficulties in math, reading, and writing. Amelia's LDs continued to affect her social life at school as well.

### **On Living With LDs**

Amelia was diagnosed with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and attention deficit disorder when she was in the second grade. When Amelia was in the third grade, her parents decided to transfer her from her public school to the “only” public school that had a program designed for students with dyslexia in her city. Amelia started receiving services at her new school in reading and math. She started working on her reading with a tutor that the school assigned. On the other hand, the math program adopted in her new school, which was called, “the Saxon,” followed an approach that built on what the students already learned and constantly reviewed what students previously studied to prevent them from forgetting. Although the Saxon program's review strategy helped Amelia to not forget the content she was learning in her math class, she found that the types of math problems she was given were “very difficult.” In addition, Amelia continued to have difficulties with completing math problems within a set time frame. When Amelia was in fifth grade, she had to complete a number of timetable sheets in a certain time so that she could be rewarded ice cream. Completing those timetable sheets proved to be a hard task. As a result, Amelia, once again, resorted to cheating to help her complete those sheets in time. Amelia explained, “I t[ook] two tests before she [the teacher] said go. I would start doing one of the tests under the desk so I c[ould] get halfway through [the problems], and then, I [would] switch them and keep doing it.” Although Amelia was able to hide her cheating from her teacher, her classmates knew, and they saw her as she was cheating and disapproved of it.



In terms of writing, Amelia started to experience writing difficulties when attempting to copy notes from the board early in her second grade. This problem continued throughout elementary school. Such difficulties were due to what Amelia described as “get[ting] lost in between... the act of looking up and looking down.” Amelia’s inability to write well in the time required resulted in “messy notebooks,” especially during science classes that required a lot of writing.

**Social segregation.** Amelia continued to experience difficulties in learning at school. Her learning difficulties affected her on both the academic level and on the social level. When Amelia initially transferred to her new school, and after losing the company of her best friend, Amelia started experiencing struggles with making friends at her new school. The new school had reading based “cliques,” which were groups of friends who shared the same reading interests. Amelia’s social life at her school was affected because of her struggle with reading. It was a “very difficult time to make friends.” The reading cliques did not allow any other children to join them, unless they read the books on which the groups were formed. Those cliques engaged in activities and games that were based on the books they liked. Due to Amelia’s inability to read some of the books adopted by these clique, she struggled to make friends at her new school.

Amelia’s inability to read at her classmates’ level not only impacted her ability to have friends, but also impacted her self-esteem. At the beginning of each year in elementary school, for reading, students were assigned books that were alphabetically arranged in boxes corresponding to the students’ reading levels, where A contained the easiest book to read. Students were supposed to choose from their assigned boxes for class reading time and were also being tested from those same boxes. Due to her reading abilities, Amelia had to choose from the

“A, B, C, or D” boxes, while her peers chose from the “V” box, and that frustrated her. Amelia reflected on that period:

I remember being really angry because I was always in A, B, C, or D, and lots of my friends were in, like, V.... So, at that age...you can hide it from a teacher, but you really can't hide from your peers that you're way behind... I think when kids kind of watch each other to see whether or not they fit in. So, people would watch, like, 'Oh, you're picking from the stupid box,' .... So that was really bothersome. (Amelia, second interview)

Amelia's learning differences have left her with the feeling that she was less intelligent than her peers. Amelia's struggle to make friends persisted from third grade through fifth grade as reading cliques continued to run as a basis for forming friends. At Amelia's elementary school, most friendship groups were based on either reading interests or sports. Amelia described herself as being “not good” at both reading and sports. However, she was eventually able to make friends. Amelia had the same teacher from third to fifth grade who constantly arranged seating charts and had students sit next to someone who she thought might become a friend. Amelia's teacher's seating arrangement helped Amelia to eventually make some friends.

**Finding strengths.** Despite struggling with mathematics, reading, and writing, Amelia was good at public speaking. Amelia remembered singing in front of people her whole life. Early on in her educational journey, Amelia recognized her ability to convince adults around her into avoiding reading and school projects. She rejoiced in her ability to “kind of getting [her] teachers to do what [she] wanted.” Such ability transformed into becoming “good at public speaking.” Amelia nurtured her speaking skills through running for student council and treasurer. She won student council two out of the three years she ran. During third grade, Amelia ran for Vice

President. For her first time running, Amelia recalled deciding not to use the school assigned sheet format. Rather, Amelia decided to write her own poem that was based on “‘Twas the night before Christmas.” Amelia recited:

‘Twas the night before voting,  
and all through the school,  
the students were choosing  
Who would rule?

Amelia did not win that year because not many students knew her. However, during the fourth and fifth grade, she ran for Treasurer and President, consecutively, and won. It was at that time when Amelia discovered her passion for public speaking and debates, a quality she continued to find helpful until college.

Amelia continued to struggle with learning and making friends at school impacted her life. During those early years in elementary and middle school, Amelia realized her ability to excel academically, as she found her passion in writing, public speaking, and in school projects. Despite Amelia’s efforts to focus more on her studies, her social struggles continued to affect her.

### **I Hated Middle School**

In sixth grade, Amelia moved to middle school. The intricacies of middle school changed from those of her elementary school years. Sports and reading were no longer the basis for making friends, but rather, fashion and popularity were the basis. However, Amelia’s unfamiliarity with fashion and popularity sceneries and her continued struggle to make friends led her to focus on school-related projects. Amelia recapitulated:

I hated middle school with every fiber of my body. Middle school was the worst. I was kind of new on the fashion scene and new on the makeup scene. I really wanted to be good at makeup. *I was not...* I had kind of a little group of friends, but I really wanted to be popular, and I kind of knew that wasn't going to happen. So, I remember I worked pretty hard. I liked the project-based things.... I really liked kind of [the] collaborative projects, and I have always been kind of more of a leader. (Amelia, first interview)

Academically, Amelia's struggle with reading affected her with different subjects, For instance, history class was "really difficult," and the material was "dense." In sixth grade, classes were organized according to students' reading levels. Amelia described being in a not "kind of a smart class" due to the fact that all the higher-level reading students were not in the same class with her. However, Amelia shrugged off the arrangement as being "okay," as it allowed her to work on her writing since she preferred "writing to reading."

In middle school, Amelia continued to receive Special Education services. In addition, Amelia had a lot of support with reading after school. Amelia's parents were able to pay a private tutor to help her with reading. The private tutor used a program called, "Wired for Reading." This program helped foster Amelia's love for reading. The program was based on phonics and aimed to teach "how to sound out words" and how to articulate words. Ultimately, the program worked to support dyslexic students with their reading and writing skills. Amelia continued on working to improve her reading skills; she continued searching for answers to "what does it mean to have a learning disability." Amelia found the books that touched on her difference and made her difference more appealing. Amelia recalled:

That private tutor was able to find books that I would enjoy reading by myself. So the first kind of books I enjoyed reading by myself were a series called Percy Jackson. It's a

book series about a child who is somehow related to the Greek gods, like Zeus. And he, in the first kind of a couple of chapters, can't read, and he hates reading, and all the letters move around. Then, they explain to him that his mind is wired for Ancient Greek. So, I remember sitting in my chair, and it's like, "Mom, I know why I can't read; my mind is wired for Ancient Greek!" So, I loved those. I read those nonstop. It's about seven books.... (Amelia, first Interview)

As for mathematics, Amelia's struggle continued. As the school ended the Saxon program, in the second half of the sixth grade, Amelia's struggles with mathematics escalated. In addition, during the sixth grade, Amelia's mathematics' teacher "was terrible," and was only able to teach because of a "teachers' Union." Such factors led Amelia's parents to remove her from her mathematics class and homeschool her for that subject.

### **Parents' Support**

Amelia's parents were involved early on in her education. Amelia remembered her mother reading to her books that she loved, such as the *Harry Potter* series during her early elementary years. Amelia's father, on the other hand, always helped Amelia to improve her writing through editing her assignments and providing her with his feedback.

Amelia's parents were able to find her a private tutor to help her with her reading. After withdrawing from her public school mathematics class, Amelia started receiving mathematics lessons from a private tutor. The tutor knew Amelia was dyslexic but "wasn't super compassionate about the fact that [Amelia] was dyslexic, and one of [the tutor's] children [wa]s kind of a math genius. He was four or five grades ahead in math. So [the tutor] wasn't always super great about it."

As time passed, more students from Amelia's public school started taking lessons with this specific tutor. Amelia continued to receive mathematics lessons from the private tutor, from sixth grade to eighth grade. However, a comment the private tutor made one day caused Amelia and her mother to discontinue her private math lessons:

I remember we had these tests once a week that [we]re due for the private tutor—ten questions. I think the last time I went I got seventy-five percent correct on my test.... I hadn't gotten most of my homework correct. I tried, but I hadn't got it correct.... The tutor said something along the lines of, 'you disgust me.' ... I remember I came home just not happy at all. My mom gave her a call. ... I don't think the teacher ever apologized. We never really saw her again. My mom said, 'you know, it's almost the end of eighth grade, you can just be done.' (Amelia, first interview)

### **High School Revelations**

When Amelia started high school, she was in a program called, the "Biotech Program," where students took the same classes together. Therefore, Amelia had her science, mathematics, and writing classes with the same group of classmates. The program, itself, helped Amelia in her academics; however, she did not have the same success with making friends in those classes. Amelia came from a different school than the other students, and that was one of the reasons that she "didn't get along very well" with them.

Academically, Amelia continued to experience difficulties with some classes. For instance, the science class depended heavily upon memorization and handwritten notes. Amelia, having dysgraphia, struggled with both spelling and the need to write in her notebook during science classes. Such difficulties affected Amelia's overall academic performance and grades. For instance, in her biology class, Amelia had to identify different types of flasks and then write

their names down. Although she was able to identify all correctly, she did not get a full grade, due to her spelling mistakes. In addition, Amelia's genetics class was "not very dyslexic friendly." In the class, Amelia had to fight for her rights to use accommodations, such as using her laptop during class time. She has had to fight for extra time so that she could submit her assignments. Amelia recalled that though she was allowed extra time on tests, she "never had any extra time on homework."

Amelia was experiencing difficulty in her chemistry class her sophomore year as well. As she recalled such difficulties, Amelia reflected on her present experience in college and how she continues to struggle with chemistry. In high school, during chemistry class, students had to solve problems in class and always had difficulties finishing them in time. When her class was reviewing the answers, Amelia was not even "halfway through the problem." In addition, Amelia continued to have difficulties with following chemistry class directions in the lab, and she remembered that most of the lab work was done by her partner in the lab. However, Amelia recognized the efforts of her chemistry teacher who provided her with the help that she feels has made a difference:

He was really good at giving me extra time. He was always available for extra help.... He would find times that [we]re convenient for me to come in, or he w[ould] always be there after school.... No matter how many times I ask[ed] a question, he never treated me like I was stupid for asking it, where my biology teacher made snide remarks...like, 'oh, you know this! You should know this by now!' (Amelia, second interview)

As Amelia reflected back on her experiences with her biology teacher who made such disparaging remarks, it brought her back to her current time in college and how she continues to experience this attitude from some of her professors in college. Such remarks have left an impact

on Amelia. She commented that listening to her teachers talking to her in such a manner was “bothersome.” As Amelia’s learning struggles continued, so did challenges in her social life at school.

### **Coping With Being the Odd One Out**

Making friends has always been a struggle for Amelia, ever since she changed schools in third grade. The reading based cliques; and the sports and fashion popularity based friendship were all against her abilities. Moreover, Amelia’s social life was basically on hold in middle school. It was a difficult time. Such an environment impacted how Amelia reacted towards her classmates in high school:

I think in middle school, I definitely didn’t have the greatest time. I was bullied in middle school, so I was kind of on this automatic defensive with my classmates in high school. I was kind of the odd one out.... They [My classmates] would just do little things to rile me up and just would say mean things.... I think my strongest memory from that period is not getting along with my classmates, especially with my biotech classmates, since they were in most of my classes; that was really hard. (Amelia, second interview)

During her first year in high school, Amelia joined musicals and continued joining musicals throughout her second year. Amelia was also in the choir every year in high school. It was an after-school program and a “big time commitment,” where practice would often last until the evening. Amelia enjoyed her time in musicals, choir, and theater. It was during these activities where Amelia made friends and where she had “a good break in [her] day to have a different subject with a completely different group of people.”

In the summer before Amelia started her junior year of high school, her parents decided to travel and live in another country in South America for a year. Despite her sister opposing



such traveling plans, Amelia supported her family's decision to travel because she "was really done with the group of kids [she] was in class with." In South America, Amelia and her younger sister attended a private school where all the students were taught in Spanish, and English was taught as a foreign language.

At the beginning of the school year, Amelia took Spanish lessons that focused mainly on grammar and building vocabularies. Although it was not the first time she was introduced to Spanish (Amelia started learning Spanish in sixth grade), Amelia found those lessons very difficult. Moreover, Amelia struggled with reading in Spanish at a high school level.

Amelia became quite distressed with some of the cultural differences that she observed there in that country. Amelia noticed that some people would steal if no one saw them—an experience that happened to her twice at school when students stole some of her belongings. When the school asked Amelia's classmates to pay for her Kindle, which got stolen, the students became irate. Amelia recalled that atmosphere:

So there was a kind of a target put on my back, even though I had not wanted any of that.... So it was kind of a hard classroom environment. I thought I was... getting away from all the classroom problems in the US, but I just had a whole different set of classroom problems. (Amelia, second interview)

Socially, standing out among her peers was "a rough time." Additionally, academic classes, which relied mostly on memorization, aggravated Amelia's learning difficulties. Memorizing in a different language other than English was not only difficult for Amelia but was often an "impossible" task. Furthermore, Amelia struggled with reading in Spanish at the high school level. Once again, Amelia had to resort to cheating to be able to complete an assignment:

There is a book called, *Maria*, by Jorge Issaks.... I really wanted to try to read it, and it took me and my Spanish tutor something, like, two hours to get through the first three pages. So, I just gave up. I just Googled the summary of the book and read that, cause there's no way I was going to be able to read it. (Amelia, second interview)

During her year in South America, Amelia continued to experience difficulties with reading and mathematics. She was not able to understand mathematical concepts and received a B for the first half of the semester and a D for the second semester. Finding math tutoring services was challenging at the beginning of living in South America, but Amelia's family was able to find her a professor who spoke only Spanish. After spending a year in South America, Amelia and her family returned home to the US. Upon returning to school, Amelia had to take two English language art classes for her senior and junior year of high school to make up for the one she missed while in South America.

### **The Problem With English Education**

During her school years, Amelia had teachers who adopted different teaching styles. Amelia's Language and Arts teachers' teaching styles had left an impact on her writing. For instance, her first-year high school teacher was not punctual and did not require much work from his students. Amelia recalled him returning grades late and, as a result, "didn't prepare [her] for [her] sophomore year English class." In contrast, Ms. Stefano [pseudonym], who was her second year English teacher, required Amelia to work hard and "was a very hard grader." Amelia added that "was kind of a rude awakening after kind of having a pushover for a teacher."

In her junior year of high school, Amelia was enrolled in a Language Arts class that was an advanced placement; however, she did not have "a good teacher." He only asked students to interview their parents on their political views. Amelia felt like she did not learn anything from

his class. As a result, she decided to transfer to “the normal class.” In the new class, Amelia had a better teacher and felt that she learned from his class. Amelia’s teacher encouraged debates and gave Amelia the option of changing projects. For instance, one time, she was able to write about the history of mental health in the US. Amelia wrote about “mental illness and how it is treated in America.” In addition, to support her arguments in her mental health paper, Amelia used “fiction literature” to speak to the culture that surrounds mental health in America. When her teacher read Amelia’s paper, he asked her “analytical questions” that helped her to further explore the topic and pushed her to do her best. Amelia recalled, “He would push me a little bit harder than he’d push the other students, which I really appreciated. ‘Cause even with dyslexia, I can write really well, but only if someone kind of pushes me [and] helps me.” In contrast, Amelia’s senior language arts teacher did not push her and gave her an A easily; as a result, Amelia did not put any effort into working on her writing. Amelia commented:

The problem with actually English education, cause I’ve had it for pretty much my entire life, is no one really pushes me very hard. ‘Cause even though I can’t spell very well, I can write, but no one really pushes me to do past the minimum. That’s been kind of the same from elementary school to even college. (Amelia, third Interview)

The dilemma with English classes continued at the college level. Amelia explained that her professor in her English 201 class, which was a course that focused on research writing, had a demeanor of “a kindergarten teacher.” Amelia reflected on her experience with her English language teacher and how her 201 class made her realize how much better she did in a more structured class:

I was really excited, but this professor has the demeanor of a woman who should be teaching kindergarten.... I feel like I respect college professors when they’re a little bit

more of a hardass.... I like structured college professors better, even though their classes [aren't] always harder, and I always have to work harder in them. I feel like I learn more, and I respect them for kind of keeping that.... I feel [my] city's education did not really push me to do more than the bare minimum. (Amelia, third interview)

### **College Life**

During high school, Amelia applied to three different universities; she only received acceptance letters from two universities. The third university's ACT and GPA score requirements were above Amelia's achieved scores. Amelia knew she did her best and felt "sad" that she was not accepted at the third university. However, Amelia believed she "definitely ended up where [she] needed to be," and that is in XY University.

The transition to college was easier for Amelia, compared to her transitioning in her early school years. In her first year in college, Amelia made many friends. She also received a significant amount of support from the "Access Center" at her university, which is the center for students with disabilities. There were many disability advocate groups that ensured students with disabilities that they were receiving the accommodations they needed. The Center also worked on helping to facilitate communication between students with disabilities and teachers. This service spared the students the need to argue with any professor who chose to deny them of any accommodations. Amelia stated:

I can instead of having to actually engage with that professor or try to fight for myself, I just send an email to this woman, named [Vanessa] [pseudonym], and she does all that for me. She has all my documentation and all kinds of proof of my disability. So she handles all of that. (Amelia, third interview)

Academically, Amelia found the first year in college “kind of hard.” Amelia took general chemistry, sociology, English, mathematics, and choir. The mathematics class combined Mathematics 106 and Mathematics 108 into one class. Amelia thought signing up for that class “was not a good idea,” considering her learning abilities. Reflecting on the mathematics course, Amelia recalled the inadequacy of the on campus support provided for this class:

That class was really difficult. We have the Math Learning Center on campus, which is kind of hit or miss. Because I have gone there and had some really useful tutors ... and then I did have one tutor who’d actually told me I should just forget about my homework, ‘cause he didn’t know how to do it. So, for me, that part was really frustrating, just because [of] how difficult math is that there wasn’t enough on-campus resources to properly handle that. (Amelia, third interview)

Despite struggling academically with math, reading, spelling, and handwriting, Amelia has always had an affinity for writing. Her teachers always praised her writing. On the other hand, Amelia’s father, who had often provided his feedback on her writing assignments, had described her works sometimes as “crap” when her teachers had said they “love[d] it” and that “it is amazing.” Amelia described her father as a “good writer” who, despite his dyslexia, has always helped her with improving her writing. Initially, Amelia’s take on writing originated from her love for the arts:

I think I’ve always been a creative person since I was little... Before I went to school ... my favorite thing when I was really little was I [would] wake up really early and just go do art most of the time.... I made this car, it’s a three-dimensional car made out of thin foil, yogurt lids, paper, and tape. I made this, I think, when I was three. And it actually

rolled. So, I was very creative. So, I think that translated to writing, ‘cause there wasn’t a ton of opportunities for art in school, unfortunately. (Amelia, first interview)

Looking back to her first year in college, Amelia recalled when she had to submit a portfolio for her English 101 class. Amelia worked very hard on her portfolio because she believes that knowing how to write well is an essential skill for any future career. In writing the portfolio, students had to write three essays and a cover letter, where students discussed how they worked on the different requirements and how they improved and edited their final writing pieces. The first essay was an argument project, which required students to work in groups and to come up with a “fake argument.” Amelia reflected on working with a group during the portfolio-building process. She believed that her time in the group was not as “constructive” as she had hoped. Amelia commented:

Sometimes, you get stuck with people who don’t necessarily care about the project. So that one working in groups wasn’t really as constructive as I could have hoped for. For that one mostly kids who are planning on [unintelligible] by and some who’d even come to class after smoking marijuana. (Amelia, fourth interview)

For the second assignment, Amelia wrote an essay on a *TED* talk titled, “The Evolution of Love and Acceptance.” The topic for the talk was about parenting children with severe disabilities. Amelia enjoyed working on this assignment. Her work focused mainly on “scholarly sources and how things c[ould] be [made] more approachable.” The last assignment was an elective topic. Amelia wrote about addiction in the US and the US’ drug policy. In this assignment, Amelia compared the US drug policy to that of Portugal.

In the cover letter for the portfolio, Amelia explained to her professor that her dyslexia affected her ability to write; however, it did not stop her from working “twice as hard” to present

her portfolio at its best. Amelia disclosed to her professor that her father had helped her with her editing. She relayed how her father was “shocked” that she turned in her work the first time with so many errors and how he viewed her work as “passable” and “pretty decent,” which, coming from her father, she reflected, “was almost a compliment.” In addition, Amelia detailed in her cover letter how she sought the help of her friends and the writing center at her university to further improve upon the content in her portfolio.

Amelia remembers working on editing her portfolio. She spent a lot of time working on the corrections suggested by her father, but she did not have as many corrections from her professor. It was the experience of middle and high school all over again—a teacher or a professor who is “pretty happy” and “liked” Amelia’s work but required her students to implement little efforts in their assignments. Extra effort was something that Amelia was desperately yearning. The grading system was based on “how hard you worked,” rather than on “how good is your writing,” which Amelia found to be a “common theme for writing classes throughout [her] life.”

The second year in college, Amelia took organic chemistry and English. Organic chemistry was “largely considered to be the most difficult course offered at the university level.” Amelia found herself struggling from week one and feeling like she was “kind of drowning.” Despite having all the books and completing all the readings, Amelia was having a hard time balancing the workload required, partly because her biology professor had a “thick” German accent and spoke so fast that he was “extremely difficult” to understand. In addition, the professor tended to change the slides he was showing during the class every ten seconds, which made it difficult for Amelia to follow the content. I asked Amelia if she considered recording her

class lectures, and she hesitated to answer for a second and then said that it is something she should look into.

Chemistry was the most difficult class that Amelia took. The fact that she had to do many equations and calculations while in class made it very difficult for her since Amelia had a tendency to confuse plus and minus signs. On the other hand, her biology class was less difficult than chemistry, but Amelia experienced difficulty with reading the class' assigned text. It took her longer to read, which, she explained "has been the case [her] whole life...."

Amelia is currently a Biology major who plans on becoming a physician's assistant (PA). After obtaining her biology degree, Amelia plans on working as a nurse assistant from six months to a year to get the necessary medical experience. Amelia plans to continue her postgraduate degree for two additional years to become a PA.

In seeking to continue answering the research question: what are the academic experiences of three multilingual, college aged students diagnosed with specific LDs? This dissertation now recounts the academic experiences of Mia. Through Mia's story, readers learn about living with the LD diagnosis through the retelling of the academic experience that Mia encountered.

### **Mia's Academic Journey (2005-2018)**

Mia is a nineteen year-old undergraduate student majoring in social work at a northeastern public university. Mia, born to a Filipino father and an American mother, grew up speaking both English and Tagalog. Mia grew up speaking Tagalog with her parents and English with her three siblings. Mia can read and write in both languages; however, she does not understand everything she reads in Tagalog. Mia did not receive any academic instructions in learning Tagalog.



Mia was diagnosed with non-verbal learning disability (NVLD), depression, high functioning autism, Tourette's, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). The nature of Mia's LD affects her ability in reading comprehension, mathematics, and science. It also reduces her ability to understand facial expressions and types of speech, such as, humor and sarcasm. Mia's lack of "bilateral and hands on coordination" affects her ability to play sports and her overall relationship with people.

I first met Mia on FaceTime in the summer of 2018. I met with Mia for five interviews, which spanned over a period of five months. During the first interview, Mia was sitting at a desk in an office. The fading background noise of people talking in the other room and her gazing constantly towards the door indicated the presence of other people nearby. I asked Mia if she had any questions prior to starting the interview, and Mia asked me where I was from. Upon answering Mia's question and reviewing the consent form, I initiated my interview questions. I asked Mia about her memories of her school years. Thinking back to her school years, Mia started telling her story.

### **Early School Memories**

When Mia was in first grade, she had a hard time making friends. At school, she only made two boy friends. Mia was more comfortable befriending boys, due to her close relationship with her brother and her boy cousin. After completing second grade, Mia's parents relocated to another city where Mia was home schooled up to the eighth grade. Mia joined different home schooling schools, and it was, again, difficult for her to make any friends. She elaborated on some of the challenges that she experienced when socializing with others:

I didn't understand why I didn't relate to people. I thought it was because I also have obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette's. So, I thought that is why—maybe I didn't

relate to people. I was so obsessive. I was so sensitive to people's words. I was sensitive to pain and touch, and I couldn't understand why that was happening. (Mia, first interview)

### **On Having an LD**

Although not yet diagnosed, Mia's learning differences interfered with her social life at school. Mia's NVLD affected her ability to make friends in elementary school. Mia has always felt "awkward" and did not "know what to say." She was never invited to birthday parties or play dates. Mia, not knowing why she was socially excluded, struggled during those times and recalled that it was a "really hard." Mia recalled such difficult times:

I was bullied a lot because I was different than the other kids.... I was very quiet and kind of shy, but I would sometimes blurt out things when I didn't understand something. Or when I saw someone, I would say something mean, but I didn't realize it was mean, because I was just being honest. I did not realize the social norms of what was proper. Later on, I would learn it was part of the learning disability, but I was not diagnosed yet. (Mia, first interview)

As Mia started second grade, things seemed to get better as she made a couple of new friends, and one of them was "a girl." However, Mia continued to struggle with understanding and relating to her peers. Academically, during the years, Mia was placed in homeschooling schools; she had the help of her parents to maintain her grades and to study, in general. She was also able to have a friend through the homeschooling schools. When Mia entered high school, her parents decided to place her in a public school again.

During high school, Mia was diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorder. However, later during college, a psychologist refuted the anxiety disorder and informed Mia that she has

high functioning autism. In her sophomore year of high school, Mia was diagnosed with a NVLD. Her family played a key role in getting her diagnosed. When Mia was in high school, her grades showed a drastic fluctuation, which was initially attributed to the fact that she has an anxiety disorder. However, her parents recognized that Mia was going through something else. Mia's parents decided to pursue the matter and, eventually, convinced the school to evaluate Mia educationally:

I was diagnosed sophomore year with anxiety and depression, and we thought that my grades were fluctuating because of that. I was in and out of the hospital a couple of times, but we couldn't figure out what was going on, and that was really frustrating. (Mia, first interview)

Mia's fluctuating grades were experienced earlier in her life during middle school. However, because Mia's mother provided her with a one-to-one support with her studies, her grades were not as drastically affected. When Mia was placed back in public school, her grades began showing more fluctuation:

My parents tried to influence [the idea of getting me tested] a long time ago, but the school didn't really listen until [my parents] went to some meeting.... They heard about a girl or a boy that had the same symptoms that I had. He got tested and got diagnosed with this nonverbal learning disorder. They were like, 'oh, my gosh. [That] sounds like [Mia]' So, they got me tested, and it turned out that I had it. So, it took a lot of pushing from my parents. (Mia, second interview)

Mia's NVLD made it difficult for her to understand facial expressions, humor, and sarcasm. These LDs also manifested in difficulties with mathematics, science, and reading comprehension. For Mia, mathematics and science were difficult because the subjects are "very visual." On having difficulties with reading-comprehension, Mia explained:

I had trouble understanding the big picture, so I look[ed] at the small details.... So, if you ask[ed] me what the story was about, I c[ould] tell you dates, I could tell you names, I c[ould] tell you places, I c[ould] tell you this happened and this happened, but I couldn't tell you this is what the main theme was unless I really worked hard to figure out what it [wa]s. Or sometimes, I [would] have to talk about it to figure out what it [wa]s or reread it, or listen to it, because I d[idn't] always pick up on the big picture. (Mia, second interview)

Despite such obstacles and social hardships, Mia viewed her NVLD as a “positive thing” that assisted in her finding ways to better understand her abilities. Her parents further reinforced the idea that her diagnosis was not to be used as a hindrance, but rather, as something to learn from. Mia added that such perspective in viewing her NVLD has “helped [her] to learn from it and not [to] use it as a crutch or something to hold [her] back.”

Eventually, Mia's diagnosis with NVLD provided her with some help that she needed to better succeed in school and to better prepare for college. During her sophomore year, Mia started receiving accommodations. In addition, she joined a summer program that was offered to students with LDs:

I got a full scholarship to do a summer program, to take two classes that [we]re worth six credits in total. So, that was really great. I got to explore one of the classes. I got to learn about learning disabilities and understand how study-skills work, how to help yourself in the classroom and prepare for college, and use the assistive technology. So, that was really helpful for me to figure out what accommodations I needed for college. (Mia, first interview)

## **National Honor Society**

As Mia continued to struggle with her medical condition and her NVLD in high school, she continued to search for ways to better cope with those challenges. During high school, Mia decided to apply to join the National Honor Society. To join the society, a student must complete certain hours of volunteer work; must demonstrate leadership skills; must demonstrate an outstanding academic performance; and must score a GPA of 3.5 or above. In addition, joining the organization required providing recommendation letters from the teachers and participating in sports and clubs. Mia raved about being part of the society and remembers the process of joining it:

So they have a committee that looks at different applications, and they decide whether you get to be admitted or not.... Everybody at school got a letter that had a 3.5 or above GPA. After we got that letter, we filled out the application, and we waited for about a month, and then, everyone got a letter back. So, it was nerve-racking because you did not know what that letter would say, yes or no. So, I waited till I saw my mom to open it. It was right after school, in the car. I think she was really excited.... We said a prayer right after. We are pretty religious. (Mia, second interview)

Joining the National Honor Society was a significant moment for Mia. It indicated her accomplishments academically and her involvement in extracurricular activities. The significance of joining the society was also due to the timing of the year, as Mia was struggling with some of her medical problems. Earlier in her sophomore year, Mia had to be hospitalized for the first time for her anxiety disorder and depression. Mia's hospitalization and follow up treatments resulted in her missing school for three months. However, Mia worked hard after being released from the hospital to make up for the missed schoolwork. The acceptance letter

from the National Honor Society made Mia feel excited about school again and that all the “hard work ha[d] paid off.”

Mia was always an “honor student.” In addition to being a member of the National Honor Society and a team leader, Mia participated in cross-country, track, and swimming during high school. Mia laughed as she remembered when her parents first convinced her to try cross-country:

I hated running.... At first, I didn't want to do cross-country, but my mom and dad were really like, 'you need to play sports and be active.' So, I was like, 'okay, I'll do that,' and I ended up loving it.... It is kind of funny how that worked out. I was going to run for college, but I didn't make the team because I wasn't fast enough.... I also was in choir, so that was a lot of fun. So, I think I just wanted to be involved.... It was just good for me. (Mia, first interview)

In her sophomore year of high school, things started to get easier. Mia's outpatient visits helped her deal with some of the mental complications that she was experiencing. During that year, Mia started to make more friends. Also, during that year, Mia joined the National Honor Society, and her grades started to improve. In addition, enrolling in cross-country and track, youth groups, and choir helped Mia to feel that she “was really apart of something.” However, during her senior year, Mia's mental, social, and academic struggles seemed to all to return. Mia had to be hospitalized twice because of depression and what was then, presumably, an anxiety disorder. Despite her struggles, Mia graduated high school with honors.

### **Graduating High School With Honors**

In the summer of 2017, Mia graduated from high school. It was an important event in Mia's academic journey. The ceremony took place at a hall on the riverfront. Mia wore a blue

dress and had her hair in a “perfect” bun for her graduation day. She was excited as the graduation day was approaching and was relieved to finally receive her diploma. Graduation day was an exciting and an emotional time for Mia as she joined with her classmates to remember their classmate who took her life earlier in the year. Mia commented:

I enjoyed high school, the one I went to, but it was really hard. But there were a lot of rough times. We had a classmate that committed suicide that year, and so, that was really hard for my class. She died in December, and so, right before Christmas. So, it was really hard for us to come together for graduation. We got to remember her in a special way because her father came, and he accepted her diploma. (Mia, second interview)

Reflecting back, Mia recalled those hard times in high school. However, Mia was grateful for the support and help she had from her parents. Mia’s parents had her side when she was suffering from panic attacks before tests and while doing her homework assignments; they always helped her to calm down. In addition to helping her with studying, Mia’s parents advocated for her at school by attending meetings and by talking to her teachers and school staff about her needs for accommodations. They were the ones who recommended her taking breaks and having extra time on tests. Mia’s parents’ help and advocacy contributed to her academic success. Mia knew that “God had a way in” through all that she had to go through. Mia elaborated on her parents and God’s roles:

They really helped me get it over ... obstacles that are in my way, and just to keep pushing and remember that God is always on my side.... I think prayers and going to church and being supported by my parents was the key to my success. And I really owe it all to God. (Mia, second interview)

## **College Enrollment: I was Really Proud of Myself**

During high school, Mia struggled due to her medical condition and her continuous hospital visits and stays. However, she eventually was able to make up for the missed work and graduate with honors. For Mia, college enrollment was very significant in proving to herself. Mia proved that she conquered her obstacles and joined her college-graduate family members:

All my family went to college. My mom and my dad both and my grandfather on my mom's side went for a little bit. But my grandmother graduated on my mom's side, and both my dad's parents graduated from college.... It was always important for the education be put first, other than religion. Religion is first, and then education.... I was really proud of myself. (Mia, second interview)

During her senior year of high school, Mia applied to five different universities. She waited impatiently for any letters from universities to arrive. Mia revealed how she received those letters:

I knew that the letters of acceptance w[ould] be coming in very soon.... I got to check the mail every day, and that was nerve-racking because I wasn't sure I would get in. Would I get in into my top choice? So, I first got into this one school.... It was XY University.... I was super excited. I saw the letter, and I was like, 'Nanay;' that was my mom. I call her Nanay, which means mom in Tagalog, which is the language of the Philippines. I [went], 'Nanay, oh my gosh, I got a letter,' and she [wa]s like, 'Okay, we're going to open it,' and I was like, 'No, you open it,' and she was like, 'No, you got to open it,' and I was like, 'Okay,' and I opened it up, and I was like, 'I got into college!'... Even though it was not my first choice, I was so excited. (Mia, second interview)



After receiving the acceptance letter from XY University, Mia called her father, her aunts, and then went to her grandparents to share the good news. Days later, Mia received two more acceptance letters from the other universities she applied for, and she decided to attend X University.

### **College Life**

Mia was both nervous and very excited to start going to college. College life was a difficult time away from home. Being away from home triggered Mia's anxiety and fear of not making friends. However, Mia believed that the college preparation program she had taken prepared her for college life. Mia described the first weeks of college:

I was a little nervous. I was very excited at first, and then, a couple weeks before, I got really nervous. I was like, 'Okay, now this is really hitting me....' I was like, 'How I'm going to do this? All my friends are leaving. I'm not going to make friends, and I'm going to be far away from home.' It was just really an anxiety provoking and nerve-racking.... I got to school, and I really liked it a lot. But I really missed my parents, and I called them every day. I felt prepared because I did really well in the college summer program. (Mia, first interview)

Throughout a typical college day, Mia studied and exercised regularly to "de-stress." She also called her family every night and attended services at the church. Mia found that all these routinized aspects helped her to cope with college stress. However, as the semester progressed, Mia started experiencing difficulties in one course, and her anxiety caused her to withdraw from that course. Mia described how this specific experience unfolded and how the support of her family helped her in pursuing her studies:

I panicked during one of the tests. I had a panic attack, and the teacher wouldn't let me retake it. So, I failed that test completely.... I had to withdraw. That was disappointing. But I was able to get through up to the week before Thanksgiving. I told my parents, 'I just want to go home.' (Mia, third interview)

Mia's parents convinced her to come home for the weekend, which was a week prior to the Thanksgiving break. They also encouraged her to think about whether she wanted to go back to school or not. They also told her that if she decided to stay, she would need to find a job. After spending Thanksgiving at her parents' house, Mia decided that she wanted to continue with her studies. Mia was "glad" she made the decision to go back to college. She completed the semester and received B's in all of classes.

As the winter semester started, Mia's struggles started to rise again. During this semester, Mia had to be hospitalized for the third time in her life, and that affected her academic life. Mia recalled the day that she had to ask for help when she feared she might harm herself:

I was really struggling. I became suicidal, and I was worried that I was going to hurt myself. So, I was going to counseling at school, and I told the therapist, and he was like, 'Let's wait a day, and we'll see how it goes.' Because I really hadn't done anything. But I just had all these thoughts about hurting myself, and he was like, 'Well, we'll wait till tomorrow.' But that night, I was like, 'I can't wait till tomorrow. I'm worried I am going to hurt myself,' so I told another adult because the counseling center wasn't open. I called and decided to go into the hospital. (Mia, third interview)

After Mia was discharged from the hospital a week later, she had to start an outpatient program that lasted for three months. Mia was enrolled in five classes during the winter semester, and due to her health issues, she decided to withdraw from the three classes.

Despite having such a difficult semester, Mia, once again, was able to pick up the pieces and finish school. She passed with a grade point average of 3.3 and was proud to pass her statistics class. In May of the same year, Mia signed up for the summer semester. It was an elective class in an oral history neighborhood and race class. Mia “loved it...even though it had nothing to do with [her] major.”

During her summer break, going into the second year of college, Mia had another evaluation to determine whether she is on the autism spectrum. The result of that evaluation indicated that Mia has “high functioning autism.” She was also informed that she was misdiagnosed with the anxiety disorder:

I have high functioning autism. It used to be Asperger’s, but now, [it is] referred to as high functioning autism. I am very high functioning, but definitely, I have [had] a lot of struggle[s]. It was from autism and not anxiety, as I thought it was. I still have a lot of OCD and depression, but it all stems from autism. (Mia, second follow up interview)

Mia was being accommodated for her NVLD at the time of the new diagnosis. She informed the disability center at the university of her recent high functioning autism diagnosis. She is currently working with a private therapist to help her cope with her panic attacks and “sensory overloads.” The recent diagnosis has helped Mia to better understand her needs. During the last interview, Mia commented:

It has really changed everything for me. I was able to understand where I am coming from, and [I was] better [able to] understand myself, and not pile up on the sensory overload and think that I am having a huge panic attack out of nowhere. So now, I recognize that ‘Okay, this is sensory overload,’ and it may seem like it comes up more often, but at least if it is coming up,

then I can anticipate it happening. I can be like, ‘Okay, this is going to happen; this is okay. This is normal for me.’ I can kind of learn from it. (Mia, second follow up interview)

In college, Mia utilized the use of the services provided through the disability center. In the initial visit to the disability center, Mia explained her needs and asked for any help available in “a two-way meeting.” At this initial meeting, Mia was informed of the available disability-related resources at her college. After the meeting was over, an email was sent out to all of her professors to inform them of her need for accommodations and asking them to sign an agreement to provide her with such accommodations. Mia has often chosen not to discuss her disability with her professors and let the disability center communicate directly with her professors.

In college, Mia continued to receive the same accommodations she was receiving in high school, such as extended time on tests and individual testing settings. However, the option of having extended time for submitting assignments was not offered at the college level. The disability center assigned Mia a one-to-one individual to help with time management and turning in assignments on time. Mia met with her “sort of educational coach” once a week to plan out the next week and to discuss any college-related work she was working on. Mia found this type of service as being very helpful.

### **Looking Forward**

Growing up, Mia often volunteered with her family at their church. She prides herself in coming from a family that was “always all around helping people, serving Christ, and see[ing] the good in others.” Looking forward, Mia wants to continue on the path of helping others:

My family is Catholic. We always learned to help out in the church, and my parents both are Peace Corps volunteer in Africa.... After learning about my mental illness and learning disability, I just wanted to help other people, like myself. I’m thinking about

working in mental health, like [at] an outpatient facility or something to do with intellectual disabilities. (Mia, first interview)

Mia, at the time of writing this dissertation, was in her second year in college and was majoring in social work. I met Mia for our last interview in person. As we parted ways, Mia told me that she is continuing her studies in social work so that she can work on helping individuals who have struggles, like hers. As Mia continues to struggle with her medical diagnoses and her NVLD, she continues searching for ways to better enhance her academic and personal life.

As I conclude retelling Mia's story, I continue to retell Ciera's story. To answer the research question of the study, following I present Ciera's story of her school and college years to help in understanding her academic lived experience.

### **Ciera's Academic Journey (1999-2018)**

Ciera is a twenty-three year-old graduate student who has a bachelor's degree in psychology. During the time of this study, Ciera was working towards her master's degree in student affairs in higher education at a northeastern public university. Ciera grew up in a large family, speaking Spanish as her first language; Ciera learned English later when she was enrolled in school. At the age of seven, Ciera was diagnosed with an LD that affected her reading, writing, and sensory motor skills.

I met with Ciera via FaceTime for a number of six interviews, which lasted over a period of four weeks. During the first interview, and upon reviewing the consent form and completing the demographic questions of the study, I asked Ciera to discuss her memories of her school years. Following, I present Ciera's educational journey.

## **Early School Memories**

At the age of four, Ciera's mother separated from her father and took Ciera and moved to another state. At that time, Ciera, who only spoke Spanish, started attending a pre-school where English is the only language used at school. Thinking back, Ciera reminisced on her early school memories:

I went to school with my older brother. He's one year older than me. I remember him telling me about school and how he didn't like school. But I really wanted to go to school because he would go, and I was very close to him.... So once I finally started school; I remember I was very excited. I got to ride the bus. (Ciera, first interview)

At the time, Ciera enrolled in preschool; she only knew and spoke Spanish with her parents and siblings. Ciera's early school memories were tainted by an incident that happened in preschool and left a lasting impact on how Ciera perceived herself as a student:

I wasn't a good student. I guess I would talk back, and I wouldn't do what I was told. I remember one time that the teacher grabbed my arm. She was getting frustrated with me.... I just remember she grabbed my arm, took me to the restroom, and she started yelling at me. All I know is that my mom told me, 'You have a bruise on your arm! What happened?' And she ended up talking to the principal.... I think that maybe I didn't understand because Spanish was my first language. (Ciera, first interview)

Ciera spent three years with her mother and continued to attend school in X state. When Ciera turned seven years old, she moved back to live with her father. In second grade, Ciera had to attend counseling sessions at her school due to her parents' marital status. During that time, Ciera was receiving speech therapy because she had a speech impediment. It was during those

counseling sessions that the school noticed that Ciera had learning difficulties and had her evaluated.

### **The LD Diagnosis: I Felt I was Different**

At the age of seven, Ciera was diagnosed with an LD. After the evaluation process, which was in English, Ciera was told that she “wasn’t reading to the level [she] was supposed to be reading.” After being diagnosed with an LD, Ciera started receiving special education services at her school through the Learning Center (LC). Ciera described how she realized that she had an LD and the feelings that she was left with:

I remember I always felt that I was different. I was always getting pulled out of class for my speech classes, as well as, there is this Learning Center I would go to. So, I would be in the normal class with everybody, and then, I think within half of the day, they would take me to the Learning Center.... But I remember feeling really lost in my normal classes. I felt I was just kind of sitting there, and I didn’t really know what was happening. (Ciera, first interview)

In contrast to her experience in the mainstream classroom, where Ciera did not feel she was learning, at the LC, she had a completely different experience. At the LC, Ciera stated, “I felt I knew my classmates. I connected with my classmates better at the Learning Center.” However, when Ciera returned to her mainstream classroom, Ciera’s classmates would ask her why she was taken out of class and where she went. Ciera was “embarrassed” to tell her mainstream classmates that she was at the LC and wanted to hide that from them, because she “did not want them to think [she] was dumb.”

Academically, Ciera’s LD affected her on many levels. It was manifested in terms of “hav[ing] a harder time learning.” In addition, her LD “affect[ed] the more specific areas of

reading, writing, processing speed, and sensory motor.” Ciera remembered reading slower than her peers and having difficulties with mathematical skills. In terms of writing, Ciera’s has always had “sloppy” handwriting and difficulty spelling. Ciera joked that to this day, her mother tells her that she “write[s] like a boy,” which is a reference to her poor handwriting.

### **The Conflicting Impact of the LC**

Ciera’s school was structured to serve students who had severe disabilities in a certain space in the school, which was at the end of one hallway. At the end of this same hallway, the LC was located. Ciera remembered feeling embarrassed walking towards the direction of the LC because it implied a “different” and a “not smart” status:

I think what it was for me personally my learning disability isn’t visible. So I can pass along, and no one will ever know about my learning disability, versus other people that were in my classes; it was very visible. I remember I would see people walking to the Learning Center and . . . personally, I can see like, ‘Oh, that’s the place where people who are different go to.’ (Ciera, first interview)

However, the center had helped Ciera continue her education. She was taught math and writing at the LC, and it was there where she learned how to tell time. Ciera argued that the LC had “empowered her” and helped her to learn. In contrast to her time in the mainstream classrooms, Ciera felt that she “disappeared” in those classrooms. Ciera explained:

When I was at the Learning Center, I felt I was the smartest kid in class. It empowered me. I remember one time, my teacher at the Learning Center told me, ‘Oh, [Ciera] is in charge for today.’ . . . She left and told me to lead the class. I remember I felt like, ‘Wow, I’m a teacher. . . .’ I felt empowered, but then, when I would go back to my normal class, I felt I kind of disappeared. I just kind of sat there, and I didn’t really matter.



The nurturing and “comfortable” learning environment at the LC allowed Ciera to ask questions, to participate in class, and to learn. In addition, the one-on-one help and different approaches to teaching contributed to Ciera’s learning success. Ciera attested that “if it wasn’t for the Learning Center, [she] would’ve dropped out of school.”

### **Middle School was Rough**

During middle school, Ciera had five classes. She spent her math, reading, and writing classes at the LC and her science and history classes in the mainstream classroom. Middle school was a difficult time. Ciera remembered not caring for school, and she started to “talk back” and defy “authoritative figures”:

When it came to my Learning Center classes, I felt more comfortable, and I would talk back. So, for example, one of the questions I remember is them asking me, ‘What do you consider yourself like: a follower or a leader?’ I remember that question really irritated me.... I was like, ‘I’m neither of those. Why do I have to answer?’... My teacher kept telling me I’m a follower and [to] just write about that. I remember that really angered me, and I’m like, ‘No, I refuse to be a follower. I don’t want to be a follower; I’m a leader.’ Everyone kept telling me, ‘No, that’s not you; don’t write about that.’ So, I remember that day, I’m like, ‘No, I’m not writing this paper,’ while everybody else in my class wrote a paper. (Ciera, first interview)

In middle school, Ciera thought of herself as an “okay” student. Ciera always felt there was a lack of a sense of purpose for going to school. However, during middle school, Ciera started making friends who also had LDs, and she did not feel much different from her friends:

I was still kind of embarrassed that I went to the Learning Center. But, by then, the friends that I had at the Learning Center, we w[ould] just all hang out. So, it started to

become less embarrassing because I was cool with all of them. They were normal. I don't want to say the word 'normal,' but they all look like me. We don't look like we have learning disabilities. (Ciera, first interview)

Socially, having a group of friends who shared the LC experience with Ciera empowered her. Belonging to this small community of LD learners, who shared the experience of attending the LC, made Ciera feel "normal" again. Similarly, academically, at the time, Ciera started learning more while at her mainstream classroom during the fifth and sixth grade.

### **On Having an LD**

Ciera was diagnosed with an LD at the age of seven. Her LD affected her reading, writing, and sensory motor skills. Ciera struggled personally after being diagnosed with an LD. Her visits to the LC left her with the feeling of "embarrass[ment]" and not wanting to be "different" or "not smart." In addition, despite feeling that she started learning more while in her mainstream classroom, Ciera struggled with her self-confidence. The LD diagnosis took a toll on Ciera's self-perception and led her to questioning her ability to have the correct answers while she was in the mainstream classroom. Ciera explained:

At the beginning, it was so hard for me. I didn't know anything. But then, as I started getting older and older, I think [during the] fourth, [or] fifth grade, I started to get a little bit better in my normal classes. I started to learn just a little bit, but I, again, ... didn't feel smart enough, and I always questioned myself. I think because I knew ... I had a learning disability.... I knew by then, and because I knew, I always questioned my ability. Even though I thought I c[ould] answer [questions in my mainstream class,] I was always, 'No, I have a learning disability, so it's probably wrong, probably not right.' (Ciera, first interview)

In her early years in school, Ciera struggled with learning, and the fact that English was not her first language augmented her struggles. However, as Ciera's English language competency started to improve, she wanted to be vocal and participate in her mainstream classroom. Ciera also aspired to be at a similar reading level as everyone else in her class. She remembered wanting to read the *Twilight* book series because everybody in her grade level was reading it. Reading such books meant for Ciera that she was at the same level of "intelligence" as her peers. However, due to socioeconomic reasons, Ciera did not have access to the books and had to hide that fact:

They would always tell me I had to read, but they never made books available to me. So, although my homework was to read, I didn't have any books. I didn't have access to books. So, I remember making up books. So ... I would make up a random book; I would make up a random author.... The only book my dad ever bought me was *Twilight*, and I was in eighth grade. I remember I had begged him, and that was the first time that I had an interest [in] reading. (Ciera, first interview)

Middle school was a rough time for Ciera. She did not understand why she had to get up every morning to go to school. Such a lack of understanding affected her behavior at school as she began to defy and talk back to her teachers. In addition, the fact that Ciera knew that she had an LD but did not understand the nature of her LD led her to lose confidence in herself and caused her to question her learning abilities.

### **High School and College Revelations**

When Ciera started high school, she continued to not care as much for school. Ciera went to the same school as her older sister. She befriended the same group of friends as her sister. This group of students was referred to as "pisas"—a term that is used to refer to students who spoke

only Spanish and were from Mexico. The beginning of high school was “rough.” Ciera’s group of friends did not care much for studying or extracurricular activities. During her freshman year, Ciera had a conversation with a girl not from her group of friends—a conversation that was set to change her life forever:

I met this white girl [Samantha] [pseudonym], She told me about college. She told me, ‘You should join tennis,’ and I was like, ‘Why would I do that?’ And she’s like, ‘Because it’s going to look good on your résumé for college.’ I was like, ‘Oh, I didn’t know that. What else?’ She’s like, ‘Oh, if you go to college, you [can] get a good job.’... It was common sense to her, but for me, I really didn’t think about that. Nobody put that idea in my head about going to college. (Ciera, first interview)

Samantha also introduced Ciera to her group of friends, who spoke only English. Ciera started spending time with Samantha and her group of friends. She felt that “they all cared about going to college.” Ciera felt that she “kind of looked like, ‘Oh, I’m better than my other friends now.’”

Before her conversation with Samantha, Ciera’s grades were impacted by her lack of interest in studying and school. However, ever since she learned about college, Ciera’s whole demeanor towards school has changed. Ciera started studying and pleaded with her father to let her join extracurricular activities. Ciera’s grades started to improve. In addition, Ciera started playing tennis and started running track and field. She also ran for and was elected for student government.

Reflecting back on the experience of learning about college for the first time, Ciera started thinking about how being a first generation and a minority affected her life. Ciera always felt that she was privileged being born an American, whereas her parents were born and raised in

another country. At the same time, Ciera realized that minorities are often excluded from the college conversation, especially first generation, due to the fact that their parents never attended college in the US:

I think I always had this kind of mentality that white people know more about college than do first generation students.... It's kind of sad that we talk about white privilege, and it's never been so real until this moment. You don't really think about it, but then you think about how they have this knowledge, and, although it seems so simple, it makes such a big difference.... So little privilege that they have like their parents are able to take them to visit colleges; their parents are able to tell them first-hand experiences about them applying for colleges. I didn't have any of this. So, to me, it really puts a focus on how real white privilege is. (Ciera, second interview)

As Ciera continued to work hard on studying and building her college résumé, she was met with an obstacle that was created initially to help her with learning. Ciera was restricted from taking elective classes due to the fact that one of two elective classes offered was a mandatory LD class. Ciera resented going to the LD class and wanted to be removed from it.

### **I'm Smart Now!**

During her sophomore year of high school, Ciera joined the Business Academy, which is similar to a "cohort model." The Business Academy was comprised of thirty students who took the same classes from sophomore through senior year, in addition to two elective classes. For Ciera, joining the Business Academy was an accomplishment, as all students who were members excelled in their classes.

However, Ciera was required to take the LD class as one of the electives. She resented taking the LD class because it deprived her of the opportunity to take other classes, such as, arts

and piano classes, which would reflect better on her college résumé. As a result, during her sophomore year, Ciera fought to be removed from the LD class:

I'm like, 'I'm smart now. I don't need it.' So, I remember she [the teacher] tested me, and she's like, 'No, you still need it.' ... So, I remember being really upset.... Then, I think it was at the end of my junior year, I asked again if I could be removed.... So, I believe it was ... second semester of my senior year that I finally got removed, and they were like, 'Oh, ok, you don't need [it],' like, 'you still have a learning disability,' but if I wanted to, I d[idn't] have to take it. (Ciera, first interview)

In senior year high school, Ciera started applying for college admissions. Ciera's parents had never been to college. As a result, there was no one in her family that could help her with applying for colleges. Ciera sought the help of one of her teachers who referred her to her counselor.

During high school, Ciera learned through her academic counselor of the available resources to help her apply for college, such as taking the SAT free of charge, an application fee waiver, and methods for applying for financial aid. Ciera felt "lucky" that her college tuition was paid for by a grant, as she remembered, "money was never an obstacle." However, Ciera's visit to the academic counselor made her feel "sad" when he suggested that she should apply for community colleges or schools with high acceptance rates. Such disparaging comments implied that the counselor did not believe Ciera could succeed in enrolling in elite schools. Ciera, who later received a GPA of 4.0 in her senior year, defied the counselor by applying to "harder schools" with no help on her paper applications or on the required documents.

Ciera applied to eight different schools and was accepted at three. Ciera stated, "I could have done better...but at least I got into the school I wanted to go to." Looking back, Ciera

reflected on the lack of help she received in applying for college. She expressed that the LC should have helped more in educating students on the importance of college. Ciera elaborated:

I think what [could have been] really helpful [wa]s for them to talk to people that [we]re in the learning center, to have more college tours, and talk to them more about college. I just don't feel it's talked enough about. Again, I only went to see two schools, and that wasn't through my learning center. That was through another program that I sought out.  
(Ciera, third interview)

In the process of applying for university admissions, Ciera took a tour at one of the universities. She instantly liked that university and decided that she wanted to study there. When the acceptance letter arrived from that university, Ciera recalled being “very happy.” To Ciera, campus life meant more than just school; it referenced her independence as well. Ciera declared, “I think living on campus was really helpful for me, ‘cause I really got to engage in the college environment, be with people, and really [had the opportunity to] immerse myself in the culture. I loved my first year in college, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.”

### **My Support Systems**

Ciera started college, majoring in Business. After spending a year there, Ciera got married and moved to another state and continued her education in Business for another year at another college. During her first year in college, Ciera lived in an apartment on campus with six other students, with whom she had a great relationship. She was the only one from the six who identified herself as Hispanic and spoke Spanish. While the others might have come from a Hispanic background, they did not speak Spanish or associate themselves with the Hispanic identity.

**My roommates as my support system.** Ciera felt that she was “different” from her classmates on many levels. For instance, two of her roommates were third or fourth generation Hispanic, and they only spoke English and did not associate with the Hispanic culture. Ciera recalled that when her parents came to visit her roommates, they were unable to talk to them because of the language barrier. Financially, Ciera noticed how her roommates had the financial support of their parents, so they did not have any issues requesting financial help from their parents, whereas Ciera did not have that option. In terms of her LD, Ciera had to work hard to be at the level of her roommates, whom she described as “very intelligent.” Academically, Ciera had difficulties focusing and had to spend an extra amount of time on her assignments, in comparison to her roommates. Nevertheless, approximately all the students in Ciera’s State were either Hispanics or of a Hispanic origin; as a result, Ciera felt that she was similar in to her roommates in that they all shared the Hispanic origin. Ciera compared her roommates to a “cohort,” in terms of the support they provided to each other, and to her community of friends at the LC:

My roommates were my support system. I am just very thankful for my roommates, as well as now, I’m in my master’s, and it is a cohort model... When I went to [Z] College, I didn’t have a cohort model. I didn’t have roommates, so I didn’t have a group of support. All I had was my husband, so although I still did fine as a student, I didn’t really enjoy my experience. But, I’ve noticed when I had this support system, I [was] really enjoying myself. Even when I talk about the Learning Center, having that group of students [unintelligible] that have similar interests and similar difficulties, to me, [that] makes the whole process easier. (Ciera, second interview)



**Life on campus and having a support system.** On the campus level, Ciera received services through an office on campus that was serving minorities. She worked with an academic advisor who helped her through meetings regularly and through providing Ciera a level of comfort that allowed her to ask for any help needed. Financially, all of Ciera's college tuition fees and housing were paid for via financial aid. Ciera attributed having such a successful first-year experience to not having to worry about any financial burdens. Ciera reflected on her experience:

I think because although I had to live off a cup of noodles, I still didn't have to worry about paying my tuition and paying fees and housing 'cause all of that was taken care of.... So, I think not having those extra stresses in my life and having that good first-year experience really shaped me as a student and really gave [me] the power I need[ed] to finish. And now, look at me; I am getting a master's! Who knows, maybe I can get a doctorate one day. (Ciera, second interview)

Life on campus has provided Ciera with a level of independence and has helped her become more active on campus. Ciera started making more friends. Her involvement with campus activities has led her to start rethinking the choice of her major. Ciera's passion for working with students was ignited early on during her first year at XY University:

I really wanted to start engaging on campus. I wanted to work in residence halls. I wanted to work in different offices.... I wanted to get involved. I remember being [a] freshman; it was the first time I had the independence of doing whatever I wanted, because my dad was really strict on me. So, he never let me go out. I didn't even really have many friends, because my dad would say, 'You don't need friends. You have your sisters; those are your friends.' (Ciera, second interview)

During her years in college, Ciera prided herself for being active on campus and for pursuing job opportunities that aligned with her passion with working with students and helping them find resources and adjusting to college. Ciera recalled that such an opportunity came early to her during her freshman year. Ciera was offered a job to work as a “pueo mentor”—which is a job that requires “mentoring freshmen and helping them transition into school and helping [them] in orientation.” Ciera recalled her first day on the job:

I remember students were sitting in tables, and my job was to go to each table and help them apply for classes. I remember thinking, ‘I’m really smart, and I know all of this. I’m actually helping somebody.’ It feels good, because I’m so used to having questions and always asking questions, and I never understand people. It’s hard for me to understand.

(Ciera, third interview)

Ciera developed a tendency toward explaining in detail and “over explaining” sometimes. She wanted to be “an approachable person” who students would approach with any questions they had. Ciera’s approach was developed because she struggled with understanding people sometimes when they explained things to her. She felt that sometimes, people would use “big words” and would assume that she understood what they said. Ciera, who would usually choose not to ask for further explanation, shook her head in pretense to signify that she understood what was being explained. While working with students, Ciera realized her passion for her job:

I really enjoyed what I was doing, and at that point, I was like, ‘This is what I wanted to do; I want to help people be successful in life, help them through college, especially [help] freshman.’ They have such a hard time. That transition period is hard. Being there for them, I really loved what I was doing. (Ciera, third interview)

**Disability services as support system.** In college, Ciera always made sure the disability office had the necessary papers for her to receive her accommodations. When Ciera transferred to Y State, she requested that all her disability related papers be transferred to her new college. Ciera acknowledged the role of the LC during her school years and how it helped her continue her education; receiving accommodation in college, especially, having extended time during tests, has helped Ciera tremendously.

During her junior and senior year of high school, Ciera signed up for online classes. She continued to receive accommodations for her online classes, as well for testing. However, the nature of one of her online classes made it very difficult for Ciera to learn. It was a class on oceanology. Ciera realized that her different learning abilities affected her during online classes as well. In this class, all material that was posted online lacked any visual aids. The readings were very long, and that resulted in Ciera getting “the worst grade [she] had ever gotten in college.” Ciera refrained from signing up for more online classes until a year later. She took a class on adolescence; Ciera found that this class helped her both on the personal-family level and on the professional level. Ciera reflected on her experience in this class stating, “The teacher was way different. He posted all of his lectures in video format, so we had to watch videos, and after the videos, we took a quiz. That was so much helpful for me, because I really felt that I was in class.”

The video nature of the online class allowed Ciera to pause the video and to take notes. Note taking was one of the accommodations that were offered to Ciera. However, Ciera did not utilize the use of a note taker. Ciera was reluctant to ask for a note-taker at first and felt that, instead, she would have to work on her note taking skills:

Because, partly, I think I would've been embarrassed a little bit, also because I just felt like it wasn't an [unintelligible]. Because I have a learning disability, it kind of forced me to learn to take notes and [to] pay attention to class. So ... to me, I don't think that was really something I needed. (Ciera, third interview)

In addition to feeling the need to work on her note taking skills, Ciera did not feel the need to disclose her disability at her work. Ciera explained that she does not “feel there is a need for [her] to disclose that information” at her work place.

**My husband as a support system.** After Ciera completed her first year in the first college she joined, she got married and transferred to another college in another state because her husband was stationed there. She continued her education there. Getting married helped Ciera to become more independent financially, as she could no longer rely on her father. In addition, transferring to the new college caused her to lose the financial aid. Ciera found herself “forced to work” to pay for her college loans. Ciera started working in Student Affairs on campus. She had to work, study, and take care of her family and dog, which made her “grow [up] a little bit.” Her new lifestyle opened her eyes, causing Ciera to realize that she actually loved her current job working with students and the lifestyle she has:

I think [marriage] just changed my entire perspective of what I wanted to do. Money is not everything. My husband is the best. He always supported me through everything. So, having him there and having those experiences is kind of being like an adult. I think [my life experiences with my husband] really have shaped who I am today. [Marriage] gave me a glimpse of what I can look forward to. I thought to myself, ‘I am really happy right now.’ ... It opened my mind into a different way of living. (Ciera, second interview)

When Ciera moved with her husband to Y State, she continued her studies in Business for another year. Ciera's initial decision to major in business was due to her father's impact on her. Ciera's father, a business owner, "has always encouraged [her] to make money," a choice she embarked on when she joined the Business Academy.

### **Changing Majors**

Soon after Ciera started working at the second college she transferred to, she developed a passion for working with students and wanted to pursue her passion for her career. This was not the first time that Ciera learned about the option of working with students. While a freshman, Ciera's professor, who was her academic advisor at the same time, played a key role in helping her understand what the job entailed. Ciera's advisor was working in Student Affairs. After talking to him about the nature of his job, Ciera realized that she had to switch her major if she wanted to work in Student Affairs. In her junior year, Ciera switched her major to psychology to be able to later pursue a master's degree in Student Affairs.

### **Social Struggles in College**

After Ciera moved to the second college, she started to feel "dis-attached" from her school environment. Although Ciera worked on campus as an orientation leader and was engaged in many activities, such as students' activities, she was not able to "connect with anybody there." It was partially due to the fact that Ciera's husband worked for the military, and there was a stigma attached to military personnel who were not from the same state. Being a wife of a military person in that state "put me in a weird space." Ciera's "dis-attachment" was due to the population nature at the college, where many students came from the same state and did not reside on campus, leaving little opportunity for students to get to know each other and make friends.

On a personal level, When Ciera moved to the second college, she was a newlywed and wanted to spend more time with her husband. Ciera made some friends while she was working on extracurricular activities; however, due to being a newlywed, it limited her chances to socialize with her friends outside of campus.

### **Graduate School: Everybody is so Smart**

During her educational journey, Ciera spoke of the support she received from her classmates at the LC. Sharing the experience of their needing to visit the LC helped Ciera connect better with her friends at the LC. She did not feel that she was different from them. At the college level, Ciera explained that it is significant to have a cohort system in graduate school. Ciera felt supported by her cohort and felt they were all equal in the sense that they were “so smart” and that they all wanted to succeed.

During her undergraduate years, Ciera studied with, primarily, a “Hispanic/Latino/Latina” population and did not feel that she was different because all students were considered a minority. In contrast, in graduate school, Ciera was a minority in a predominantly white institution for the first time in her life. Ciera felt that she was more comfortable and “click[ed]” more with people of color. However, the fact that Ciera’s graduate school was primarily White helped push Ciera “out of [her] comfort zone” and made her realize that it is in these same institutions that she wants to work at after graduating:

I want to work in those prominently white institutions so that I can be around people who are different than me but [so I can] also help out different minority students. It doesn’t have to be Hispanic. They can be Pacific Islanders, they can be Asians, [and] they can be African American. I just want to really work with students who are different than me and learn about their difference struggles. (Ciera, third interview)

## Looking Forward

Looking back on her school years, Ciera felt “proud of how [she] handled [herself].” Ciera stated that she has no regrets. She focused on school, and her work with students made her realize that it is such a “great experience;” it is the reason why, today, Ciera is continuing her education to be able to work in Student Affairs.

Looking forward to her future, Ciera envisions working at a university. She sees her role in educating minorities on the university resources available to them. Ciera enjoyed her time in college, and she wanted to teach others how to make the best of their educational college journey. She realized that despite all, she has finally succeeded:

I feel there are a lot of obstacles put against me. I am [a] Hispanic, first generation student, first generation American, and I’m a woman. I have a learning disability ...social economic status, just all of those combined. I really want to help those students who are first-generation.... I think my biggest concern is just first generation, and my second would be people with learning disabilities, because I feel...they’re kind of not expected to do great things... (Ciera, second interview)

Ciera wants to work in Student Affairs because she realizes that students with LDs are not believed to have the potential to go to college. Ciera stated, “I did feel sometimes they [teachers and administrators] didn’t really think much of me,” which made me “very sad.” Ciera further commented:

I still keep in touch with everybody who I had classes with, and out of all the students [in the LC class], I’m the only person who has gotten a bachelor’s degree. On top now, I’m getting my master’s degree.... So, to me, I really want to encourage them and make them

empowered to feel they can take on college and feel like they can get a degree. (Ciera, second interview)

In general, Ciera wants to share her experience in college with the students she will work with. She wants to share how college time can be “enjoyed” and how they, too, can be a success. She wants to teach the students about the available university resources, and she wants to help students “advocate for education.”

As our last interview came to an end, Ciera asked me about my studies and how many years I have spent working on my doctoral degree. Ciera seemed as if she was considering pursuing a doctoral degree. I met Ciera when she was in her first year, working on her master’s. At that time, she was pursuing her dream of working on campus to advance students’ resources through educating freshman on the resources available to them. She wanted to help students continue their college education and to have a successful future.

To answer the research question of the study, I presented the academic stories of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera’s. As the art of retelling the participants’ stories came to its end, following I present how I analyzed each constructed story to establish that the stories demonstrated coherence and communicated the academic lived experiences effectively.

### **Establishing Coherence in the Three Participants’ Educational Narratives**

Rubin and Rubin (2005) stated that narrative analysis focuses on how people make sense of their experiences, “how they interpret them, and how they share their experience with other[s],” rather than on the content of these experiences (p. 28).

In writing the academic narratives of the three participants, a thorough approach was implemented to ensure the establishment of the elements of coherence, including: causality,



continuity, and chronology as an affirmation of the consistency and rationality in presenting the stories of my three participants.

Throughout the process of constructing the participants' academic stories, I have reviewed the narratives to establish coherence of the stories. Steps, such as member checking and follow up interviews, were used to provide any missing details in the participants' narratives. In the follow up interviews, questions were asked to ensure the clarity of certain points that initially, or on the surface, appeared to be contradictory to the element of causality. In addition, continuity was established through forming a narrative that adheres to the established common sense and belief system. Finally, the chronology of the narrative was arranged based on a chronological order of each participant's educational journey, which started in kindergarten and continued until college time.

### **The Element of Causality**

In telling their stories, the participants were active agents who tried to emphasize certain aspects and/or hide others. In the art of retelling their stories, narrators reveal their "ideas of causation and complexity, or might reveal a hesitation to explain the causes or consequence of some event or action" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 29). In pursuing the element of causality, the documenting of the participants' educational life stories was not for the purpose of checking whether these stories were true or not, but rather, for the purpose of ensuring the comprehensibility of these stories. It has been established in narrative research that realities have many representations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2005), and that "narrative relies on criteria, other than validity, reliability, and generalizability" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7)

Establishing causality in a story is more than demonstrating the cause and the effect in the narratives. It is establishing that each narrative, as a whole, is coherent in terms of why events developed in the manner in which they did. According to Linde (1993), a number of factors could be used to establish the adequacy of causality in narratives, such as the character of the narrator and/or the richness of the account. In addition, elements of discontinuity and continuity were further identified in the collected narratives to establish the overall coherence of the collected narratives. Finally, the coherence system, which is governed by “expert systems,” and the element of “common sense,” are further examined in the construction of the narratives. Following, I discuss how each of these factors was established in the narratives of the participants’ three educational journeys.

**Character as a form of adequate causality.** Linde (1993) stated the character of the protagonist, in its own right, is the most compelling factor in establishing causality in the account of peoples’ choices of their professions. The protagonists’ certain traits, such as their abilities, ambitions, and passions, can be accounted for as some of the reasons for pursuing certain professions. Linde (1993) distinguished between two patterns of character traits that are used to explain choices, namely, the negative traits, which are used “to explain an unsuccessful choice,” and the positive traits, which are used “to explain a positive career choice” (p. 135).

In their exercising of their agency, each narrator identifies certain traits in their character that led her to make certain life choices. In the three stories that I presented, elements of the negative traits in each participant’s story were identified as causes for certain events and life choices. For instance, Mia explained throughout her story how her inability to understand facial expressions and figures of speech, which were symptoms of her undiagnosed NVLD at that time, and the fact that she had Tourette’s, affected her ability to make friends at the elementary level.

Mia stated that she “did not realize the social norms of what was proper”(Mia, first interview). This continuum was noticed when she joined the homeschooling school and in high school when she was enrolled in a public school. Such fear would continue to the college level when Mia expressed her fear of not making friends at college. On the other hand, Ciera’s inability to understand people was transformed in her actions towards over explaining and often repeating herself. Such inability affected her career choice as well. Ciera wanted to work with students to help them understand better the resources available and college life in general through presenting them in a more approachable way. Ciera explained her choice: “I want to be this approachable person that people can ask questions [to]” (Ciera, Interview Three) because:

I just feel like sometimes people talk to me in really like big words or ... they just kind of assume that I know certain things. So then, they just kind of explain things to me, and I’m like, ‘Wait, what is that you just said, what is that word, what does that mean?’ So, like, I just don’t understand. So, when I say things, I explain it, like, in very simple terms, and like [in] simple words. It is very, like, basic language. (Ciera, follow up interview)

In terms of their future professions, the three participants chose their majors based on traits they exhibited early in their lives. For instance, Amelia loved science, stating that she enjoyed the visits from scientists during elementary school years. Amelia declared, “I wanted to learn about DNA, chromosomes, and all of that kind of stuff” (Amelia, Interview One). Her love of science led her to majoring in biology so that she can eventually work as Physician’s Assistant. Mia, on the other hand, who suffered from mental illness early in her life, and who loved to work with people, chose to study social work so that she can eventually work with those who are dealing with mental and psychological issues. Finally, Ciera realized her passion for working with students early on in her first year in college. Her ambition to work with students

came from her own struggles as a first generation student who has an LD. Ciera chose to study psychology and Student Affairs to be able to work with students on campus.

In constructing the narratives, I tried to maintain what Plummer (2011) referred to as the “sense of the person behind the text.” (p. 196) I included many excerpts throughout the narratives to convey a sense of authenticity and to provide an understanding of the persons behind these stories, their idiosyncratic features, and their personalities. Identifying character traits is one way of establishing adequate causality. A second way to provide adequate causality is through providing a rich account of the educational experiences.

**Richness of an account as a form of adequate causality.** The rich accounts, argued Linde (1993), is usually an account that covers a long period of time, which, in turn, helps in locating the reasons behind the narrator’s past. In providing such accounts, the speaker is given the opportunity, the chance to provide multiple “noncontradictory accounts” that provide coherence to her story (Linde, 1993, p. 136).

Upon completing a collection of the narratives that answered the question, “What are your memories of your school years?” The collected narratives covered the period from the first days in school until the time of the last interview in each participant’s life. Such periods in my participants’ lives helped in eliciting details as to how specific events in their lives evolved.

In addition, in order to establish a rich account of the participants’ stories, I have asked each participant to think of three events in their educational journey, from their school years up until the day I interviewed them, and to tell me of these three events. For the time they spent in college, the participants were asked to think of one day in their college life that stood out and to tell me about that day.

In the three scene questions, the three participants chose to talk about events from different times in their lives, which varied from their elementary school years, up until their college years. While the participants mentioned some of these scenes previously when answering the first interview question, asking them for three specific events provided an opportunity to provide an in-depth description of these significant events in this dissertation. The three events, which proved to be turning points in each participant's life, helped in producing richer narratives.

The account of these events in the participants' lives helped in shedding light on what caused events to develop in the way they did. These events accounted further to why the participant's lives had taken certain turns. The first participant, Amelia, chose to talk about three events that happened around the time she was in elementary school. First, Amelia chose to talk about a time in second grade when she had difficulties copying notes from the board and struggled to perform at the level of her peers. Second, she talked about the time her parents talked to her about transferring to another school and how changing schools affected her self-perception and cost her the company of her best friend. Amelia also chose to talk about a disability fair she attended at her new school as the third event. Each event provided more details that shed light on why things developed in such a manner. The first and second event in Amelia's story helped in identifying the struggles she endured due to her LDs and how those struggles affected her life and self-esteem. The third event, which took place at the disability fair, gave a clear example of how Amelia acknowledged her LDs as an experience. Amelia shared having a dyslexia with someone who had dyslexia at the disability fair. Amelia's feeling of the sense of community that had disabilities in common has caused her to share her experience being dyslexic. While the two scenes were mentioned briefly when Amelia answered the first question in the interview, choosing three specific scenes helped Amelia remember the disability fair, and

identifying the scenes allowed her to talk about her experiences with meeting someone with dyslexia, other than her father, for the first time.

The second participant, Mia, chose to talk about events that evolved around the time she was in high school. Mia talked about joining the National Honor Society during high school. In addition, Mia spoke about getting accepted to college and finally graduating from high school as her second and third events. Mia chose to briefly talk about these three scenes during her initial narrative and decided to elaborate more on them. The choice of these themes helped in understanding what Mia valued as turning points or significant events that shaped her life. The three scenes were accomplishments that Mia was proud of, as they indicated her success in her educational life.

The third participant, Ciera, discussed three events that were all related to her time in college. The first event was about the time she learned about college from a girl in her high school. Ciera also talked about her first year in college, which she stated was “impactful.” The last scene was the time she got married. All three events were contributing factors to why Ciera chose to attend college and why she ended up in Student Affairs. Ciera argued that these three events shaped who she is today. Ciera’s first chosen scene was previously mentioned in her story. It was about her meeting Samantha and learning about college. The last two scenes were about Ciera’s first year in college and her getting married, both of which she referred to as having helped shape who she is today. Ciera has also mentioned both events briefly in her narrative.

Furthermore, in these events, the participants provided additional accounts that were triggered through the mentioning of these scenes. In conclusion, the three events allowed me to

look for details that explained the accounts of the three participants and to look for causes that occurred during the early years of the participants' lives.

### **Continuity**

Dewey emphasized that people's experiences should be understood as individual experiences; these experiences should be understood as situated in the social context. Dewey's criterion of experiences is "continuity"—that an experience is a result of other experiences, and these experiences lead to others, where the past, the present, and the future are on a continuum, which moves through the person and out into the social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories are events that happened in the past and that are narrated in the present and continue as the people narrating them continue to live their lives and retell those stories. Continuity is a key element in establishing coherence in the stories presented. On the other hand, discontinuity in narratives must be acknowledged and explained so that events in a story make sense. In explaining discontinuity in a narrative, a number of strategies could be used. Linde (1993) identified some of these strategies, such as:

- 1) Establishing discontinuity as temporal through "referring to earlier interests" in the protagonist's childhood, which is linked to establishing "adequate causality by referring to character traits" (p. 155);
- 2) Distancing oneself from the person in the past: The protagonist might explain that the apparent discontinuity is not, in fact, discontinuity because she is a different person now; and
- 3) The protagonist might refuse to acknowledge there is a discontinuity in the events and may provide an explanation that clarifies how they see these events as a continuum.

The narrators manage their narratives in order to exercise their agency in being the active

agents in their stories. They account for what appeared to be discontinuity by using some strategies to show the connections between events and developments in their stories. In the three collected stories, features of apparent discontinuities were demonstrated, which were often explained by the narrators, themselves, or through asking follow up questions when a break in the story was recognized.

The first participant, Amelia, described her love of arts and her creativity as a child of only five years old. Sensing the discontinuity in her story, Amelia explained that due to the lack of art classes at her school, her passion for art translated into a love for creative writing. While there is no apparent connection between arts and writing, Amelia connected these topics through their shared element of creativity, stating, “I’ve always been a creative person since I was little” (Amelia, second interview).

On the other hand, in Mia’s story, discontinuity appeared in high school in the form of two events: Mia experiencing a fluctuation in her grades and Mia making friends after struggling to do so for many years. I asked Mia if it was the first time in her educational years that her grades started fluctuating. Mia clarified that though her grades showed some fluctuation during middle school, it was not as noticeable because while she was homeschooled, her parents provided one-to-one help with studying, which helped her to maintain good grades. Mia referred to the causes that might have obscured her early struggles by referring to earlier events. On the second event, Mia stated that she started making more friends during her sophomore year of high school; this appeared as a break in her continued struggles in her earlier school years to make friends. Through questioning, I sought to clarify why her struggles with making friends was discontinued. Mia answered that after receiving the diagnosis of having an NVLD, she was able to adjust better at school, and that adjustment helped her to make more friends. In a sense, Mia



referred to not being her old self and sought to distance herself from earlier experiences. Mia argued that her difficulties in making friends and understanding people were all due to her undiagnosed NVLD during her earlier years in elementary school.

In the third participant's narrative, Ciera, the element of discontinuity was apparent in her break from her old self as a careless student who did not care for school. Ciera explained that the day she met Samantha and learned about college, she became a different person. Thus, Ciera adopted the strategy of distancing herself from her old self by changing her demeanor at school. Ciera adopted this same strategy of distancing herself from her past once again, especially after deciding to change her major from business to psychology. Ciera pointed out the different factors that contributed to such a decision, such as working with students on campus, being influenced by her professor and mentor, and finally, getting married and looking at her life differently.

In conclusion, in the three stories, elements of managing discontinuity were established to help the listener understand how the events unfolded. Without such account-managing strategies, the stories would lack comprehensibility and coherence.

### **Chronology**

After the establishment of the element of causality and continuity in the collected narratives, I am further explaining how the narratives were arranged in the manner in which they appeared. During the collection of the narratives, not all the participants followed an order in telling their stories. For instance, while Amelia literally started naming every grade and trying to remember what happened, Mia and Ciera talked about their experiences in terms of levels: elementary, middle, high school, and college. The participants further jumped in time to tell about different events as they remembered them. However, I re-constructed the participants' educational narratives and organized the events in the order in which they occurred to provide a

“sense of ordering” that is critical for readers to understand how the stories unfolded (Plummer, 2011, p196) and to establish the cause and effect of different events, as they were revealed when the stories were put in order.

Finally, organizing the narratives in the order in which they occurred allowed for further clarity and helped to establish accuracy and trustworthiness of the narratives. Adriansen (2012) stated that once these stories are put in order, “tensions and contradictions” become more apparent (p. 45). Eventually, I addressed these apparent contradictions and emphasized the tensions that my participants depicted as turning points and as significant moments in their lives.

In collecting the three stories, elements of coherence, including causality, continuity, and chronology, were established to ensure that these stories were understood as a “socially sharable narrative” (Linde, 1993, p. 163). To further analyze these narratives, and to provide a new level of understanding to the common shared themes among the three participants, I have conducted a thematic analysis of the three stories.

### **Thematic Analysis of the Three Participants’ Educational Journeys**

The academic journeys of the three participants revealed their moments of struggles and empowerment, how they transitioned through the disability identity stages, and how their educational institutions contributed in certain ways to their struggles and to their empowerment. Looking at the participants’ journeys from a disability studies lens that argues that individuals with disabilities’ perceptions of their abilities are often affected by the medical model view of disability and that disability should be examined from a social-cultural perspective as an experience, rather than as a deficit that resides within the individuals themselves, in this section, I examine the thematic tensions that the three participants shared in their stories. Additionally, in

this section, I examine how these generated themes helped in further understanding the experiences of the three participants.

Identifying the shared themes in the collected stories and examining those themes while implementing a disability studies lens helps in understanding concepts and practices used in the educational institution through views from inside those institutions, views that that are often viewed from the outside by individuals. The significance of understanding those events through listening to the participants' stories is to draw on any pedagogical implications that would potentially enhance the educational process.

Riessman (2008) stated, "the push toward narrative comes from contemporary preoccupations with identity" (p. 7). The identity is constructed through the telling of these stories as individuals narrate "who they are and how they want to be known" (Riessman, 2008, p. 7). In addition, the use of narrative research towards collecting the participants' stories allows for further examination of the development of the constructed disability identity of the participants.

The use of narrative research towards collecting and presenting the educational journeys of the three participants allows for an examining of their LDs as experiences, rather than as a deficit that could eventually be cured. The participants' educational journeys are centered within the disability studies framework to help examine the effect of the sociocultural contexts on these stories. Moreover, through examining these stories, the three participants are perceived as *the* informative in their stories. In addition, their stories functioned as sources of information that could help in better understanding their lived experiences, and to eventually find additional means to better serve this population of learners.

Prior to beginning the thematic analysis of my data, I acknowledge that, "data analysis is always a process, not a preconceived plan that can simply be scripted, providing predictable

products” (Hall, 2003, p. 494). I started the analysis with the intention of letting my participants’ stories, in a sense, identify the themes through following a thorough coding process and avoiding any means to link the participants’ stories to any previous research findings presented in my literature review.

To identify the shared themes in the educational experiences of the three participants, a thorough approach was adopted following Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) recommendations. The steps were as follows:

- 1) After transcribing all interviews, I read all the interviews of each participant several times and identified the different themes, events, and concepts using the margins of an electronic copy to record each theme and concept.
- 2) I organized the coded themes and concepts in one Microsoft Excel file to facilitate comparison between the three participants and grouped the different themes, concepts, and codes under broader themes that I generated.
- 3) I arranged the excerpts from across the interviews that were listed under the same generated themes into different computer files labeled according to the shared codes.
- 4) I used NVivo to look at word frequency in each participant’s interview transcriptions to further find any missed themes through looking at word frequency and re-reading the transcription of the interviews.
- 5) I sorted the themes and concepts among the different participants, and I then summarized the finding of each coded file.
- 6) I created theme excerpts that included the participants’ description of these themes to “create a complete picture” of each theme represented in the collected stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 190).

- 7) I re-read the summarized finding in each file to look for any “patterns and linkages between the themes” in order to generate the final themes that drew on the different connections between participant events (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 224).
- 8) Further, due to the fact the stories documented the participants’ experiences through different stages in their lives (i.e., elementary, middle, high school and college), I examined the themes across the three stories in relation to the grade stage factor.
- 9) Finally, I presented my results in the thematic analysis section in my dissertation.

The stories collected of the lived academic experiences of three multilingual, college students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs represent an array of disentangled moments and turning points that helped shaped who the participants are today. Each participant experienced living with LD(s), and through interacting with the world around her, she learned, struggled, often became embarrassed, and empowered through those experiences. Looking back to their experiences, the three participants tried to make sense of what happened, acknowledged factors that helped them to succeed, and to identified obstacles that stood in their way of learning.

At this juncture, I am introducing how the three participants experienced living with the LD diagnosis; how the diagnosis affected their lives, in terms of their school placement and the social struggles they endured; and how the participants reacted to hiding such struggles. I am also featuring the different ways that their diagnoses and the educational institutions contributed to their experiences. In addition, I am presenting how the educational institution practices affected their self-esteem, and how it empowered them. Finally, I explain how the participants’ experiences guided them to choosing their paths in their lives.

## **Theme (1). The Controversy of Living With an LD Diagnosis: The Learning Disability Identity Dilemma**

In the collected stories of the three participants, Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, it was established that the three participants noticed that they were “different” than their peers as early as their first years in elementary school. The word, “different,” was used in the three stories in the sense that a participant could not perform in math, writing, and/or reading at the level of her peers; this was expressed in Amelia’s story. A participant could not understand facial expressions and body language and struggled with reading comprehension, as in Mia’s story; or a participant perceived herself as not being “a good student,” as in Ciera’s story. Going through what Rodis (2001) referred to as the “problem without a name” phase in the development of their disability identity was stigmatizing to the three participants. It caused the three participants to feel “annoyed,” “embarrassed,” and “awkward” at times. However, such stigma was the result of a gap that the participants noticed when comparing themselves to their peers. The feeling of stigmatization continued after each of the participants found a name to the problem; however, the feeling of stigmatization was further aggravated with the need to be physically removed from a school or a classroom in order to receive special education services.

The diagnosis of an LD is necessary in order to provide students with the special education services they need. It is suggested that the learning of one’s disability could help aid a person in understanding that the difficulties they are experiencing are not their fault, but rather, are due to biological and neurological differences within their body (Rodis et al., 2001). After being diagnosed with LD(s), both Amelia and Ciera continued to feel embarrassed, because not only were they unable to perform at the level of their peers, but they also had to be pulled out of their classes to attend special educational classes.

After being diagnosed with an LD, Amelia had to transfer to another school. Amelia's old school did not have any special education programs for children with dyslexia. Amelia resented the need to move to another school, because it translated to her that she was "stupid" because of her need for additional services. In addition, while Amelia resented her special education classes because they deprived her of the opportunity to attend a visiting scientist's speeches, Ciera resented going to the LC because it indicated that she was "different" due to the proximity of the LC to the multiple disabilities classroom. In addition, Ciera resented going to the LC because she did not want her classmates to think she was "dumb."

As the participants advanced in their grades, the feeling of stigma that was internalized became externalized to reflect how other students perceived Ciera and Amelia's difference and how the two became subject to bullying at their schools. As they started middle school, the two participants continued to struggle with learning, and Amelia continued to struggle with making friends. In middle school, Ciera declared that she did not "care for school" around that time; similarly, Amelia stated that she "hated middle school." Early in her school years, Mia was bullied at school and was subjected to social segregation. Mia remembered struggling with making friends and with not having many friends. In addition, Mia was not invited to schoolmates' birthday parties, nor did she have opportunities where she could take part in any play dates.

In Mia's situation, due to the fact that she was not diagnosed with an LD until she was in high school, the "problem without a name" extended from kindergarten to high school. However, because Mia was homeschooled from third to eighth grade, her inability to perform at the level of her peers was diminished through providing her with a one-on-one tutor at home, which helped her to maintain her grades. After being diagnosed with an LD, Mia's age and her parents'

support helped her to deal with the diagnosis from a positive perspective. Mia's parents helped her see the NVLD diagnosis as "something to learn from." Darling & Heckert (2010), discovered that active individuals associate themselves with the social model of disability that views disability as an experience to learn from, rather than as a deficit, as in the medical model of disability. Therefore, the fact that Mia was engaged in extracurricular activities helped her to embrace her difference.

As the participants continued to receive special education services and utilized the accommodations available to them, they were faced with several challenges that stemmed from either the institute, itself, or from within themselves. For instance, in middle school, Amelia had to fight to use her accommodations in one of her classes. She was also hesitant to ask to record her lectures at the university. While Mia's parents helped her to learn from having an LD to better progress at school, Ciera struggled with her need to use a note-taker during classes and continued to reject her need for a note-taker, arguing that she always felt embarrassed to ask for one. Due to their LDs, the participants' lives were affected, both academically and socially. The participants developed certain strategies to help cope with those struggles.

## **Theme (2). Implementing Survival Learning Strategies**

In their journeys, the three participants struggled with learning throughout their academic lives. Both Amelia and Ciera did not understand the nature of their LDs; however, both equated their LDs to being "stupid" or "dumb." Amelia remembered being "really angry" that she had to read books at a lower reading level and that she could no longer hide her reading difficulties from her peers, which was "bothersome" to her. Ciera, on the other hand, felt embarrassed that she had to go to the LC and was worried that her classmates would find out about that and tried to hide it.



In an attempt to alleviate some of those struggles, the participants adopted different strategies in a reaction to those struggles. For instance, realizing her difficulties with performing at the level of her peers, Amelia explained how she tried to hide her inabilities, stating, “At school, I w[ould] just kind [of] like . . . flip through the pages of my books, or [just] look at the pictures, and I was able to kind of get a sense [of the content]. I would just essentially just kind of keep talking until they [my classmates] thought I had it [the content]” (Amelia, first interview). Moreover, during middle school, in math, Amelia would take two math sheets instead of one, so that she could start ahead of the students and switched the sheets midway through the test to finish in about the same time as her classmates. In high school, unable to read a novel in Spanish, Amelia, again, resorted to cheating and copied the novel’s summary from the Internet.

On the other hand, Ciera’s socioeconomic reasons, coupled with her LD, led her to cheat on one of the assignments by writing a summary about a book that did not exist. Ciera further defied her teachers at the LC and often talked back to them. In her mainstream classroom, Ciera questioned her ability to have the correct answers. Ciera stated, “I started to learn just a little bit, but I, again . . . didn’t feel smart enough, and I always questioned myself. I think because I knew . . . I had a learning disability. . . . I knew by then, and because I knew, I always questioned my ability” (Ciera, first interview). Ciera’s self-esteem was affected after being diagnosed with an LD. As a result, and despite the fact that Ciera started learning in her mainstream classroom, she opted not to participate in her mainstream classroom.

As the participants tried to cope with their learning differences to minimize the gap between them and their peers, they dealt with social struggles as well. Similar to how they reacted to their learning differences, the participants tried to find ways to fill the gap in their social life that was created by their LDs.

### **Theme (3). The LD(s) Social Stigma and Adopting Social Survival Strategies**

Both individuals with disabilities and without disabilities have adopted different social survival strategies in an attempt to fit in and secure certain needs. For instance, some female writers have opted to use male names to ensure their work would be well received or published. In addition, some disabled individuals chose to hide their disabilities in their work place by not utilizing any available accommodations, often in fear of rejection. In general, such survival strategies are often adopted to help individuals cope with the society's demands (Clare, 2008).

In their stories, the three participants detailed how their LDs affected their social lives at school. The social alienation of students with LDs has been documented in literature. Often, students with LDs experience different forms of social segregation, which are caused by their inability to perform at a similar level to their peers. For instance, Amelia detailed how, in her elementary school, friendship groups were based on reading and how her inability to read at the level of her peers deprived her from joining those groups. Amelia, left without a friend, wandered the school hallways and worked on the computer and at the library to hide the fact that she did not have any friends. During middle school, as Amelia continued to struggle with making friends, she diverted her attention to school projects and found her passion in public speaking. Amelia ran for school President and Treasurer and won. In high school, Amelia enrolled in choir and joined extracurricular activities, which helped her to cope with not having friends at school. In fact, Amelia started making friends among the students who practiced music and choir with her during after-school practice hours.

While Amelia's inability to read at the level of her peers affected her ability to have friends, Ciera's source of struggle with feeling that she was unequal to her peers originated from self-belief. In elementary school, Ciera felt "embarrassed" of her need to go to the LC and feared

that her classmates in the mainstream classroom would know and would think that she was “dumb.” However, while Ciera stated that such feelings of embarrassment came from within and was not caused by any comments made by her classmates, the impact of the medical model on Ciera’s perceptions of her disability could not be denied. The medical model, in this instance, is represented in society’s view of disability as a deficit or a dysfunction. Such negative view was reflected in Ciera’s fear in being perceived as “dumb.”

In middle school, Ciera continued to struggle with her self-esteem and questioned her learning abilities in the mainstream classroom. At this period in her life, Ciera found comfort in becoming friends with students who also attended the LC. She found solace in her group of friends at the LC. This group of friends, who shared the LC experience, created a sense of community. For Ciera, this was her new norm:

I was still kind of embarrassed that I went to the learning center, but by then, like, the friends that I had at the learning center, like, we w[ould] just all hang out. So, it started to become less embarrassing because, you know, I was cool with all of them, and, like, they were like normal. (Ciera, first interview)

Belonging to a group helped Ciera to regain her self-confidence. In addition, the friendship between members of the LC students helped foster their sense of belonging. Research indicates that support groups help foster self-confidence and pride in those with disabilities; this support eventually helps those with disabilities in defying the exclusionary circumstances they face in the outside world (Mejias, Gill & Shpigelman 2014).

Sharing the experiences of her need for the LC with her friends helped Ciera to transfer such experience from a source of shame to a bond that connected her to her friends. On the other hand, Mia’s social struggles started early in her educational journey. Mia was bullied and treated

as an outcast in elementary school. Mia continued to struggle socially with making friends in middle school when she was homeschooled. After being diagnosed with a NVLD in high school, Mia's struggle with making friends took a turn for the better, as she explained that learning about her disabilities helped her to cope better in life. Moreover, joining extracurricular activities helped Mia to adjust better at school.

In the three stories collected, the three participants detailed how their learning differences affected their lives academically and socially and how the learning about their diagnosis did not always provide a sense of relief, but was sometimes a source of embarrassment. However, in their stories, the participants indicated that receiving special education services after being diagnosed with an LD helped to transform their educational paths. In learning about their disabilities, the participants were able to receive special educational services and accommodations, despite the controversy surrounding them; it provided them a level of assistance that enabled them to succeed in school and to continue in their education.

#### **Theme (4). The Empowering Effect of the LD Diagnosis**

In the literature documented on students with LDs, often the diagnosis of an LD brings some relief to the individuals diagnosed; diagnosis helps to provide some individuals with a reassurance that they are not "stupid," but rather, that they are simply experiencing challenges in learning due to a neurological aspect. Mia was the only participant in the three collected stories who experienced such a reaction. It was due to the age that she was diagnosed with an NVLD and that was in sophomore year in high school; in addition, Mia received support in studying from her parents. In contrast, Amelia and Ciera resented the negative impact of being diagnosed with LD(s). However, all the participants embraced what that knowledge of being diagnosed offered, in terms of accommodations. The three participants utilized the accommodations made

available to them while in school and college, except for utilizing the use of a note-taker in Ciera's case. For instance, Amelia expressed how the use of technology helped her in science classes and how extended time during tests was beneficial. On the other hand, Mia detailed how the college preparation course she had taken during high school had prepared her for college. Finally, Ciera stated that accommodations have helped her tremendously during her school years. Ciera elaborated on how the LC "empowered" her because it created a learning environment that fostered learning and encouraged asking questions. Ciera stated:

When I was at the learning center, I felt comfortable to ask my questions ... that's where I actually learned. And, you know, I definitely feel like if it wasn't for the learning center, like, I would've dropped out of school because, you know, the learning center made me feel like, 'Wow, actually, I can really learn.'" (Ciera, first interview)

Moreover, the participants' awareness of their rights to be accommodated helped them in claiming those rights. For instance, during a biology class in high school, Amelia argued with her teacher who wanted to take away her rights for extended time to submit assignments. In addition, the three participants disclosed their disabilities to the Office of Disability at their universities in order to continue to receive accommodations. Amelia, Mia, and Ciera continued to benefit from the resources made available to students with LDs. The three participants were empowered through understanding that utilizing those resources would help them to succeed in school. Moreover, the Disability Office at the university made available to these students the option to resolve any disputes with their professors through the office and spared them the need to directly argue with their professors.

In term of their disability identity, understanding the nature of LDs could potentially help individuals embrace their disability identity. For instance, the disability fair at Amelia's school

helped her to understand the nature of dyslexia and empowered her to declare shamelessly her disability in front of her classmates. Ciera's experience with sharing the experiences of having an LD with her friends at the LC helped her to embrace her disability identity and helped her to feel "less embarrassed."

Finally, knowing about the nature of the LDs helped the participants' families in utilizing out of school resources to help their children with their learning difficulties and struggles. For instance, Amelia's parents were able to provide a reading tutor who helped Amelia to improve her reading. On the other hand, Mia's knowledge of her different medical issues led her to seek the help of a therapist during college. This therapist helped Mia to cope better with college stress and assignments.

While the educational institutes helped the participants through advising them on their rights to use accommodations, there were instances when these institutes' practices diminished the participants' self-esteem and/or devalued their abilities.

### **Theme (5). The Unsystematic, Disparaging Practices of Some of the Educational Institutions Towards Students With LDs**

Ware (2001) stated that a society's perception of disability has "informed normalizing discourses in medicine and psychology and [has been] reinforced by institutions [who have] unchallenged beliefs of deficiency and need" (p. 107). The medicalization of disability in the special education field is still prevalent (Hamayan, et al., 2013). In exploring the theme of unsystematic, disparaging approaches of some of the educational institutions in the three participants' academic journeys, it must be stated that these were individualized practices that were sometimes identified in the actions of some of the educators and were often embedded in the practice of the institutions. Under this theme, I explore the different ways the three

participants encountered disparaging practices that sometime led them to make certain choices in their educational paths.

During their academic journeys, Amelia, Mia, and Ciera utilized the use of accommodations to help them meet their educational needs. They all accomplished a lot in their journeys, and despite their learning difficulties, they all enrolled in the college of their choice. Both Mia and Ciera talked extensively about how they felt accomplished in getting excellent grades, in graduating from high school with honors in Mia's story, and in earning a GPA of 4.0 in Ciera's story. The three participants prided themselves in getting accepted to college and in pursuing their dreams, despite facing obstacles in their educational journeys. Moreover, all three participants became part of some of their school's organizations, such as Students School Board, The National Honor Society, and The Business Academy. Belonging to such organizations added to the participants' accomplishments through becoming a part of a well-recognized entity in their schools. Such organizations were recognized for encompassing an accomplished body of students.

In their schools, the three participants recognized themselves as being skillful, each in their own way. Such recognition helped in boosting the participants' self-esteem in perceiving themselves as accomplished individuals; however, in these same institutions, the participants were segregated from their peers during special education classes and through being subjected to social marginalization. The three participants often felt "different" for not being able to perform at their peers' level; and sometimes insinuated to be incapable of doing well in college. While some of these practices were obvious and often stated, some are embedded in the physical and the academic structures of the educational institutions.

The concept of segregation, as exemplified in pulling out Ameila and Ciera from their mainstream classes in order to provide them with special education services, has been documented and criticized in the literature (Ochoa, 2006). Measures have been initiated to help mitigate the effect of pull out approaches, such as the inclusion of students in the mainstream classrooms through providing further support, and through adjusting the curriculum (McGrady, 2001). In addition, the literature documented the skeptical attitudes of some teachers and professors towards students with LDs' need of accommodations (Jensen et al., 2013; Marshak et al., 2010). Both Amelia and Ciera were subjected to such biased attitudes by their teachers. For instance, Amelia stated that one of her high school teachers would make "snide remarks" when she asked questions, an attitude she continued to experience while in college. Ciera, on the other hand, spoke about two different disparaging practices she encountered while in school; the first was the location of the LC in a secluded part of the school, which is solely designed for students with severe disabilities. The association of students with LDs with students with physical disabilities should not be viewed as undesirable. Such negative views are the result of the lack of advocacy and awareness in helping young learners embrace their differences. It is a common practice for some educational institutions to design a space in their school for special education classes. Although the reasons for such designs might be due to issues related to accessibility and logistics, students with disabilities are often left with a feeling of embarrassment. Students with disabilities feel embarrassed for their need to go to another class to receive special education classes. The second incident that Ciera encountered, which she explained as having made her feel "sad," was when her counselor in high school suggested that she should apply to high acceptance rate colleges. Ciera argued that she always felt that "they did not think much of [her]."



Amelia, Ciera, and Mia struggled during their school years with feelings of “embarrassment.” Additionally, the women struggled with being bullied and with being “different.” It was not clear whether the school played any role in helping the participants to embrace their differences; with that being said, there was a common theme in the collected stories of struggling with embracing their disability identity.

In Mia’s situation, the effect of the institution took a different angle. Mia was not diagnosed with an LD until high school, and even at that time, it was at the persistent request of her parents that she be tested for a potential LD. When Mia was left without an LD diagnosis during elementary and middle school, it deprived her of the opportunity to utilize any special educational services that could have aided her in her educational endeavors. According to Ochoa (2006), withholding an LD identification and referral of students, as in Mia’s situation, has been argued to be “detrimental and denies them [the students] the opportunity to benefit from school” (p. 382). However, the educational support of Mia’s parents has helped to diminish the effect of the absence of special education services during school years.

Moreover, while the three participants seemed to utilize the use of accommodations during school and college time, there was an unspoken resentment towards the need to argue for their needs for those accommodations. Both Mia and Amelia expressed their relief in that the Office of Disabilities at their colleges handled any disputes with professors who denied them the use of their accommodations. Such statements indicate that disputes with professors weighed heavily on the two participants during their school years. Moreover, the nature of some of the accommodations, such as having a note-taker that requires requesting a person to write down notes during class for another student who has LDs, made Ciera resent that need and caused her to further defy her needs. Ciera stated that although she was offered a note-taker, she felt that she

should not have one and that she needed to work on her note-taking skills. Ciera's resentment towards having a note-taker stemmed from her embarrassment for the need of one that would make her stand out among her peers. When I asked Ciera whether she considered using a recorder to record her lectures, she stated, "I would really love to do that, but I feel uncomfortable asking the teacher." In such a case, the institution could act on behalf of students with LDs and could have the notes available to students without disclosing their needs for help. Such services would require the individual with a disability to take the initiative and let the office of disability look into providing such services. However, students with LDs' lack of self-advocacy skills, which should have been nurtured during school years, might impact the initiation of such actions.

Special education services offered during high school years provides a level of support for students to help them transition into college. However, such services that do not take into consideration all the factors that contribute to students' college success could have an adverse effect on students' future. For instance, Mia greatly benefitted from the learning disability course that she took during high school. She learned about the different accommodations that she could use in college which were not available in school; in addition, she learned that the course was counted towards her college credits. In contrast, Ciera's LD classroom deprived her of the opportunity to join other classes that would help to reflect better on her college résumé. It was mandatory for Ciera to take the LD class, which led her to fight the school so that she could be taken out of that class. Such demanding measures had contrasting effects on each participant due to the nature of their LD classes.

Often, in narrative research, as in this dissertation, researchers use their participants' stories as a "window to the contradictory and shifting nature of hegemonic discourses"(Chase,

2011, p. 422). This type of research focuses on the different ways that such discourses are “disrupt[ed],” though the participants’ stories “are constrained but not determined by those discourse[s]” (Chase, 2011, p. 422). Although the educational institutions’ disparaging practice had impacted the participants’ lives, it was in these same institutions that the participants found the support, which enabled them to succeed academically.

### **Theme (6). The Crucial Impact of the Support System on the Participants’ Educational Lives and Success**

Support systems, whether parents or friends, proved vital in the participants’ stories. For instance, Mia and Amelia enjoyed a level of support from their parents that helped them to cope with their learning difficulties. During school years and college, Amelia’s father helped her with editing her writing assignments. In addition, Amelia’s parents made available private tutors for reading and math. Mia’s parents, on the other hand, realized their daughter’s struggles early on, stayed up with her at night to help her cope with her anxiety before tests, and assisted her with studying for those tests. Furthermore, Mia’s parents played a key role in getting her diagnosed and continued their involvement in her education through meeting with her teachers and through advocating for her needs during high school. Mia stated, “I don’t think I noticed it. I think it’s more my parents and my teachers noticed it, mostly my parents because my teachers didn’t think of anything because I had such good grades” (Mia, second interview). In college, Mia’s parents continued to provide Mia with support through talking to her everyday. They also helped her during the times she wanted to drop out of college due to not doing well in one of her courses. Similarly, Ciera’s support system consisted of her friends in high school and college. Ciera spoke of how Samantha helped her become interested in school through informing her about college. After starting to accompany Samantha and her new group of friends, and upon joining

extracurricular activities, Ciera's grades started to improve, and she started to care more about school. In college, Ciera's roommates functioned as her support system during her first year of college. When Ciera transferred to another college after getting married, Ciera lost her support system. Ciera's husband ultimately became her support system, for her husband helped her with dealing with her college and life stresses.

In each of the three stories, the presence of a support system helped each of the participants to surpass any obstacles and to succeed in their academic lives. As the participants continue their studies at their colleges, they thought back to their journeys and how their journeys helped shape who they are today and what they aspire to be in the future.

#### **Theme (7). The Influence of the LD on the Participants' Life Choices**

In the three stories collected, the participants chose different college majors to continue their academic journeys. While Amelia chose to study biology, Mia chose to major in social work, and Ciera chose to work towards a master's degree in Student Affairs. In their interviews, the three participants shared their struggles with learning, shared the support they received from their schools, in terms of special educational services, and shared how they were impacted by their educational institutions throughout their journeys.

In Mia and Ciera's stories, it was evident how their choices of their majors and their choices in what they wanted to become, was driven by their personal struggles during school years. Mia, who is majoring in social work, stated, "I just wanted to help other people, like myself. I'm thinking about working [in] mental health, like [at] an outpatient facility, or [at] something to do with, like, intellectual disabilities" (Mia, first interview). Similarly, Ciera, who is working on her master's degree in Student Affairs in higher education, declared, "I really want to help those students who are first-generation.... I think my biggest concern is just first

generation, and my second would be people with learning disabilities, because I feel...they're kind of not expected to do great things" (Ciera, follow up interview). Ciera's choice of her major stemmed from her own struggles with "having questions and asking questions." Ciera often had a hard time understanding what people meant. In fact, she stated, "I just feel like, sometimes, people talk to me in really like big words...They just kind of assume that I know certain things" (Ciera, follow up interview). Finally, Ciera wants to share with those she would work with her successful journey as a student with an LD. Ciera also wants students to enjoy their time in college, just like she did.

In contrast, Amelia's choice of studying biology to become a Physician's Assistant was based on her love of sciences, which she recognized in third grade. In addition, Amelia argued that she did better in classes that had more structure. Science classes had more structure, in comparison to her other classes, such as English. Amelia stated, "I like structured college professors better, even though their classes [are] always harder, and I always have to work harder in them. I feel like I learn more, and I respect them for kind of keeping that" (Amelia, third interview). It is due to her LDs that Amelia argued that she did better when she was not given an easy pass, but rather, was pushed to do her best.

The three participants' different learning abilities affected their educational lives. In addition, their different abilities led them to choose their majors. As the three prided themselves for being able to enroll in college, they all look forward to pursuing their dream of graduating from college, each in their field.

### **Theme (8). The Empowering Dynamics That Helped Foster Success**

In the stories collected, and because the participants were college students, the goal for all was to ultimately enroll in college and graduate, whether this type of accomplishment was to

prove that one is similar to one's all-college-graduate-family members, as in Mia's story, or to declare oneself as the first in one's immigrant family to graduate college, as in Ciera's situation. In these stories, the participants talked about the different factors that contributed to their success, such as their family support, the special education services they received (e.g., accommodations, special education services, and certain teaching styles.)

In their narratives, the three participants spoke about different elements that contributed to their learning. While their families played a key role in providing stability, either financially or emotionally, other factors assisted the participants in continuing their educational journeys and helping them to enroll in college. For instance, Amelia talked about certain classes and teaching styles that helped her to learn. Amelia described those classes as well-structured classes, and she argued that the teachers were "hard graders," in contrast to those who did not demand much work of her and gave her an easy pass. In addition, since Amelia's LDs affected her ability to write, she found one professor's teaching approach to be of a great asset. The professor often held a discussion of the work in class debates. In addition, the professor asked analytical questions to help Amelia improve her writing. Finally, becoming the student president during Amelia's middle school years helped her gain self-confidence and helped her flourish in an area she enjoys, and that is public speaking—a skill she found to be advantageous in college.

On the other hand, Mia, who was not diagnosed with NVLD until high school, had the support of her parents, who helped her with studying and maintaining good grades. During high school, Mia joined the National Honor Society and became more active in extracurricular activities, which, in addition to providing a sense of accomplishment, helped Mia to cope with her school stress. Belonging to a certain community has been established as one of the elements

that help students continue their education. Finally, the outpatient program that Mia visited helped her to further cope with her medical and psychological struggles.

Similar to Amelia and Mia, Ciera found support in becoming a member of the Business Academy and continued to receive such support in college through her roommates. However, Ciera also experienced another type of community—a self-made community of the students at the LC. After becoming friends with her classmates at the LC, Ciera explained that she was “normal.” The community of LD learners functioned as a net that provided support for its members in the sharing of their experiences. Last but not least, the LC helped Ciera learn by providing a nurturing environment that encouraged students to ask questions—an obstacle both Ciera and Amelia mentioned and encountered while learning in their mainstream classrooms. However, Ciera argued that the LC should have done more to educate students with LDs about college and to help them increase their chances to get into college through informing them about their opportunities.

In college, all participants spoke of the role of the Disability Office in helping them facilitate the use of accommodations and communications with professors. The office initially informed the professors of the participants’ disabilities and further offered to resolve any disputes that might occur. For instance, Mia spoke about the benefits of meeting weekly with a coach at the Disability Office at her college. Amelia, on the other hand, talked about having this approachable person who would respond immediately to her questions. Amelia was also able to communicate any problems with receiving her accommodations to the Disability Office.

Finding shared themes among the three participants was not for the purpose of diminishing the individual findings, but to connect the dots in the participants’ stories and to make sense of their experiences. In examining and collecting those themes, I was able to shed

light on how particular LDs have transformed my participants' social lives and how their LDS affected their self-esteem. In addition, I was able to showcase how accommodations and the educational institutions fostered their learning. Moreover, I identified the limitations in educational systems serving the three participants. I assessed how the participants found strengths in themselves and through different support systems to succeed in their journeys. Finally, I presented how each participant found her passion in life.

#### **Summary of Chapter Four**

People narrate their experiences and the world around them to make sense of what happened (Horn, Moss, 2014). Linde (1993) stated, "Narratives consist of events and evaluations: what happened and what its moral meaning is" (p. 163). Narrative research helps in transforming individuals' experiences into social knowledge. This narrative research dissertation collected and analyzed the academic experiences of three multilingual college students diagnosed with specific LDs.

My interest in the experiences of multilingual college students with LDs revolves around an interest in learning about their lived experiences through documenting and analyzing their stories. Chase (2011) defined narrative as a "distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one's own or others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (p. 421). In this chapter, I answered the research question: What are the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who are diagnosed with specific LDs? Through sharing the participants' academic lived experiences, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of the documented experiences. I have further identified the shared themes among the three participants, Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, to help in



studying the tensions, the turning points, and in juxtaposing events to understand the effect of the educational institute on the three participants' academic experiences.

This dissertation's purpose is to understand the academic experiences of the three participants through listening and analyzing their stories. This study further attempts to find the pedagogical findings that these stories implicate. In the next chapter, I explore the pedagogical implications that are understood from the collected stories and the thematic findings. The purpose of such pedagogical implications are not for generalization but rather, are offered to find ways to better advance the educational outcomes of the learning process.

## CHAPTER 5

### PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

#### **Overview of Study**

This dissertation documented and analyzed the academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students diagnosed with specific LDs. The principal purpose of this study is to enrich an understanding of these individuals' experiences through sharing and analyzing the nature of the participants' experiences. Furthermore, the study identifies the shared themes that emerged from the three narratives to articulate the pedagogical implications that are understood from these experiences. Ultimately, the study's purpose is to cultivate an understanding of those experiences and to provide implications to the educational field to better serve this population of learners.

The significance of this dissertation is recognized in facilitating the voices of participants and adding to the scarce narrative research on multilingual individuals with LDs. This dissertation documented the academic experiences of only three individuals, and as it is the practice in qualitative research, the dissertation does not aim to generalize any findings. However, in sharing and analyzing the academic experiences of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, this dissertation aimed to raise the issues that surfaced in their stories and that warrant educators' consideration.

The dissertation was guided by one major research question:

- 1) What are the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs?

The use of narrative research in documenting and analyzing the academic stories allowed the inclusion of the voices of multilingual college students diagnosed with LDs. Additionally, the

use of narrative research facilitated in examining the role of the educational institutes and how they contributed to the academic life experiences of these individuals. Finally, the use of narrative form in presenting the stories of the three individuals helped in diminishing the effect of the medical model and activating the social model in the perception of these stories as lived experiences. From a social model perspective, the disability does not reside within the individual herself, but rather interacts and responds to the social surroundings. In studying these experiences, the narrative form enabled an examination of the environment, which is represented in the educational institution, on the lives of the three participants, rather than looking at and studying their disabilities as separate entities of their own.

In the previous chapter, Chapter Four, I presented the academic experiences of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, and I provided the shared thematic findings in the stories collected. In Chapter Five, I present the pedagogical implications understood from the shared themes of the three participants in the study. I reinstated and generated the potential pedagogical implications that the participants' academic stories provided to the education field, in general, and to the field of Composition and Applied Linguistics in specific.

Special education services aimed for multilingual and minority individuals with disabilities have often been criticized for “inappropriately, disproportionality, labeling, segregat[ing], stigmatiz[ing], and poorly educating the children” (Ochoa, 2006, p. 360). By listening to the three participant's stories, this study emphasized building on what can be learned by listening to the three participants' academic stories to better serve these learners instead of focusing on prior institutional challenges. In reading this dissertation, I invite educators and administrators across disciplines to explore the pedagogical implications in this dissertation to potentially implement them to the conditions in which they apply.

In collecting and analyzing the academic experiences of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, the disability studies framework was adopted as a theoretical lens, which guided this study. Such a framework is based mainly on five tenets that present the views of the social model of disability. Following, I detail how each tenet was implemented in this dissertation to help in understanding the academic life stories of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera and to help in reaching the pedagogical implications of the study.

### **Applying Disability Studies Tenets to the Participants' Academic Journeys**

It has been established in the literature on minorities and disenfranchised individuals that their stories are told once there is a “social framework” that allows for such experiences to be told (Plummer, 2011, p. 235). For instance, stories of Blacks and victims of sexual abuse emerged when a social framework helped in organizing them (Frank, 2013; Plummer, 2011). Similarly, the advocacy efforts of the disability studies field have helped in promoting the social model in looking at disability as a part of an experience that results from the interaction with the social context, rather than as an abnormality that resides within the person and must be cured.

The employment of a disability studies framework in examining the stories of the three participants helped in redefining their role in their stories as active agents who played a key role in living their experiences through the retelling of what happened in their life and why their experiences happened. The participants in this study perceived themselves as capable individuals who are, despite various life obstacles, succeeding in pursuing their education and in enrolling in college to ultimately pursue their dream careers.

### **Placing People With Disabilities Central to Theories of Disability**

To apply the concept of placing people with disabilities central to theories of disability is, in other words, to have individuals with disabilities determine how they would define their

disability and to listen to what they perceive to work best in given educational contexts. To be able to start such dialogue, several key factors need to be addressed in the educational process. The first is a redefinition of the power dynamics in the classroom. Next, accommodations must be included within the infrastructure of the classroom. Finally, the inclusion of students with disabilities voices-stories in redefining and reforming the classroom environment. Below, I explore each of these points separately.

**Redefining the student-researcher-relation dynamics.** Lubelska and Matheaws (1997) stated that individuals with disabilities are often disabled and enabled by those around them by perpetuating certain practices. For instance, when a teacher denies a student with LDs the use of accommodation, such as in Amelia's situation in her science class, the teacher enacted her authority to disempower this student due to frequent, erroneous misconceptions about students' with disabilities need for accommodations, such as that the student either does not need the accommodations or does not have a learning disability (Jensen et al., 2013; Marshak, et al., 2010; Rao, 20). As a result, to redefine the roles, the students should be perceived as an equal part in the power dynamic, in relation to the decisions related to their disabilities in the classroom. When teachers discontinue perceiving themselves as the ultimate source of knowledge, such knowledge related to disability would potentially shift to the individual with a disability. However, refraining from preventing students with disabilities from using their accommodations is not the ultimate objective in the classroom. These students' needs for such accommodations must be addressed in the classroom in the form of the curriculum and the teaching style. Such classroom's restructuring is the ultimate inclusion and empowerment of these individuals.

**Accommodations built within the infrastructure of the classrooms.** Accommodations should not be viewed as a privilege or a charitable offering. They should not be added into the

classroom environment; however, they should be built into the infrastructure of the classroom for those who need them, and “revised” and revised again (Dolmage, 2008; Perrier, et al., 2014; Price, 2001, p. 102). Such measures should not take effect on the setting accommodation only, in terms of seating and technological aspects, as Price argued (2001). It should be further included in the “beliefs,” “the attitudes,” and “the discourse” in the classroom (Price, 2001, p. 62). Students with disabilities should not feel embarrassed, as Ciera felt asking for a note taker. In the stories collected, classroom accommodations and the participants’ needs for such accommodations were examined from the perspective of perceiving accommodations as an essential part of the classroom environment.

**Including students with disabilities’ voices-stories as part of an approach to redefine and reform the classroom environment.** Including the experiences of individuals with disabilities in the classroom through allowing them to share such experiences would help in eventually perceiving those needs as part of a typical classroom environment, and as a result as “normal” (Lubelska & Matheaws 1997, p. 135). Narratives of students with LDs can be documented and analyzed further to find additional ways to include their needs within the classroom in the same manner as other students’ needs were included.

The shift of power dynamics in the classroom has been gaining momentum as more teachers are driven towards the use of a learner’s centered approach in the classroom. The needs of students with LDs must be valued and must be considered as essential to the overall success of the learning process. In putting students central to the learning process, and in documenting and allowing students with LDs to share their experiences, we are privileging the knowledge that derives from such experiences.

## **Privileging Knowledge Derived From the Lived Experience of People With Disabilities**

Adopting narrative research methodology to document the academic experiences of multilingual students with LDs is one way to include their voices in the educational process. Through understanding the stories of the participants in this dissertation and in other narrative works, we are providing them the opportunity to not only share their experiences, but further, to include what can be applied from their stories to similar educational contexts. The use of narrative research methodology towards examining their stories allowed for an examination of the interaction of disabilities within social and cultural contexts. In adopting such an approach in studying the lives of individuals with LDs, the ultimate goal is to understand their needs and to further include such needs in the educational institution, which could potentially help in redefining their disabilities as part of the norm.

## **Working With People With Disabilities as Informed Participants or Co-Researchers**

The inclusion of people with disabilities in research as informed participants and co-researchers is embodied in adopting narrative research towards collecting and analyzing their stories. Such a concept can be summarized in the disability movement's motto, "nothing about it without us" (Charlton, 1998, p. 17). However, "without us," is used in the sense that individuals with disabilities' experiences are included, rather than they their disabilities are objectified and studied.

In addition to using narrative research methodology to document the academic experiences of the three participants, I have also used the strategy of member checking to review the constructed narratives and to ensure that the stories were presented in a manner that reflects the reality as perceived by the participants. The credibility of narrative work is often viewed within terms that shared by many known as "common sense" and viewed through the lens of

specific, more experienced fields, such as political, psychological, or religious theories that make sense of what happened (Linde, 1993, p. 163). In the stories collected, it was clear that the effect of the medical model of disability on some the participants' perceptions of their disabilities. Both Amelia and Ciera were ashamed of having LDs and viewed their disability as deviant from the norm, which resulted in viewing disabilities a source of "embarrassment." In the shared stories, the effect of the long adopted medical model in the society on their perceptions of their disabilities was recognized.

In addition, through sharing their stories, the participants provided a large picture of what occurred in the educational institutions that affected their learning and social life. The participants as informants have also indicated through the sharing of their experiences the absence of advocacy for a positive disability identity.

### **Valuing Disability as a Natural Part of Human Diversity, Rather Than as a Dysfunction**

We are living in a world where students with disabilities are pushed to believe it is their responsibility to overcome their disabilities. The concept of "overcoming ones' disability" originated from aspiring to become "normal" and what is deemed as the definition of normal. What constitutes a fundamental part of the learning process is deemed normal. To include the needs of individuals with disabilities is to help in normalizing those needs and to change the societal perception of their disabilities as something to be fixed.

Once again, sharing the participants' stories is one step in the way of valuing disability as an experience worth telling and in viewing disability as only one part of human characteristics, which interact in the same manner as other human characteristics within varied social and cultural contexts.



## **Supporting Disabled Students in the Development of a Positive Disability Identity**

A number of steps should be followed to help individuals with LDs embrace their disabilities and learn from their difference. Chase (2011) suggested that narratives could help bring positive change. When stories of individuals with disabilities are shared in a narrative form, it could potentially help in viewing them as lived experiences and in viewing individuals with disabilities as part of a society; a society that should do better to serve its members.

In addition, to help develop a positive disability identity, students with disabilities need to be educated on how to self-advocate. Such preparation has already taken place in some educational institutions in the form of teaching students their rights and in showing students the resources available to them. However, there is a need for an additional level; there is a need to teach students to value their experiences and their differences and to acknowledge their differences as a form of diversity rather than viewing those differences as a deficit.

In telling their stories, the three participants provided a portrait of their shaped identity and included the interpersonal and the social factors that contributed to such formation. They articulated their efforts to belong, their aspirations to be viewed as equal and capable, and their pride of their accomplishments. Finally, the three participants' stories further inspired a number of pedagogical implications that could potentially better advance the field of special education and applied linguistics, among other fields.

### **Researcher's Reflections**

During the data collection process, I mistakenly thought that when listening to my participants' stories, they would remind me of my daughter, but rather, they reminded me of myself as a mother with a child with disabilities. It is quite possible that due to my daughter's disabilities' nature, which caused her to be unable to communicate in a manner that would enable

her to carry out a conversation, that I experienced her experience to fullest. For instance, in learning about her diagnosis, I experienced both the positive aspect, in terms of realizing there is physiological element to her symptoms. I realized that my daughter's disability was not due to environmental causes. In terms of the negative aspect, my concerns were mainly about the fact that now that my daughter has been diagnosed with disability and is learning about her diagnosis, I realize how that could affect her for the rest of her life. While I do not deny that I am for curing my daughter's disability, I am here to state how, as a mother, I have learned to identify with her disability as an experience we both are living.

During my daughter's early school years, I used to struggle when her teachers would say she was not making progress due to her disability. I relate to my participants when they tried to hide their LD(s), as I sometimes wished I could hide the fact that my daughter was disabled to see if her educational outcomes would turn out differently.

Having a child with a disability weighed heavily on my perceptions as her mother. I carried such weight around trying to figure out what else I could possibly do to help in mitigating the effect of her disability on her life. The first years in my daughter's life, my research endeavors focused mainly on finding services to help her learn more and progress. However, after years of therapy and realizing the toll it took on my well-being and on my family's life, I decided to re-examine how I look at my daughter's disability. Realizing that she had made little progress during the years and gained and lost many skills due to her regressive condition, I came to the conclusion that we, as a family, need to redefine how we view her disability. About a year and a half ago, I decided instead of trying to change my daughter's condition that I should modify the environment to better suit her needs. Such an approach has helped in turning my daughter into a happier and healthier child. For instance, instead of looking for additional

outpatient services in terms of physical, occupational, and speech therapy where she had to spend most of her time in small rooms practicing the same goals for months, I decided to discontinue such services and focus more on recreational activities and having some quality family time with my daughter. While my daughter continues to receive special educational and therapeutic services at her school every week, she is now able to live her life as any able person to the fullest. Similarly, the three participants in this dissertation attested to the fact that extracurricular activities have helped in improving their grades and sometimes have helped them with coping with school struggles and life stresses.

During my data collection and analysis process, I was inhibited with the fear of treating my participants as a “means to an end,” instead of treating them as “ends in themselves” (Seidman, 1998, p. 142). In the course of conducting the interviews for this study, I exercised self-control against my instincts to ask questions that I knew were originating from my mother of a child with a disability-self, rather than from my researcher-self— questions that do not conform to qualitative research interviews documenting life stories. Paradoxically, when I had the opportunity to ask such non-research related questions during a lunch I arranged after an interview with one of my participants, despite the fact that the participant was open to sharing her experiences, I could not discontinue the researcher’s role I had undertaken and felt an obligation to continue such a role even after the interview was over.

During the data collection process, I kept journals to document my journey during conducting the interviews. These journals included my reflections of how the interviews were carried out. These journals also included the viewpoints that occurred to me while doing those interviews. I wrote about my thoughts and fears, and what I thought should have been done

differently during the interviews. For example, on my first encounter with my first participant, Mia, I wrote:

When we first saw each other across the screen, we kept staring for a few seconds at each other's image. I think she was not expecting someone who is wearing a hijab, but it might be just me, worrying a bit about her reaction to the fact that I am a Muslim, especially at this time in the US history. (Research Journals)

Such journals helped me to reflect on my follow up questions after each interview. In addition, they enabled me to pay more attention to the times I redirected the conversations unconsciously to areas that I invested in, rather than on the focus of my study.

As I listened to my participants' stories, I relived their feelings of frustration and anger. I relived their struggles and their moments of joy and laughter. I wanted to extend sharing their experiences to inform my colleagues in the Composition and Applied Linguistic fields among other fields. I hope that this work will inspire other disciplines. As I parted ways with my participants with the conclusion of this dissertation, I realize that I carry a piece of each one of them in me, as they became part of my life. In my journals on my last interview with my last participant, Ciera, I wrote:

Ciera was smiling and asked how I was doing, which I noticed with all the interviewees is a question they all asked in the last interview, knowing heartedly that I knew a lot about them, but they know almost nothing about me. (Research Journals)

### **Pedagogical Implications for Administrators and Educators**

Rubin and Rubin (2005) argued that qualitative analysis “is not about counting or providing numeric summaries. Instead, the objective is to discover variation, [to] portray shades of meaning, and [to] examine complexity” (p. 200). The thematic analysis of this dissertation

was carried out for the main purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the collected academic narratives of three multilingual college students who have been diagnosed with LDs. Through such in depth understandings, the participants' academic struggles and accomplishments were examined in light of their diagnosis. In addition, the role of the institution in helping foster and hinder their successes was assessed.

In the shared thematic analysis of the three participants, the effect of living with an LD diagnosis was portrayed in terms of the social and learning struggles that they endured. In addition, the themes shed light on the empowering side of being identified as learning disabled, in terms of getting the support needed and understanding one's potentials. These successful stories help to serve as evidence that disabilities do not define or confine people's abilities, but rather, the circumstances surrounding them.

After a thorough examination of the academic success stories of the three participants, and upon further investigation of the shared thematic analysis, two conclusions have been reached: 1) From the perspective of the participants, a number of factors contributed to their academic success. 2) Additionally, listening to the participants' stories helped in identifying the impeding factors that affected the participants' academic lives. As educators, teachers, and administrators strive to advance the learning of students from all walks of life, these stories could potentially help in defining some of the elements that contributed to the academic success of the three participants, such as having a support system (e.g., family, friends, a husband, and/or a cohort). The participants further benefited from their LD diagnosis, in terms of understanding their needs and advocating for those needs. Contrastingly, listening to the three participants' stories helped to further identify some of the elements that might inflect a negative impact on the development of a positive disability identity, such as some of the disparaging practices of

educational institutes, and the stigma associated with living with an LD diagnosis that is caused by the medicalization of disability.

In considering the pedagogical implications that are drawn from the three collected and analyzed academic stories of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, I wish to approach such implications from two levels: (1) the immediate level, which is understood from direct statements made by the participants in their aspirations for better educational environments that foster learning and which embrace and support the development of a positive disability identity; and (2) the inferential level, which is represented in the inferences I concluded from the three collected and analyzed academic stories and thematic findings. Such inferences were made through studying the elements that contributed to the participants' success and the obstacles that hindered their educational paths.

On the first level, participants made statements that indicated their wishes for certain life aspects to have been carried out differently. Additionally, the participants contrasted the different services provided to them during their journeys and identified the ones that improved their educational experiences. For example, Amelia pointed out the importance of structured classes and teaching styles that helped her to reach her potential. Amelia resented when her teachers gave her a pass and did not push her to work more; Amelia actually accomplished more when her teachers pushed her and when the classes demanded more work from her. Amelia expressed her disappointment with her easy language arts school classes and college English classes because, not only did they not bring out the best in her, but they did not help her to learn much. It has been established in the literature on individuals with dyslexia that higher order tasks are easier to manage, in contrast to simple tasks (Cottrell, 2003). Amelia wished all of her classes had more structure and demanded further rigor. The pedagogical implications that can be

concluded from Amelia's wishes for more structured classes and more rigorous work demands are represented in the need for a reexamination of the frequently held views of students with LDs. Students with LDs are often perceived as incapable of high order tasks and the teaching practices that are the result of such views.

On the other hand, Ciera talked about how she wished that the LC was more involved in educating students with LDs on the importance of college. She had also emphasized that the LC should play an active role in helping students tour colleges, as well as helping with college applications and educating them on the resources available. Delpit (2001) argued that when people are "stereotyped as less competent, their performance tends to bear out the stereotype" (p. 162). The LC's lack of involvement in educating students on the importance of college education was not carried out intentionally to exclude this population from the college conversation. However, there is a need for further work in helping students understand and advocate for their different learning abilities, especially as part of the transition to the college program. Ciera stated that she was the only one in her LD class who enrolled in college. If such acts are implemented, the number of college students who are diagnosed with LDs could potentially increase. Moreover, educating students with an LD at the LC about college would additionally communicate to these students that they are capable of enrolling and succeeding in college. Supporting students with LDs would help in fostering the development of a positive disability identity that views oneself as an equal to others.

Additionally, Gregg (2013) stressed that factors, such as family composition and having conversations about college within the family, play a key role in students' college persistence. However, first-generations students, as Ciera pointed out, do not learn about college because their parents did not have the US college experience; thus the absence of such experience created

a gap in these students’ lives. Ciera suggested that the LC should step in to help fill the gap left in first generation students with LDs’ educational lives due to their families’ sociocultural backgrounds.

On the second level, a number of pedagogical implications were concluded from the academic stories and the thematic analysis. Such pedagogical implications could potentially further help in advancing the educational environment, in the circumstances in which they apply, in both the Composition and Applied Linguistics fields, among others. (Please see figure 2 for a summary of the pedagogical implications that are inferred from the shared themes of the three stories.)

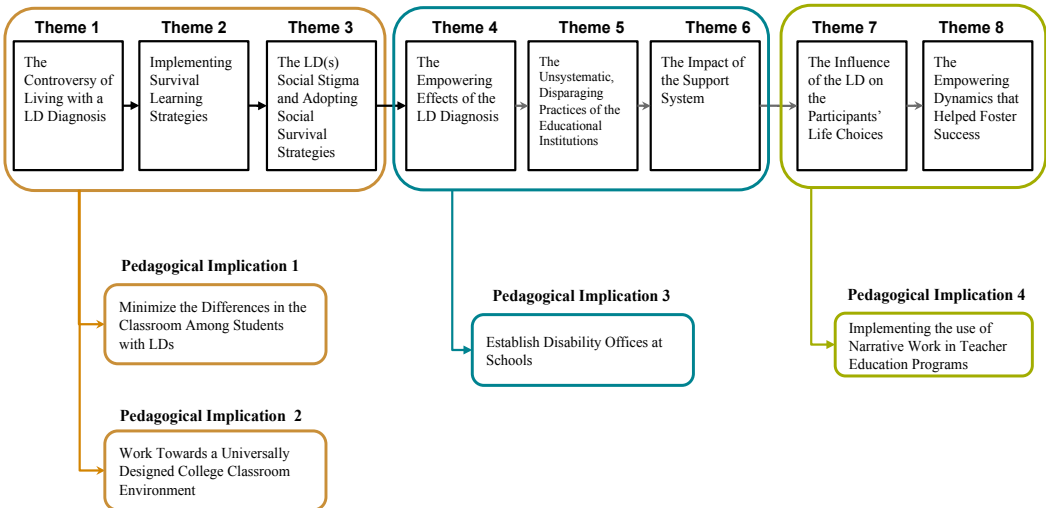


Figure 2. Thematic analysis of the three participants’ academic journeys and their pedagogical implications.

**Minimize the Differences in the Classroom Among Students With LDs Through the Use of Narrative Work in Teacher Education Programs**

During their elementary and middle schools years, the three participants struggled through issues of social segregation and learning differences, which caused them to be segregated from peers, embarrassed, and often bullied. Including students with LDs in the



mainstream classroom environment has been gaining momentum. Schools are trying to have inclusive classrooms that minimize the needs for students with LDs to be taken out of the class to receive special education services. Many schools are further developing anti-bullying programs to help monitor and confront such destructive behaviors and to help educate students on the importance of accepting those who are different. However, often, these measures are taken as an aftermath to some of the issues that have arisen in these schools. As a result, there is a need for more regulated initiatives to ensure the implementations of such measures in all schools. In addition, there is a need to listen to more stories, such as the ones included in this dissertation, to help identify the sources of social and learning differences that students experience at school. Documenting these stories would potentially better help address such issues. Demanding and establishing regulations is only one step in the right direction to eliminating stigmatization and the bullying of individuals with differences; however, such measures do not deflate the need to raise awareness for how stares potentially inflict as much hurt and stigma as words and actions (Clare, 2008).

Additionally, in the three stories I collected, the participants attested that extracurricular activities helped them to often distress and focus on their studies. Darling and Heckert (2010) stated that individuals who are more active and involved in activities associated in a positive manner with their disability identity. Hence, students with LDs can greatly benefit from extracurricular activities, both on the social and learning levels.

Another possible avenue to pursue in order to deal with the social segregation at schools is incorporating the use of narratives of individuals with LDs in the curricula. Sharing stories of people with LDs help advocate for a positive view of disability and help students with LDs identify with these stories. In addition to using these narratives to educate students, narratives

from students with LDs could be further implemented in teacher training programs (Jones, 2011). These narratives can help to raise awareness and to promote a disability studies perspective in the perceptions of storied individuals differences (Jones, 2011; Price, 2008). The use of narrative work in teaching training programs has been implemented argued Jones (2011), and has yielded findings that reflect the success of such an approach. Jones (2011) attested that such an approach raised awareness about the experience of living with disabilities among teachers. In addition, such an approach helped teachers to identify better with their students, helped them to reflect better on and question their teaching practices, and, finally, helped teachers to start identifying better ways to serve students with disabilities.

In the composition and the TESOL classroom, as educators, we need to push for narrative works that embody the tenets of disability studies as an approach to help normalize the experiences of individuals with disabilities. Price (2008) stated, "...the writing classroom is not simply a place to improve writing "skills," but a place to think critically. While we write, we align ourselves with particular worldviews; we step into and out of subject positions; we signal our alliances and our enmities" (p. 57). The use of disability studies' tenets in the composition classroom would potentially help in fostering a positive view of disability as an experience.

### **Establish Disability Offices at Schools**

Similar to the disability office that serves students with disabilities in colleges, there is a need for a similar office at K-12 schools. Such an office could potentially help support students with LDs morally and with their needs for accommodations. The office could further provide a level of advocacy to help students with LDs embrace their disability identity, help them advocate for their needs, and last but not least help resolve any issues that might develop between students and their teachers, as it is the practice at universities. Such measures could protect students with

LDs from the need to argue for their needs; such measures could also help to avert any negative effects on their self-esteem, which might be caused by such practices. McGrady, et al., (2001) stated that advocacy is “critical to the overall success of students with learning disabilities” (p. 192). Students with LDs have the right for an inclusive education that values the disability identity construct.

Furthermore, disability offices could also play a role in helping families to allocate local resources for an afterschool program. Supporting families could help mitigate the effect of the socio-economic factors on aggravating the needs of students with LDs. In research, the disparity in educational outcomes has been documented among some “ethnic minority” students in dual educational programs (Genesee, 2008; Gregg 2007; Quintana et al. 2012). For instance, in Spanish/English dual language programs, students from lower socioeconomic levels perform lower in reading and writing than students from higher or considerably advantaged backgrounds (Genesee, 2008). In this study, Ciera’s socioeconomic status affected her ability to access books while in middle school and stood out as an obstacle in her way of learning.

### **Work Towards a Universally Designed College Classroom Environment**

In terms of LDs, to apply the concept of universal design in the college classroom is to take into account various learning differences. In the stories collected, a number of points were mentioned in regards to a lack of learning disability friendly classrooms. For instance, Ciera mentioned the difficult time she had in one of her online classes due to the lack of visual aids and the long readings assigned. There is a need for more inclusive curricula that provide both visual and auditory aids to help students with LDs succeed. On the other hand, Amelia struggled with her fast paced chemistry class during college. While the lecture’s speed might be understood due to college requirements and limited time given, some extra measures could be taken to help

students with dysgraphia catch up on their lectures, such as posting those lectures online or allowing students to audio and/or video record lectures. Such measures could help students with LDs who need a note-taker and could potentially save them the need to ask for one.

Furthermore, due to the complicated nature of different types of LDs, some college students continue to struggle to understand how the nature of their disabilities might affect their learning and how to balance their classes to meet their educational as well as their learning needs. To alleviate such struggles, the disability office at the universities could work with professors from different disciplines to help advertise better for their classes to help students understand the nature of the class requirements. Advertising the nature and the requirement of each class would help students with LDs prepare better for these classes. The use of universal design in classrooms could lead to a decrease in the need to use labels to refer to students' different abilities.

It is important to emphasize the role that educational institutions play in helping educate students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and who have LDs. The aim of this work was to lend a hand in trying to make sense of what went on in the lives of three multilingual college students who are diagnosed with specific LDs. This work tried to find means that we together as educators can adapt to move along in building a better educational environment for diverse learners.

My purpose in drawing these pedagogical implications is not to suggest that the educational system has fallen short, but rather, it is to engage educators in the significance of listening to the students' stories to better understand their experiences and to potentially find ways to enhance the learning process. Through sharing my participants' stories, I am using narrative research as one vignette for those interested in life stories as a means to help understand

people's experiences (Horn & Moss, 2014). Speaking from my own experiences as a mother with a child with disabilities, I have found that my participants' academic stories has opened my eyes to the power of narrative work and to how it can potentially change the realities of many.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

The findings from this dissertation help to open avenues for new research areas, which can be explored within the fields of Composition and Applied Linguistics. For instance, there is a need to investigate the effect of socioeconomic factors on the educational lives of multilingual students with LDs. Gregg (2007) stressed the significance of socioeconomic factors on the achievement of students with LDs, arguing that little research investigated its effect. Whenever students with LDs fail to thrive, it is often ascribed to factors other than socioeconomic issues, such as a student's "inadequate motivation or ability" (Gregg, 2007, p. 219).

In addition, for this dissertation, the use of narrative research enabled me to examine the three participants' narrative stories and to find tensions and contradictions in their stories. The use of narrative research allowed for an in-depth understanding of how their lives events unfolded. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry is not about finding a solution to a problem, but rather, it is about "a search, a re-research" and "a searching again" (p. 124). The narrative literature on multilingual students with LDs is marked with scarcity, as such learners' accounts have been rarely documented. In this dissertation, I documented the academic experiences of three college multilingual students with LDs. There is a need to grow this small body of research with future studies that build on narrative work in documenting the experiences of multilingual college students with LDs. Such effort would help in potentially advancing the educational field through learning about such experiences.

An additional area warranted studying while documenting and studying the multilingual college students with LDs experiences is the discursive construction of these stories. These ideals are represented in the “linguistic, rhetorical, and interactional properties, as well as [the] cultural, historical, political, and social context[s] in which they are produced and shaped, both [through] the telling and omission” (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 181). While this study delved into some of the cultural effects on the participants’ experiences, such as the medical and the social model represented in the historic and the social context, there is a further need to study the linguistic interactions that resulted in the telling and omission.

The use of shared thematic analysis in analyzing the academic experiences of the three participants, which relied heavily on instances of repetitions and shared themes, might have obscured some of the individual themes. Such individual themes though were not given an abundance of space in the narrative may still be informative. In addition the omission of themes and events that did not fit into any of the categorized themes formed in the process of coding, they might have neglected to include themes that “do not fit into preestablished schemes” (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 166). The need to adhere to a form of analysis that has established use in the research field negated the shortcoming of such an approach. In light of what was mentioned, I would potentially engage further in analyzing each of these stories as separate entities of their own to help further determine any missing individual themes and events that could potentially help in further understanding participants’ lived experiences.

Narrative research has been used in psychiatry, school counseling, and in rehabilitation psychology to help better understand the experiences of individuals with disabilities and to help find better ways to assist patients in these fields (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dunn & Burcow, 2013; Lambie, Milsom, 2011). Similarly, the educational field needs to follow in documenting

the experiences of individuals with LDs to understand the elements that contributed to their success and those that hindered their learning.

### **Dissertation Conclusions**

I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.  
Albert Einstein

This dissertation presented the collected and analyzed academic experiences of three multilingual college students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs. The purpose of this dissertation was to understand their experiences and to potentially better advance the educational field in light of this understanding. This dissertation answered the following research question:

- 1) What are the narrated academic experiences of three multilingual, college-aged students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs?

The participants, Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, are three multilingual college students who have been diagnosed with specific LDs, which have affected their reading and writing skills. The academic journeys of the three participants and the thematic analysis of these journeys, which were detailed in Chapter Four of this dissertation, provided for a clear understanding of the academic experiences of the three participants. In their journeys, the participants detailed the learning and social struggles they endured during their school years due to their LDs. They detailed the elements that comforted them and fostered their learning and, eventually, contributed to their educational success, such as receiving special educational services, receiving accommodations, and receiving support from their families and friends throughout their school and college years. The participants also described the ways in which educational institutes have contributed to their educational success. They have also detailed how the educational institutes sometimes inflicted negative consequences on their self-confidence through unsystematic disparaging practices. Finally, the three participants, in their renditions, testified how their

experiences with living with LDs helped shape who they are today and defined their aspirations and their future careers. These journeys exhibited how the three participants struggled with their disability identity because of the social and physical barriers that were placed against them, how sometimes destructive messages left a negative impact on their self-esteem, and how, despite all they encountered, they succeeded in enrolling in college.

As a mother with a child with disabilities in academia, and as a novice researcher, I was honored to listen to my three participants, Amelia, Mia, and Ciera. I recognized the significance of narrative research in the educational field. Cummins (2001) stated that “the power relations in schools is a reflection of what is going on in the society” (p. 650). The change we propose to happen in schools, in terms of how disability is viewed starts from the homes we come from. As a mother, I learned that I need to foster and develop a positive view of disability as one character in my daughter’s life, rather than the character that defines her life. In valuing the experiences of individuals with disabilities, we are valuing their knowledge in contributing to better advance the field of education.

Through listening to and understanding the academic experiences of Amelia, Mia, and Ciera, a number of pedagogical implications were inferred that could potentially better advance the educational field in the areas in which such implications apply. For instance, the stories of the three participants indicated the need for a reexamination of some of the disparaging practices in the educational institutes. It is imperative to look for possible remedies, such as including the narrative of learning disabled individuals in the teachers’ training programs towards fostering a comfortable learning environment. In addition, there is a need to advocate for a positive disability through the inclusion of accommodations within the infrastructure of the classrooms from the beginning. Including different students’ abilities as part of the educational norm through



incorporating the knowledge from these learners' experiences helps to better advance the educational outcomes. Such measures could foster the development of a positive disability identity that is viewed as part of the classroom norm and could possibly eliminate the need for labeling and issues of social segregation and stigma.

The academic journeys of the three participants offer their views of the academic world around them. As a result, the findings generated from these stories are not intended for the purpose of generalization. This narrative research based dissertation used semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth understanding of the three participants' educational experiences. The three participants, in their renditions, tell of the world they want to live in, a world that perceives them as equal to other students, as valued members who can succeed and contribute to society that values their diversity.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Form

June 11, 2018

Dear Hend Ghouma:

Your proposed modifications to your previously approved research project, “The Narrated Academic Experiences of Eight Multilingual College-Aged Students Diagnosed with Specific Learning Disabilities,” (Log No. 18-149) have been reviewed by the IRB and are approved as an expedited review until May 17, 2019. This approval does not supersede or obviate compliance with any other University requirements, including, but not limited to, enrollment, degree completion deadlines, topic approval, and conduct of university-affiliated activities.

You should read all of this letter, as it contains important information about conducting your study.

Now that your project has been approved by the IRB, there are elements of the Federal Regulations to which you must attend. IUP adheres to these regulations strictly:

1. You must conduct your study exactly as it was approved by the IRB.
2. Any additions or changes in procedures must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented.
3. You must notify the IRB promptly of any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects.
4. You must notify the IRB promptly of any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in items 2 or 3.

Should you need to continue your research beyond May 17, 2019, you will need to file additional information for continuing review. Please contact the IRB office at (724) 357-7730, or come to Room 113, Stright Hall for further information.

The IRB may review or audit your project at random or for cause. In accordance with IUP Policy and Federal Regulation (45CFR46.113), the Board may suspend or terminate your project if your project has not been conducted as approved or if other difficulties are detected.

While not under the purview of the IRB, researchers are responsible for adhering to US copyright law when using existing scales, survey items, or other works in the conduct of research. Information regarding copyright law and compliance at IUP, including links to sample permission request letters, can be found at <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=165526>

I wish you success as you pursue this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Roberts, Ph.D.

Chairperson, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Professor of Criminology

JLR:bkj

Cc: Dr. Curtis Porter, Faculty Advisor

## Appendix B

### Study Invitation Email

To listen to this email click twice on the icon:

Dear students,

My name is Hend M. Ghouma. I am a doctoral student in the Department of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). I am currently conducting a study on the academic experiences of college students who speak more than one language and who have been diagnosed with specific learning disabilities. The findings of the study would potentially help to better understand the academic experiences of multilingual students with learning disabilities.

I sincerely invite you to participate in this study. Participation in this study will require participating in one mode of data collection, namely, interviews. You are asked to participate in three initial interviews; each interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time.

During these interviews, you will be asked questions about your academic experiences while in school and in college. You are also asked to participate in a follow up interview, which will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. All interviews are audio-recorded. The location of the interviews will be determined accordingly and will be in a location that is accessible to you.

In case you cannot be physically present for the interviews, an online interview or a phone interview will be arranged via Facetime or Skype. Only an audio-recorder will be used during the online interviews. The period of completing the initial interviews and the follow up interview is twelve weeks. However, your involvement in the interviews might extend over a period of twelve months.

Please follow the link to complete the survey to determine whether you qualify to participate in the study: [https://iup.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0wabnHg0YRe4jC5](https://iup.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0wabnHg0YRe4jC5), or copy and paste the

URL below into your Internet browser:

[https://iup.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_0wabnHg0YRe4jC5](https://iup.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0wabnHg0YRe4jC5).

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary, and your agreement to participate will remain confidential. Participation or non-participation will neither affect your grades in any course, nor your relationship with your college. Your professor and the disability office at your college, or any other entity at your college, will not know whether you participated in this study because all your responses will be kept confidential.

THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (PHONE 724.357.7730).

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at [VPMT@iup.edu](mailto:VPMT@iup.edu).

Thank you so much; your participation is much appreciated.

Yours respectfully,  
Lead Researcher  
Hend M. Ghouma  
Doctoral Candidate  
Email: [VPMT@iup.edu](mailto:VPMT@iup.edu)  
Department of English  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA, 15707

Faculty Advisor  
Dr. Curtis Porter  
Assistant Professor of English  
Email: [Curt.porter@iup.edu](mailto:Curt.porter@iup.edu)  
339 Sutton Hall  
Department of English  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA, 15707

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

#### **Introduction**

My name is Hend M. Ghouma. I am a doctoral student in English Department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I am currently writing a dissertation on the academic experiences of multilingual college students with learning disabilities. The dissertation is under the supervision of Dr. Curtis Porter in the Department of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. You are invited to participate in the study. The following information is being provided to you so you can make an informed decision to participate or not. You are eligible to participate because you meet the following criteria: (1) you are 18 years old or older; (2) you are a college student who has completed at least one academic year in college; (3) you speak more than one language; and (4) you have been diagnosed with a learning disability that affects your ability to read and/or write, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to collect the educational experiences of eight multilingual college students with learning disabilities. The information gained from this study will help in complementing the literature on multilingual college students with learning disabilities. Additionally, the information gained from this study will help in understanding their experiences.

#### **Procedures**

Participation in this study will require participating in one mode of data collection, namely, interviews. You are asked to participate in three initial interviews; each interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. During these interviews, you will be asked questions about your academic experiences while in school and in college. You are also asked to participate in a follow up interview, which will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. All interviews are audio-recorded. The location of the interviews will be determined accordingly and will be in a location that is accessible to you. In case you cannot be physically present for the interviews, an online interview or a phone interview will be arranged via Facetime or Skype. Only an audio-recorder will be used during the online interviews. The period of completing the initial interviews and the follow up interview is twelve weeks. However, your involvement in the interviews might extend over a period of twelve months.

#### **Benefits and Risks**

The results of this study would contribute to an understanding of students with learning disabilities at the K-12 level and the higher educational level educational experiences. The study further contributes to special education services and disability services provided for multilingual students with learning disabilities. At the individual level, I think the study would potentially help you understand your experiences through reflecting during interviews and through sharing your story.

#### **Foreseeable Risks in Participating in the Study**

While sharing your experiences in the study, you might become emotionally distressed. You will have the ability to take the following options: discontinue the interview at any given time, step out of the room to calm down, not answer a specific question, and/or withdraw from the study.

**Compensation**

Participants will be compensated \$25 at the end of all interviews.

**Confidentiality and Privacy**

Participation or nonparticipation in the study would not affect your status at the university, nor would your participation or nonparticipation impact any type of services you receive. Your participation will be kept confidential, and none of your professors would know of your participation. Any data you provide would not be linked to your name in any documents stored, except for one document accessed only by the researcher. The recorded interviews will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Any other written material will be saved for at least three years.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or your college. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits or services to which you are entitled. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying the researcher at any time during the study. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and will have no bearing on your academic standing or services you receive from your university. Your response will be considered only in combination with those from other participants. The information obtained in the study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please print your name below.

Thank you for taking part in my study. Your participation is highly appreciated.

THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS (PHONE 724.357.7730).

**Lead Researcher**

Hend M. Ghouma  
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**Dissertation Advisor**

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Fifth floor  
Indiana, PA 15705

**Voluntary Consent Form**

I have read and understand the information on the form, and I consent to volunteer to be a subject in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.

Name:

Cell Phone:

Email:

Best day and times to be reached:

## Appendix D

### Initial Interviews and Follow Up Interviews Protocol and Guide

Three initial sets of interviews will be conducted with each participant. These initial interviews will take place over a period of twelve weeks. Each interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The location of the initial interviews will be determined after consulting with each participant. One follow up interview will be arranged, and additional follow up interviews will be determined as needed. In the following section, I detail what would occur during each interview, and I include the type of questions I would be asking.

#### **First interview: Getting to know each other**

- At the beginning of the first interview, I will provide each interviewee with a hard copy of the consent form, and I will ask if there are any questions or concerns they would like to address before starting recording.
- I will remind the interviewees of what their participation in the study requires, namely, three initial interviews and follow up interviews.
- I will remind the interviewees that each interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes, and all interviews will be digitally audio-recorded. I will position the recorder in a place where it is visible.
- I will encourage participants to submit any artifacts, such as written materials, to complement participants' stories. The artifacts will all be copied and returned to the participants.
- I will explain to the interviewees that I will start with demographic information before easing into the interview questions.



### **Section I. Demographic information**

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) How long have you been a student in college?
- 3) When were you diagnosed with a learning disability?
- 4) What is the type of learning disability you have, and how would you describe your learning disability?
- 5) Is there anything you would like to share with me about the nature of your learning disability?

### **Section II. First interview: General questions**

- 1) I would like to take you back to your school years, as early as you can remember (e.g., first day at school), and I want you to start telling me about your school years. What were your memories of your school years?
- 2) What else can you tell me about your experiences during your school years?

### **Section III. Closing the first interview**

- At the end of the first interview, interviewees will be thanked for their time and for sharing their journey.
- The interviewees will be reminded that there will be a second interview.
- The interviewees will be informed that a summary of their narrative will be emailed in written and audio recorded forms, and they will be asked to check the summary for accuracy prior to the second interview. Reviewing the summary should take only 10-15 minutes.

## **Second interview: Memorable educational life experiences**

- *Member checking*: I will discuss with each participant the narrative summary of the first interview I sent via email to see if they would like to add or correct any information. and to ask for any missing information.

### **Section I. Second interview: General question**

- I want you to take your time and think back to your educational journey and tell me of three memorable events or scenes you remember. (Please feel free to use paper and pen to jot down your ideas.)

### **Section II. Second interview: Follow up questions**

For each scene:

- 1) Where did this scene take place?
- 2) Who was involved?
- 3) What happened?
- 4) What made this scene or moment significant?
- 5) Do you have any other thoughts that this scene might have triggered?

### **Section III. Closing second interview**

- Interviewees will be thanked for their time and for taking part in the study.
- Interviewees will be reminded that there will be a third interview.
- The interviewees will be informed that a narrative summary of their second interview narrative will be emailed in written and audio recorded forms, and they will be asked to check the summary for accuracy prior to the third interview. Reviewing the summary should take approximately 10-15 minutes.

### **Third interview: College life and the future**

- *Member checking*: I will discuss with each participant the narrative summary of the second interview I sent via email to see if they would like to add or correct any information, and to ask for any missing information.

#### **Section I. Third interview: General questions**

- 1) Describe a typical day in your college life.

#### **Section III. Closing the third interview**

Participants will be thanked for their time. I will also remind the interviewees during the third interview that a follow up interview will take place to go over any missing details and to check their narratives.

#### **Follow up interviews**

During these interviews, I will share a summary of each participant's third interview transcription. I will also provide each participant the opportunity to add or correct any missing details. The time allotted for the follow up interview is 10-20 minutes.

## Appendix E

### Transcription Conventions

Transcription conventions were adopted from Du Bois (1991) and Bucholtz (2000):

( )	Researcher's inserted words
.....	Ellipses for omitted words
@	Indicates laughter
?	End of intonation unit: rising intonation
.	End of intonation: falling intonation
~	Extended pronunciation
-	Self-interruption: break in the word
<u>Underlined</u>	Emphasis
(.)	Pause of five seconds or less
(n.n)	Pause of greater than five seconds

Appendix F

The Academic Journeys' Code Samples

1. Sample of the codes of Amelia's academic journey

Category	Sample of the codes	Sample of the excerpts
<b>1. Living with LDs</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cannot read, write, do math at peer's level</li> <li>2. Felt different</li> <li>3. Transferred from school</li> <li>4. Hiding of LD strategies</li> </ol>	<p>"I realized that I wasn't like the other kids when it came to learning, was in Kindergarten."</p> <p>"Or I would take two pieces-I take two tests before she said go I would start doing one of the tests under the desk so I can get halfway through and then I switch them keep doing it."</p>
<b>2. Learning struggles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Difficulty with spelling/writing</li> <li>2. Difficulty reading</li> <li>3. Difficulty with math</li> <li>4. Difficulty with memorization</li> </ol>	<p>"I remember having spelling being very difficult for me in kindergarten."</p> <p>"The science classes they were really hard cause a lot of it was memorization, and I wasn't great at that."</p>
<b>3. Social struggles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Struggled making friends</li> <li>2. Embarrassed books at lower level</li> <li>3. Not friends with classmates/high school</li> </ol>	<p>"I had to read up to a certain point in the book and since I couldn't read, I couldn't join the group."</p> <p>"I remember I was really embarrassed because my books were at a lower level."</p>
<b>4. School Support</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Saxon program helped/middle school</li> <li>2. Biotech program helped/high school</li> </ol>	<p>"So, for me, the Saxon method was a lot better cause I could go back and remember but those homework problems were also very difficult for me..."</p>
<b>5. Other support systems</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mom read to me</li> <li>2. Private tutor</li> <li>3. Dad helped</li> </ol>	<p>"I was reading with my mom; she would have to stop me a lot to check that I can actually read those words..."</p>
<b>6. Accomplishment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 4<sup>th</sup> grade: Became treasurer</li> <li>2. 5<sup>th</sup> grade: Became president</li> </ol>	<p>"But the next year, I ran for treasurer. What we did is that we took a dollar bill, and we enlarged it to, I think, forty inches across, and then, we cut my head out, put on the poster. It was very cute, so I won for that."</p>
<b>7. Strengths</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Good at convincing teachers</li> <li>2. Good at public speaking</li> <li>3. Loved science</li> <li>4. Liked projects</li> </ol>	<p>"I kind of realized that I was very good at public speaking. So, although I couldn't read very well because I couldn't communicate in a written form, I was very good at standing in front of people."</p>

2. Sample of the codes of Mia’s academic journey

<b>Category</b>	<b>Samples of the codes</b>	<b>Sample of the excerpts</b>
<b>1. Living with LDs</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Felt different</li> <li>2. Was awkward</li> <li>3. Grades fluctuated</li> </ol>	<p>“I was 17 years old when I was diagnosed with non-verbal learning disability. Non-verbal learning disability is on the autism spectrum, and it makes things difficult for me to understand. Things that are nonverbal as it is called.”</p>
<b>2. Learning struggles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Struggled with reading, math, and science.</li> <li>2. College stress</li> </ol>	<p>“I have a hard time in math and science because it is very visual.”</p>
<b>3. Social struggles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bullied</li> <li>2. Struggled with making friends/homeschool/public school</li> </ol>	<p>“So, I just remember being really awkward and not knowing what to say. I was bullied a lot because I was different than the other kids.”</p> <p>“I remember going to school, and I had a really hard time making friends.”</p>
<b>4. School support</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Accommodations</li> <li>2. Disability Center</li> </ol>	<p>“Last year, I had couple of issues. So I was able to talk to the disability center, and I met once a week with someone from there, and we kind of scheduled out my week and say ok, this is when this is due, and we should start working on this.”</p>
<b>5. Other support systems</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Parents</li> <li>2. God</li> <li>3. Extracurricular activities/high school</li> <li>4. Outpatient program</li> </ol>	<p>“I’m just really thankful that just like my family, my parents helped me and supported me so much. They, like, really helped me get it over my- what is it called? I am sorry, I am blanking out. What is it called, like obstacles that are in my way and just to keep pushing and remember that God is always on my side.”</p>
<b>6. Accomplishment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. National Honor Society</li> <li>2. Graduated high school</li> <li>2. Accepted in college</li> </ol>	<p>“The first memorable time that I remember was when I got into National Honor Society. I was very excited about that. I had to write an essay.”</p>
<b>7. Strengths</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Honor student</li> <li>2. Love to help others</li> </ol>	<p>“Just loved helping people and then after like learning about my mental illness and learning disability, I just wanted to help other people like myself. I’m thinking about working at mental health, like an outpatient facility or something to do with, like, intellectual disabilities.”</p>

3. Sample of the codes of Ciera's academic journey codes

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sample of the codes</b>	<b>Sample of the excerpts</b>
<b>1. Living with LDs</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Felt different because of LC</li> <li>2. Can't spell</li> </ol>	"I remember I always felt that I was different like I was always getting pulled out of class for (.) my, my speech classes, as well as there is this learning center I would go to."
<b>2. Learning struggles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mistreated by teacher</li> <li>2. Could not spell</li> <li>3. Lost in mainstream classroom</li> </ol>	"But I remember, like, feeling really lost in my normal classes. Like, I felt like I was just kind of sitting there and, like, I didn't really know what was happening. Like, I would just sit there, and then once I would go to the learning center, I felt, you know, I knew my classmates."
<b>3. Social struggles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Embarrassed had LD</li> <li>2. Embarrassed to go to the LC</li> </ol>	"I kind of felt embarrassed. I didn't want to tell anybody that I was going to the learning center because I didn't want them to think I was dumb."
<b>4. School support</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. LC helped</li> <li>2. Changed my friends</li> </ol>	"I definitely feel like if it wasn't for the learning center, like I –I would've dropped out of school because, you know, the learning center made me feel like, <i>wow, actually I can really learn.</i> "
<b>5. Other support systems</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cohort</li> <li>2. Husband</li> <li>3. Work on campus</li> </ol>	"When I went to university of x, I didn't have, like, a cohort model, and I didn't, like, have roommates, so I didn't have, like, a group of support. All I had was my husband."
<b>6. Accomplishment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. GPA 4.0</li> <li>2. Business academy</li> <li>3. Graduate school</li> </ol>	"I remember feeling proud that I was part of the Business Academy because everybody in the Business Academy was, like, really smart, so I felt good about that."
<b>7. Strengths</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Learned about college</li> <li>2. Extracurricular activities</li> <li>3. Loved work on campus</li> </ol>	"She got me thinking about college; that's when I completely changed. I started doing tennis, track, and field. I was in, like, student government, and I feel like joining those activities, it also affected my grades. Like, I started caring about my grades. I really started wanting to do good, and yeah."