

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENTS WITH A READING DISABILITY

by

Ellen Ziegler

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Meredith Park, Committee Chair

Dr. Sandra Battige, Committee Member

## ABSTRACT

Reading is an essential skill for all students. However, students who do not grasp the basic reading skills during elementary school struggle through school. Without basic skills, many of these students are at risk for behavioral issues and a low self-concept. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of high school students with a specific learning disability in reading. The theory that guided this study was the social identity theory as it relates to high school students with a disability in reading to their identity to self and others. The central research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of high school students with a specific learning disability in reading who read significantly below grade level? The study sought to understand how students with a specific learning disability (SLD) identify personally, among their friends, and among their non-disabled peers. Twelve high school students provided input through three data collection methods including photograph collection, semi-structured interviews, and a word association activity. Six themes were developed during data analysis, including positive self-concept, insecurity, anxiety, commonalities, social dynamics, and maximizing differences. Implications of the findings suggest that educators need to encourage students to participate in extra-curricular activities and to provide additional training for teachers to look for signs of insecurity and anxiety. Recommendations for future research include adding teacher interviews to the study and incorporating other types of learning institutions.

*Keywords:* special education, social identity, high school students, reading disability



**Copyright Page (Optional)**

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband. Mark, you have always believed in me and never let me quit. When you got sick, one of the first things you said to me was that you wanted me to continue and finish my work on this project. Even in your pain and with our lives turning upside-down, you still continued to encourage me. Your confidence in me made me want to accomplish my goal—even though you were the one to suggest I continue with my education.

I also want to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my father. He always told me not to let school get in the way of my education. It took me years before I realized that he wanted me to be a life-long learner. As a child, he did not like school and he struggled with reading. However, I saw his determination and he was one of the smartest men I ever knew. His example of reading God's Word, even when he struggled with reading, was an inspiration, and I am sure it has impacted my teaching. He was so proud when I graduated from college and always encouraged all of his children to be the best they could be.

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one of my biggest supporters, and I know she prays for me daily. Her example of loving and helping others has helped me to become the wife, mother, and teacher that I am today.

Mark, I know that when I would be deep in thought about what I was writing, I would start sentences and not finish them, I am sure that was frustrating, but you just joked about it and continued to encourage me. You were the first to believe that I could, and should, continue my educational journey. You would bring me tea, rub my back, listen to what I was thinking, even if you did not fully understand what I was talking about. I would have never finished this if it were not for you! Thank you for your love, your prayers, and your support. I love you.



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### **List of Abbreviations**

Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Evaluation Team Report (ETR)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

International Review Board (IRB)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Race to the Top (RTTT)

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Specific learning disability (SLD)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Reading disabilities are found in students from elementary to high school. Reports indicate that 80% of children with a learning disability struggle primarily with reading, and boys outnumber girls two-to-one in special education (Endress, Weston, Marchand-Martella, Martella, & Simmons 2007; Severence & Howell, 2017). This study focused on discovering the self-identity of students with a specific learning disability (SLD) as it relates to themselves, their peers, and their typical classmates. Chapter One will provide the reader with a background of students with SLD and the risks they face. Next, the situation to self will discuss the motivation behind this study and will include philosophical assumptions and possible biases. The problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the study will be presented next. Finally, the chapter will present the research questions, provide an outline of the research design to be used during the course of the study, and address any important definitions. A summary finalizes Chapter One.

### **Background**

Students who struggle in school may be tested for a learning disability. Students can be identified as having a specific learning disability (SLD) if their response to the instruction, including intervention, is substantially below their peers (Catts, Nielsen, Bridges, Liu, & Bontempo, 2015). Moreover, students have the right to special education if their "disability adversely affects their educational performance and if these special services would allow them to benefit from the education program" (Cohen & Spenciner, 2015, p. 5). One disability that qualifies students for special education services is SLD. While the definition of a specific learning disability has neither been clearly explained nor operationally defined by the federal

government, it usually refers to when a student's academic ability in reading, writing, or math is significantly impeded even with quality instruction (Farnsworth, 2018; Kavale, Spaulding, & Beam, 2009).

## **Historical**

Even though compulsory education laws were put into place by 1918, individual states allowed for students with disabilities to be excluded from that education (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). In 1934, the Cuyahoga County Court of Appeals in Ohio ruled that schools had the right to exclude students with disabilities even though they were of compulsory school age. In 1958, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that compulsory education laws did not require schools to include free public education to children who were "feeble-minded" or "mentally deficient" (Yell et al., 1998). Thus, school was seen as a place for "normal" students, rather than for children with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

The Civil Rights Movement helped to bring about changes in special education law (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 1998). The landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* not only helped racial minorities but it was also upheld by the Supreme Court to declare that segregation of people by race or disability was unconstitutional (Yell et al., 1998). As a result, federal mandates regarding special education soon followed. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was enacted to offer equal educational opportunities to underprivileged and disadvantaged children in response to the War on Poverty. When the ESEA was passed, Title I represented the most extensive financial source for educating the nation's most vulnerable children. Even though the ESEA's goal was targeting the most impoverished children in the nation's schools, the services were based on educational needs (Thomas & Brady, 2005). In 1973, Congress passed Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which was written to

extend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and to correct problems in the law regarding the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998).

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), also known as P.L. 94-142, which provided all students, including students with disabilities, the right to a free and appropriate education (Lemons, Otaiba, Conway, & Mellado De La Cruz, 2016; Russell & Bray, 2013; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). This act required that students with disabilities were to be educated alongside students without disabilities within the least restrictive environment (Lemons et al., 2016). The centerpiece to the EAHCA was the implementation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities (Blackwell & Rosetti, 2014; Yell et al., 1998). The IEP is developed to identify goals and objectives based on specific needs for students with disabilities to ensure that these students are successful in school (Musyoka & Clark, 2017).

Congress passed yet another education law in 1990, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Russell & Bray, 2013; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Yell et al., 1998). The passage of NCLB held schools accountable for the academic success of all students through the use of standardized testing (Russell & Bray, 2013). Theoretically, by requiring schools to create standards and assess students on those standards, then schools would be accountable for student learning and therefore, raise the expectations for all students (Russell & Bray, 2013). Shortly after the inception of NCLB, the EAHCA was expanded and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which was signed into law in 1997 and revised again in 2004 (Russell & Bray, 2013). IDEA ensures that all students with disabilities are guaranteed individualized educational supports within the scope of the legally binding IEP (Russell & Bray, 2013; Yell et al., 1998).



The problem for educators has been finding a way to implement both of these laws when working with students with disabilities (Russell & Bray, 2013). NCLB has no mention of how students with disabilities should be educated (Russell & Bray, 2013). According to NCLB, all students, even students with disabilities, had to reach proficiency in all areas by 2014 (McGuinn, 2016). However, knowing this was not possible, the Obama administration started to make some changes in educational law (Darrow, 2016; McGuinn, 2016). President Obama and Secretary Duncan, along with the United States Department of Education introduced the Race To The Top (RTTT) program in 2009 to help reform education (Darrow, 2016). States submitted applications in order to be rewarded with funding to help advance reform in standards and assessments, to provide data systems measuring student growth, to recruit and retain effective teachers, and to turn around low achieving schools (Darrow, 2016; McGuinn, 2016).

By 2011, states still struggled to implement the reforms put forth by RTTT, so the government once again offered a solution. In 2010, Common Core Standards were introduced to improve academic achievement for students and to better prepare students for college and careers. Many felt that the Common Core did not address the social inequities that caused performance gaps. Finally, in 2015, a bi-partisan passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed (McGuinn, 2016). The ESSA aligned with the mandates of IDEA in that students with disabilities receive accommodations when taking state assessments (Darrow, 2016). While the ESSA narrowed the role of the federal government by putting more power in the hands of the states, the states now were presented with the challenge of determining their educational agendas (McGuinn, 2016).

## **Social**

High school students are at a stage in life where they are becoming more independent. They are involved in redefining their family and social relationships, growing more independent, and spending more time with their peers (Majorano, Brondino, Morelli, & Maes, 2016). This transition toward independence can be difficult for all teens, but can be even more challenging for teens with a specific learning disability. Because of their academic difficulties, students with SLD need to invest more time in school-related tasks while often obtaining lower results than their typical peers. Additionally, students with SLD often have problems with social relationships and tend to “experience more peer-related loneliness and depression” (Majorano et al., 2016, p. 691).

Research has revealed that SLD negatively affects a student’s academic self-concept and leads students with SLD to see every area of their lives as a failure (Hakkarainin & Holopainen, 2016; Lithari, 2019; Majorano et al., 2016). Several studies have compared the risk of suicide, substance abuse, and dropout rates among students who exhibited poor reading comprehension skills with their typical counterparts (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Berman & Stetson, 2018; Daniel et al., 2006; Fuller-Thomson, Carroll, & Yang, 2018; Moses, 2018; Salleta, 2018). Not fitting in with their peers, which resulted in lower self-esteem and withdrawal from peer groups, was a common thread in the Alexander-Passe (2016b) study. When students start to withdraw from social activities, it may lead to depression or anxiety (Livingston, Siegel, & Ribary, 2018). Additionally, it was found that the risk for students with disabilities regarding suicide attempts or ideation is significantly higher than their non-disabled peers (Daniel et al., 2006; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2018; Moses, 2018). While schools are known as a place for academic learning, schools cannot ignore the social and emotional processes that students with disabilities experience (Hernandez-Saca, Kahn, & Cannon, 2018). As educators continuously try to find ways to

remediate students with a specific learning disability in the area of reading, there is an increased awareness of the problems of students progressing through school with limited reading abilities.

### **Theoretical**

As students with reading disabilities start to notice the differences between them and their non-disabled peers, the perceptions of those around them lead these students to develop an identity to try to fit in with their peers (Alexander-Passe, 2016b). When students have trouble establishing an identity, they experience confusion and self-doubt (Einat, 2017). Understanding the self-identity theory (SIT) assists in recognizing why people of a particular social group act and behave the way they do. According to Tajfel's(1974) SIT, people classify themselves into a variety of social categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The SIT examines a person's perception of who they are and the groups with which they participate and identify. This process of categorization is used to simplify a person's environment (Tajfel, 1974).

Self-identity is defined as “the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership” (as cited in Hogg & Abrams, 1998, p. 7). People acquire their identity and self-concept mainly from the social groups to which they belong (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel, 1974). According to SIT, a person's identity is the lowest level of self-categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000). This self-categorization is what makes a person unique and different from others. People become parts of various social groups as a result of interactions between others in similar situations to accomplish personal and social goals (Stet & Burke, 2000). Not only do people categorize themselves into groups, but they also put others into categories. Those members of the same group are called ingroup members, and those who are members of a different category are called outgroup members (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998).

For members of an ingroup to dislike or discriminate an outgroup, they must first have a sense of belonging to a group (Tajfel, 1974). Group identification is associated with groups that are “distinctive, prestigious, and in competition with, or at least aware of, other groups, although it can be fostered by even random assignment to a group” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34). As individuals become aware of the outgroup, boundaries are formed by the ingroups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

High school students who have a reading disability need a way to improve their self-identity. According to Tajfel (1974), individuals want to achieve a satisfactory image of themselves, and a person’s self-concept comes from group membership. The SIT assumes that people look for positive experiences through social comparisons within their ingroup. Given that students with disabilities are perceived to have a relatively low-status position, they are offered fewer experiences to gain a positive self-concept as a result of their ingroup. Therefore, people with disabilities find certain aspects of commonality with other people who have disabilities (Dirth & Branscombe, 2018). The current study used Tajfel’s self-identity theory to guide the research in exploring the self-identity of students with a specific learning disability in reading.

### **Situation to Self**

A person’s philosophical assumptions and paradigms influence the way a person conducts his/her research. As a parent, I have two sons who have struggled with reading and had IEPs during most of their years in school. Due to their struggles, I went back to school to pursue a special education teaching license. One day when my youngest son and I were discussing his struggle with reading, he told me that while other children his age wanted toys for Christmas, he just wanted to be able to read. This exchange with my son is what has driven my classroom instruction to be able to help students increase their reading abilities. I have worked extensively

with students who have reading disabilities, which has motivated me to study how these students interact with their peers, both with and without reading disabilities.

A constructivism paradigm guided this study. A constructivist approach is concerned with finding meaning within the world in which we live (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These meanings are how people make sense of the world around them, based on their perspectives. This study focused on the experiences of the participants and gained meaning from those experiences. My assumptions were viewed through a constructivist lens. I wanted to understand how students with a reading disability feel and what they think. Then I wanted to take what they said to find meaning in their words, so that I can help them find success in school and have an impact on their future lives. This study used the constructivist assumption to “capture diverse understandings and multiple realities about people’s definitions and experiences of the situation” (Patton, 2015, p. 122). I wanted to understand the experiences of students with a disability in reading and how they relate to their peers in creating their social identity.

### **Epistemological Assumptions**

One of my philosophical assumptions is epistemology. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), an epistemologist tries “to get as close as possible to the participants being studied” (p. 21). As an intervention specialist, I believe that listening to students is essential in determining their needs. Students may not be able to communicate their needs clearly, but by getting to know one’s students, a teacher can learn the tools each student needs to be successful. Building relationships and learning about my students’ lives outside of school is part of knowing how to best teach the students in my classroom. Students often have experiences outside of school that impact their academic experiences. These experiences, sometimes known as the “hidden curriculum,” can have a positive or negative impact on a student’s academic success. The

hidden curriculum is referred to as “the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, procedures, and norms that exist in the educational setting” (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 125). Therefore, educators may be unaware as to how students interpret communicated information; therefore, the message they convey can play either a positive or negative role in a student’s education. By getting to know my participants, I was able to start to understand what impacts their self-identity based on their experiences both in and out of the classroom.

Students with a reading disability need to be given a voice, so that educators can begin to understand their reality. Their experiences drive both their motivation and their self-identity. By knowing and interacting with students who have a reading disability, I can use what the participants are saying as evidence to determine meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study used the feelings and sayings of the participants to give them a voice about their lived experiences with this phenomenon.

### **Ontological Assumptions**

An ontological assumption also guided this study. An ontological assumption embraces the concept of multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While I believe in absolute truth, other people's beliefs are based on their own experiences. Each person’s experiences influence the way they view their reality. For example, one student's idea of how their reading disability affects their social identity may be different from another student's perspective. Because of the various perspectives of my participants, the approach to this study was that each participant has their own story and their own experiences to share. As I listened to each student’s story, I kept the core phenomenon at the center of the study.

## **Problem Statement**

Students with disabilities in the area of reading deserve the opportunity to improve their literacy skills. Current research shows that intensive reading interventions can work with older students (Bachman, 2013; Dierking, 2015; Ruppard, 2017; Saletta, 2018; Solis, Vaughn, & Scammacca, 2015). However, most of the research is quantitative in nature and focuses on specific strategies or programs that can be implemented to help increase reading skills. Of the studies using a qualitative approach, the focus has been on how teachers present and administer reading interventions (Ruppard, 2017; Wilkerson, Yan, Perzigian, & Cakiroglu, 2016) or discovering the attitudes of students about particular reading interventions (Bachman, 2013; Dierking, 2015). Furthermore, since early intervention is crucial in helping students with reading disabilities, much of the research focuses on elementary and middle school students (Girli & Ozturk, 2017; Groff, 2014; Meyer & Bouck, 2014; Saletta, 2018).

A student's reading level and writing ability is a predictor of school achievement (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, & Savolainen, 2013; Saletta, 2018). When children do not learn basic reading skills in early elementary school, they usually are unable to catch up with their typical peers. Several studies have compared the risk of suicide, substance abuse, and dropout rates among students who exhibited poor reading comprehension skills with their typical counterparts (Daniel et al., 2006; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2018; Moses, 2018). These studies found that the risk for students with disabilities for suicide attempts or ideation is significantly higher than their non-disabled peers.

According to the social identity theory (SIT), people tend to define themselves based on various social categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Students with a reading disability begin to be aware of the differences between themselves and their non-disabled peers. As they recognize the

differences, they begin to experience problems while interacting with their typical peers (Girli & Ozturk, 2017). It is essential to discover how students with a specific learning disability in reading identify with their peers. The problem is that many students with a reading disability have difficulties in creating a social identity, which impacts their academic performance. By giving students with a reading disability a voice, educators can better understand how the disability impacts both the student's social and academic performance, giving the educators insight on how to provide interventions that will help students in both areas. Students with a disability in the area of reading need a voice so educators can understand how their disability affects their social identity, which has a direct impact on their classroom performance.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences and social identity of high school students with a disability in reading. A specific learning disability is defined as a “disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken, or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations... including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., Sec. 300.8 (c) (10)). Self-identity is defined as the student's knowledge of who they are and how they relate to others (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998). The theory guiding this study is the social identity theory as it relates to high school students with a disability in reading along with their identity to self and others.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the growing knowledge of high school students with a disability in reading and the impact that disability has on those students. While a number of studies have



examined the various risks that a reading disability has on a student (Daniel et al., 2006; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2018; Hakkarainin & Holopainen, 2016; Lithari, 2019; Moses, 2018), these studies offer very little in regards to the social identity of these students. Although research is starting to study SLDs and suicidal behaviors (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2018), there is still a need to understand what life is like for these students who struggle in reading. Additionally, there is less research on how reading disabilities affect adolescents and adults, than research on the effects of a reading disability on younger children (Saletta, 2018). However, young adults may be able to improve their decoding skills through the use of interventions that focus on sight words and phonological awareness (Saletta, 2018). The transition from school to the workforce brings about a greater need for independence, and more research on how a reading disability impacts older students is critical in determining how to better assist this population better. The current study focused on a deeper understanding of the social identity of students.

Current research has asked students with SLD about programs and attitude towards learning (Bachman, 2013; Dierking, 2015), but has not asked these students about how their disability in reading affects their identity in today's society. The current study is of particular importance for intervention specialists as they connect with their students, which has been shown to have a positive effect on students' academic success (Roorda, Jak, Zee, Oort, & Koomen, 2017). The current study can help educators working with students with a reading disability to understand how this population of students perceive themselves, as well as to better assist these students academically. Furthermore, school counselors and school psychologists can benefit from understanding the mental state of students with a reading disability in order to better support these students. It is essential that learning disabilities and self-esteem issues are

addressed during high school or these issues may persist into adulthood (Lithari, 2019). Many of these students have faced years of reading failure (Saletta, 2018) and it is necessary to examine how their disability impacts these students as older learners. Listening to shared self-identity experiences of students with a reading disability can enable educators to devise ways to assist these students in creating a more positive self-identity and to help reduce at-risk behaviors in this population of students.

### **Research Questions**

As students with a disability in the area of reading start to notice differences between their reading ability and the reading ability of their non-disabled peers, they often develop problems in self-confidence and self-identity (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Girli & Ozturk, 2017). These students react to those differences in a variety of ways, which can impact a student's academic success (Haft, Myers, & Hoefl, 2016; Hakkarainen & Holopainen, 2016; Hen & Goroshit, 2014; Jeffes, 2016). One central research question (CRQ) and three sub-questions (SQ) guided this phenomenological study.

**CRQ:** What are the lived experiences of high school students with a specific learning disability in reading who read significantly below grade level?

The central research question sought to identify the phenomenon of the study as it emerged from the participants' experiences. The sub-questions were designed to explore the experiences of the participants and their social identity based on their reading disability (Trajfel, 1982).

**SQ1:** How do the participants believe their learning disability in reading defines who they are as a person?

Individuals want to have a positive self-image. Through the process of self-categorizing, identity is formed through various social categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). This question sought to find the personal social identity of students with a disability in reading.

**SQ2:** How do the participants believe that their learning disability in the area of reading impacts their identity with their peers who also have a learning disability in reading?

A social group is a group of individuals who view themselves as having a common social identification (Stets & Burke, 2000). As individuals compare themselves with others through a process called categorization, those who are similar to an individual are a part of the ingroup (Tajfel, 1974). This ingroup is how individuals develop their self-esteem. Research has revealed evidence that ingroup differentiation elevates self-esteem in individuals (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). This question sought to find how students with a reading disability categorize themselves within the group of peers who are most like them.

**SQ3:** How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading impacts their identity with their non-disabled peers?

While individuals have an ingroup, they also have an outgroup. The outgroup is comprised of those individuals who have differences between self and others (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998). Individuals see differences, and sometimes those differences lead to a social comparison of others. This question examined the perceived differences that students with a reading disability have towards those who do not have the same disability.

### **Definitions**

1. *Accommodations* – How a student completes the same assignment as their peers, but with a “change in timing, formatting, setting, scheduling, response and/or presentation”

(Center, 2015, p. 1). Some examples of accommodations for reading are extended time, frequent breaks, and test and assignments read aloud (Witmer et al., 2018).

2. *Modifications* – A change of an assignment or test that changes the standard that a test or assignment is supposed to measure (U.S Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, n. d.).
3. *Reading disability* – Is sometimes referred to as a reading disorder or reading difference. Dyslexia is one type of reading disability (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018). A reading disability is defined as a student whose learning is substantially below their peers who have received equivalent opportunity (Snowling & Hulme, 2012) and has a performance level below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on a standardized measurement (Vaughn et al., 2015).
4. *Social identity* – The student’s perception of who they are and the groups in which they participate (Tajfel, 1982).
5. *Specific learning disability* – A disorder that is unrelated to intelligence, motivation, effort, or any other known cause for low achievement that makes a child struggle with learning in areas of reading, writing, and math (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018).
6. *Special Education* – “Specially designed instruction at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (U.S. Department of Education, IDEA Sec. 300.39). Special education also includes the services offered to a student who has been identified as having a disability that impacts their education. These disabilities can include specific learning disability, speech or language impairments, cognitive disabilities, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, visual

impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, orthopedic impairments, and other health impairments (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018).

### **Summary**

Chapter One provided an outline of the research study, focusing on the lived experiences of high school students with a SLD in reading. This chapter reviewed background information as well as the purpose and significance of this study. The research addressed a central research question and three sub-questions that were utilized to guide the study.

Chapter Two will present a discussion of the theoretical framework that has helped to structure this research study within the social identity theory. Following this will be a review of the literature used to establish currently available research in the area of students with SLD in reading. Through the review of the literature, a gap in the literature will emerge.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

A thorough review of the literature was conducted to identify studies that explore students with a specific learning disability (SLD) in reading and their experiences. This chapter contains an overview of the existing research pertaining to the study. The first section will discuss the social identity theory selected as a framework and how it relates to the central phenomenon. The second section will synthesize the current literature on students with SLD in reading and what they experience as a result of their disability. After reviewing the literature, a gap in the literature will emerge and provide a focus area for the need for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Issues of identity are often seen in students with disabilities (Dierking, 2015; Girli & Ozturk, 2017; Hen & Goroshit, 2014; Jeffes, 2016). As students with disabilities experience difficulties in academic skills, they start to become aware of the differences between themselves and their typical peers (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Girli & Ozturk, 2017). These differences then begin to influence the way a student with disabilities determines their own identity. The social identity theory (SIT) was first proposed by Tajfel in the early 1970s and later by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 (Trepte, 2006). It is a social-psychological theory that seeks to explain how individuals view themselves. Social identity can be defined as “a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). People obtain their identity or self-concept from the social groups to which they belong. Individuals can belong to several different groups at the same time and can place themselves into groups through a process called self-categorization. Self-categorization comes from defining one’s identity based on characteristics of the different social groups to which they belong (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). The

process of categorization comes from the idea that all social groups share characteristics which make each group unique from another group (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). It is from the unique combination of social groups with which a person identifies with that makes up a person's self-concept (Stets & Burke, 2000). A group becomes a group only when there are perceived common characteristics or common failures because there are other groups within the environment (Tajfel, 1974).

In the social identity theory (SIT), the personal identity of an individual is the lowest level of self-categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000). A person derives most of their personal identity and self-esteem from the groups to which they belong. It is through social comparison that a person identifies with various groups by finding those who are similar. Social comparison and social categorization enable an individual to define themselves as these comparisons relate to their social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). These similar groups are labeled as the ingroup (Stets & Burke, 2000). An ingroup is a group of people who identify with each other based on similarities (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel, 1974). Being a part of a group means seeing things from the group's point of view (Stets & Burke, 2000). There is a sense of uniformity among the ingroup members that helps develop the ingroup culture, and those who use their ingroup to label themselves are more likely to act like their ingroup (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Additionally, a person is more likely to remain in a group as long as the group contributes positively to a person's social identity (Turner, 1975). Not only are ingroups formed through uniformity, but ingroups may also be formed through common failures of groups. The identification in these groups may result from great loss or suffering, task failures, or even expected failure (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Students with SLD in reading identify with others

who struggle with reading and the expected failure of reading tasks. Sometimes these common failures or expected failures result in problematic behaviors, truancy, or trouble with the law (Learned, 2016; Wilkerson et al., 2016).

Individuals use comparison within a group, as well as comparisons between different groups. These comparisons can have either a positive or negative effect on a person's self-esteem (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to SIT, the need for positive self-esteem comes from positive feedback from the ingroup (Treppe, 2006). Group members compare their group to other groups, either positively or negatively. These other groups are described as the outgroup. An outgroup is a group categorized by an individual as a group which is different from those members of the ingroup (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998). When defining ingroups and outgroups, members will maximize the differences between the ingroup and outgroup. People come to view themselves as a member of one group, or the ingroup, in comparison to the outgroup (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Additionally, identification is associated with "salience of the outgroup" or the importance of classifying others into groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Turner, 1975). Being aware of the features of the outgroup substantiates one's ingroup. For the members of an ingroup to dislike or discriminate against an outgroup, they must first have a strong sense of belonging to a group which is easily differentiated from the outgroup that they dislike or discriminate against (Tajfel, 1974).

When examining students with SLD in reading, the ingroups and outgroups begin to become noticeable as these students start to notice the differences in ability between themselves and their typically developing peers (Girli & Ozturk, 2017). Students with SLD often experience social exclusion, which can lead to bullying (Mulvey, McMillian, Irvin, & Carlson, 2018; Rose,



Simpson, & Moss., 2015). Tajfel's SIT has found that individuals favor their own group while discriminating those in the outgroup (Turner, 1975). Biased-bullying is a type of bullying that focuses on an individual's membership of one particular group (Mulvey et al., 2018). Students with disabilities are at a higher risk for negative outcomes from biased-bullying than those who experience bullying that is not based on an individual's group membership (Mulvey et al., 2018). To increase an individual's self-esteem, they will boost the status of their group in comparison to the outgroup. The SIT identified self-esteem as a motivation behind intergroup behavior (Abrams & Hogg, 1998). It has been shown that there is a significant relationship between academic success and self-esteem, especially for a student who has a history of a learning disability (State & Kern, 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). However, as differences between students with and without a learning disability become more apparent, students with SLD do not receive approval from their typically developed peers and experience loneliness due to those comparisons (Girli & Ozturk, 2017; Stiefel, Shiferaw, Schwartz, & Gottfried, 2018).

Adolescents with SLD in reading seem to experience poor social relationships, especially with their non-disabled peers. The difficulty in social relationships could limit attempts to make friends outside of their ingroup, resulting in feelings of loneliness and isolation (Majorano et al., 2016). A sense of belonging is part of the ingroup behavior, but when examining bullying and reaction to bullying, students with SLD in reading may react aggressively toward others because they are responding to actions that conform to their peer group (Rose, Espelage, Monda-Amaya, Shogren, & Aragon, 2015). However, those students with SLD in reading who develop quality peer relationships were less likely to be a victim of bullying, while students who experienced rejection had fewer friends with lower social status in their ingroup (Rose et al., 2015).

The SIT has been used to examine how groups interact within an organization. This theory has been used to explain intergroup behaviors within business organizations, racial groups, and sports teams, but has not been used to examine behaviors of students with a SLD in reading (Abrams & Hogg, 1998; Tajfel, 1974). Exploring how students with SLD in reading identify socially will benefit educators' understandings of how and why students with SLD behave as they do. Research on self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-concept has contributed to the education of high school students with SLD in reading, but understanding their social relationships and social identity is essential to improving students with SLD's self-concept and self-esteem.

### **Related Literature**

Since the inception of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), educators have been trying to find a way to incorporate the policies outlined by both laws, which is challenging since they seem to conflict with one another. NCLB is based on standardization and the ideology that all students meet the same set of state standards. It holds schools accountable for the achievement of all students through the use of standardized tests (Russell & Bray, 2013). Contrary to this, IDEA is based on individualization and supports the philosophy of students with disabilities meeting goals and objectives based on their instructional level. Coupled with this, IDEA also ensures that students with disabilities are given appropriate supports and services through the Individualized Education Plan (IEP; Russell & Bray, 2013).

In 2010, the Obama administration called for schools to place an emphasis on college and career readiness (CCR). College readiness is defined as being academically prepared for post-secondary education, without remediation; whereas, career readiness is defined as possessing the

skills necessary for success in the workforce (Bachman, 2013; Malin, Bragg, & Hackmann, 2017). The goal was to create a balance of the two ideologies; however, the emphasis of CCR seemed to focus more on college readiness than career readiness, even though it was expected that high school students attain both skill sets (Malin et al., 2017).

The implementation of the Common Core Standards (CCS) in 2010, along with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, worked with the mandates of IDEA in that students with disabilities receive accommodations when taking state assessments (Darrow, 2016). The ESSA narrowed the role of the federal government and allowed individual states to determine their educational agendas (McGuinn, 2016). Implementing these policies, which were intended to reach all students with higher academic standards, has become a daunting task for educators when working with students with disabilities (Zumeta, 2015). Consequently, the academic achievement of students with disabilities continues to remain low, even with these educational policies in place (Zumeta, 2015).

Even with numerous educational policies in place, academic achievement is still a concern. In 2011, American College Testing (ACT) released data indicating that only 25% of high school graduates who took the ACT met the benchmarks for college in English, reading, math, and science (Bachman, 2013). According to the National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) in 1997, “There was a decrease in reading scores for 12<sup>th</sup> graders” (Devault & Joseph, 2004, p. 22). A deficiency in reading skills prohibits students from obtaining both comprehension and higher-level vocabulary skills to communicate and learn. Teachers can introduce and model comprehension strategies to students, but if they have deficits in decoding or fluency, then it may be difficult for students to comprehend academic content passages fully (Nippold, 2017). The problem of implementing reading skills intervention at the high school

level then becomes a task for classroom teachers who are not usually trained to remediate these basic skills.

Research reveals that reading disabilities are found in students from elementary to high school (Groff, 2014; Melekoglu, & Wilkerson, 2013; Solis et al., 2015). Students can be identified as having a specific learning disability (SLD) if their response to instruction and intervention is significantly below that of their peers (Watts, Nielsen, Bridges, Liu, & Bontempo, 2015). Additionally, reports indicate that 80% of children with a learning disability struggle primarily with reading, and boys outnumber girls two-to-one in special education (Endress, Weston, Marchand-Martella, Martella, & Simmons 2007; Severence & Howell, 2017). When children do not learn the necessary reading skills in early elementary school, they usually are unable to catch up to their typical peers. Research shows that if a student struggles with reading skills as early as second grade, then they will continue to have reading problems throughout school and even into adulthood (Blachman et al., 2015; Carawan, Nalavany, & Jenkin, 2016; Ferrer, et al., 2015; Hulme & Snowling, 2016; Moraueu, 2014; Smart et al., 2017). As students struggle with reading, they read less, resulting in falling farther and farther behind (Moraueu, 2014). Therefore, as students with reading disabilities continue to fall behind, their future is restricted as opportunities in the workplace may be compromised due to reading failure (Hornery, Seaton, Tracey, Craven & Yeung, 2014).

A student's reading skills at the elementary level can predict their reading skills as they progress through school (Hulme & Snowling, 2016; McLaughlin, Speirs, & Shenassa, 2014). The reading gap widens as students progress through school, and by high school, struggling readers are reluctant even to try to read (Ferrer et al., 2015; Livingston et al., 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2014). Lower performing readers usually fall below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile, while those with a

reading disability either read below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile or have a reading IQ discrepancy of one standard deviation (Suggate, 2016).

Furthermore, high school students who lack necessary reading skills need opportunities to receive instruction and remediation in basic word reading skills in order to be successful in life. Once students reach the high school level, they are expected to read to learn and not learn to read (Gooch, Vasalouo, Benton, & Khaled, 2016; Nippold, 2017; Saletta, 2018). To help students build and improve upon their reading skills, they must be enticed to strengthen their reading (Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013). By providing students with a reading disability with interventions to foster reading achievement and reading self-concept, schools provide these students the opportunity to take advantage of their full potential (Hornery et al., 2014). Therein lies the daily challenge that high school teachers face; they have restricted time to help students who read significantly below grade level. (Alias & Dahlan, 2015).

It is true that some students are at a higher risk of having a reading disability. Research has revealed that if a parent or another family member has a reading disability, then those children are at a greater risk for also having a reading disability (Carroll, Solity, & Shapiro, 2016; Horowitz-Kraus, Schmitz, Hutton, & Schumacher, 2017; Hulme & Snowling, 2016). Moreover, a potential risk for developmental dyslexia includes having a family member with dyslexia and delayed speech as a child (Dilnot, Hamilton, Maughan, & Snowling, 2017; Swagerman et al., 2017). Furthermore, difficulties with auditory processing, visual deficits, sensorimotor skills, phonological deficits, or poor oral skills at the age of three are predictors of poor reading development, although phonological awareness and print knowledge have been shown to be the most critical indicators of reading difficulties in young children (Carroll et al., 2016; Dilnot et al., 2017; Hulme, Nash, Gooch, Lervag, Snowling, 2015). This makes sense

because if parents are struggling readers themselves, then they are less likely to expose their children to print sources at an early age.

A child may develop low self-esteem and question their role in a family unless one parent, usually the mother, shares the same reading disability as the child (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Rauf, Ismail, Balakrishnan, & Haruna, 2018). Unfortunately, if a parent has a reading disability then the parent may not be able to provide the same reading opportunities than parents who do not have a reading disability (Dilnot et al., 2017; Hulme & Snowling, 2016). This seems to justify why early struggling readers continue to have these same problems in high school. However, one study found that the mother's level of education had a direct impact on the accessibility of educational resources available in the home, which has a positive effect on students with a reading disability (Mascheretti, Andreola, Scaini, & Sulpizio, 2018; Smart et al., 2017). Some parents claim that they read less frequently to a child because of their child's lack of interest in books which, in turn, makes it difficult to implement consistent reading within the home (Dilnot et al., 2017).

### **Poor Readers at Risk**

Studies have revealed that students who have poor reading skills continue to fall behind their typical student peers as they progress through school (Blackman et al., 2015; Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013; Snow & Matthews, 2016). This trend continues to be significantly problematic as students enter high school, where high stakes testing becomes increasingly more demanding. These difficulties lead to a lack of necessary reading skills as the texts become more complex (Kaldenberg, Watt, & Therrien, 2015; Kang, McKenna, Arden, & Ciullo, 2015; Saletta, 2018).

Additionally, as a result of their disability, students with an SLD in reading lack skills in organizing information and using those that skill set to apply educational strategies when

completing their schoolwork (Girli & Ozturk, 2017). Moreover, these students experience difficulties in processing new material in an academic setting. Recognizing that there is a literacy problem at the high school level is essential because, unfortunately, prevention and intervention programs at the elementary level are not enough. Students entering high school with poor reading skills require additional interventions to remediate their difficulties in reading (Ferrer et al., 2015; Solis et al., 2015). Therefore, intervention should not discontinue after the middle school years.

**Academic risks.** While most students grasp the concepts of putting together letters and sounds in early elementary school, some older students have not and may benefit from remedial instruction (Wilkerson et al., 2016). According to one meta-analysis, research continues to indicate that older students who continue to struggle with reading require many hours of remedial intervention to help them improve their abilities (Josephs & Jolivette, 2016; Scammacca, Roberts, Vaughn, & Stuebing, 2015). Vaughn et al. (2015) noted that students who have struggled for multiple years may require more than nine months of intensive interventions to be successful with grade-level text mastery. Since high school is the last opportunity for consistent remediation to make a substantial effect on a student's reading fluency skills, they will need to participate in daily remediation to improve those skills (Josephs & Jolivette, 2016). During the course of the remediation process, teachers need to convey to students with a reading disability that literacy helps empower students not only to make textual connections, but also to make decisions in their own lives; it is a way to connect to other people (Ruppar, 2017).

A strong relationship has been found between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Kaldenberg et al., 2015). Students with a SLD in reading have trouble with the vocabulary in the core content areas as informational texts become more difficult (Vaughn et al.,

2015). If a student cannot gain meaning from a text due to reading difficulties, then their motivation to read decreases (Gooch et al., 2016; Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013; Saletta, 2018). For a student to understand informational texts in their academic classes, educators may need to pre-teach vocabulary in order for the student with an SLD to make connections when reading (Kaldenberg, Watts, & Therrien, 2015). Understanding subject related vocabulary prior to reading a text helps students with reading comprehension.

Academic failure has a direct impact on behavior risks in students with a SLD in reading (Haft et al., 2016; Hakkarainen, Holopainen, & Savolainen, 2013). As a result of academic failure, students with this specific SLD are two and a half to three times more likely to drop out of school than their non-disabled peers and are less likely to graduate from post-secondary education (Doikou-Avlidou, 2015; Haft et al., 2016; Price & Payne, 2018). Furthermore, students with a reading disability were found to miss an average of 14.9 days of school due to out-of-school suspension or expulsion, which diminished their opportunities to be a part of classroom activities (Learned, 2016). Academic failure, which can lead to poor social skills, also increases the likelihood of peer rejection, learned helplessness, lower educational expectations, and less persistence (Haft et al., 2016; Hen & Goroshit, 2014; Livingston, et al., 2018; Rabiner, Godwin, & Dodge, 2016).

Although there are negative effects of academic failure, peer acceptance can have a positive effect on academic success. Those students who have positive peer relationships tend to have better social interactions and are more engaged at school (Gallardo, Barrasa, & Guevara-Viejo, 2016). Therefore, ensuring that students with a SLD in reading have positive social experiences at school will help those learners with their self-esteem and academic involvement.



**Behavior risks.** Implementing daily remediation in foundational reading skills for students with reading disabilities is justified based on the risks that continued reading failure may impose on a student (Vaughn et al., 2015). When a SLD negatively affects students' academic self-concept, it can then lead to students seeing every aspect of their lives as a failure (DeVries et al., 2018; Girli & Ozturk, 2017; Hakkarainin & Holopainen, 2016; Lithari, 2019; Smart et al., 2018). When students who exhibited poor reading comprehension skills and poor academic self-concept are compared to their typical counterparts in areas such as suicide, substance abuse, and dropout rates, several studies have shown that students with reading disabilities are at a higher risk for these behaviors (Blachman et al., 2015; Daniel et al., 2006; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2018; Huford et al., 2016; Moses, 2018; Smart et al., 2017). These studies found that the risk of suicide attempts or ideation is significantly higher for students with disabilities than for their non-disabled peers. Additionally, the risk of dropping out of school for those with a reading disability becomes much higher when a student has a comorbid behavior problem, or the presence of more than one disability (Smart et al., 2017).

Adolescents with a SLD in reading are at a higher risk for behavioral difficulties than their non-disabled peers (Fuller-Thomson et al., 2018; Moses, 2018). Mental health issues in children with reading disabilities are typically seen through internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Aro et al., 2019; Leitao et al., 2017). Internalizing behaviors include withdrawal, anxiety, and depression, while externalizing behaviors include aggression, hyperactivity, and delinquent behaviors (Leitao et al., 2017). According to Moses (2018), there are several risk factors, which include problem-solving deficits, mental health problems, coping issues, and low self-esteem. Moses (2018) continued by stating that students receiving special education services were significantly more at risk for suicide attempts when compared to other high-risk

groups, including children on welfare, those in the juvenile justice system, and those receiving drug abuse services. It has also been reported that when analyzing suicide notes, numerous spelling and writing errors consistent with a specific learning disability were found (Fuller-Thomson et al., 2018).

Having a reading disability not only puts students at risk during their time in school, but it also increases risks after they leave school. It has been reported that there is a high percentage of persons with reading difficulties or dyslexia in prison (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Berman & Stetson, 2018). According to Berman and Stetson (2018), one study revealed that 48% of the inmates at a Texas prison were dyslexic. This study suggested that after leaving school, those with a reading disability find difficulty in securing meaningful employment and resort to illegal activity (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Ferrer et al., 2015; Price & Payne, 2018; Salleta, 2018).

It has been shown that there is a link between a student's socioeconomic status (SES) and educational and occupational success (Little, Hart, Phillips, Schatschneider, & Taylor, 2019; Mascheretti et al., 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Romeo et al., 2018). Students with lower SES often regress throughout the summer, most likely due to decreased exposure to books and reduced experiences that emphasize literacy skills (Romeo et al., 2018). The potential for accessing resources to help a child learn is limited for children living in a lower SES (Schatschneider, & Taylor, 2019). Furthermore, high school graduation, college attendance, and adult earning potential are all impacted by low reading abilities (Carawan et al., 2016; Livingston et al., 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2014 Price & Payne, 2018).

Along the same lines, environmental factors such as the limited availability of resources like libraries, parks, and learning centers, as well as crime and violence also contribute to higher risks of reading disabilities (Little et al., 2019; Mascheretti et al., 2018). A mother's education

was also a predictor of later reading abilities. This suggests that the mother's education level impacts the reading environment for young children, therefore shaping their attitudes and abilities toward reading when these children start school (Mascheretti et al., 2018). Another environmental factor that increases the risk of cognitive functioning is sleep deprivation due to stress or fear, which is associated with reading comprehension difficulties (Little et al., 2019). These reports are startling, and educators need to be aware of the risk factors for poor reading at the high school and young adult level.

When reading is difficult, students learn coping strategies that allow them to maintain a sense of normality in their lives (Alexander-Passe, 2015). Due to their reading disability, these students need to work longer and harder than those without a reading disability which makes time management and productivity critical skills for success (Kreider, Medina, & Slamka, 2019). Learning to identify coping strategies and using support systems not only help with academics, but also with the ability to carry out tasks and routines when transitioning to adulthood (Kreider, Medina, & Slamka, 2019).

As students with disabilities progress through school, they soon notice the differences between themselves and their non-disabled peers. As difficulties in academic tasks increase, students with disabilities start to experience problems when interacting with their peers (Alexander-Passe, 2015; Girli & Ozturk, 2017). When students with a reading disability are asked to read aloud or complete group work, differences in ability become noticeable to their peers and can influence their behaviors within the classroom (Turunen, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2017). A student's reading level and writing ability is a predictor of school achievement, and these predictors have a much stronger effect on boys than girls (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, & Savolainen, 2013). Basic word reading skills and reading comprehension skills are foundational

for students to be able to learn in school and throughout their life. Children who have deficits in these areas in the third or fourth grade are considered high risk for dropping out of school, which will have an impact on any future employment (Chiang et al., 2017; Ferrer et al., 2015; Smart et al., 2017).

Within schools, males are more likely to be identified with a reading disability than females. This may be due to genetic, prenatal, and environmental influences, but may also be due to girls appearing to be more interested in reading, resulting in more support for girls (Quinn, 2018). However, while girls seem to outperform boys in reading, this may be due to girls having more positive attitudes toward reading. Furthermore, the negative attitudes toward reading among boys seem to be further impacted by negative stereotyping, targeting boys in reading (Pansu et al., 2016). This negative mindset continues to impact boys' attitudes toward reading. Due to stereotyping and the potential for failing, it was found that girls are more likely to participate in post-secondary education than boys; this may be due to boys being able to find more employment opportunities than girls (Livingston et al., 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2014).

While schools are known as a place for academic learning, schools cannot ignore the social and emotional processes that students with disabilities experience (Hernandez-Saca, Kahn, & Cannon, 2018). Students with a SLD are at a higher risk for dropping out of school because they do not feel prepared for the academic rigor they face in high school and later in life (Hakkarainen, Holopainen, et al., 2013; Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen, & Jahnukainen, 2016). Some students with a reading disability have reported that they feel like they are working themselves to exhaustion to compensate for their difficulties (Livingston et al., 2018). The purpose of special education should focus on supporting students with disabilities to reach their goals, as well as reaching out to students in order to prevent them from dropping out of school (Kirjavainen et al.,

2016). Additionally, adults with a disability in the area of reading often face problems with employment and job training because of the insecurities that stem from their disability, which leads to lower income (Aro et al., 2019; Doilou-Avliidou, 2015; Eloranta, Narhi, Ahonen, & Aro, 2019; Saletta, 2018). As students are identified with a SLD, they need to be given evidence-based interventions to assist in improving necessary, foundational reading skills.

Students with a SLD also have higher levels of stress and anxiety (Francis, Caruana, Hudson, & McArthur, 2018; Livingston et al., 2018; Piccolo et al., 2017). A lack of confidence and low self-esteem regarding their learning process causes students with a SLD to have higher levels of anxiety and stress (Hen & Goroshit, 2014; Jensen et al., 2019; Piccolo et al., 2017). Moreover, a high level of anxiety can inhibit performance on complex tasks, which can have an adverse effect on a student's academic performance (Piccolo et al., 2017). Interesting though, Panicker and Chelliah (2016) found that students with a SLD in writing or math did not exhibit the same levels of anxiety as those who struggled with reading. Students with reading difficulties exhibit higher anxiety and increased emotional levels as young as first grade and continue throughout college (Tobia, Bonifacci, Ottaviani, Borsato, & Marzocchi, 2016). Additionally, students with a reading disability think there is a correlation between intelligence and reading ability and are more likely to feel unintelligent (Livingston et al., 2018). Aside from academic stress, students with a SLD in reading may face pressure at home if their parents do not understand or are unaware of the presence of a SLD (Panicker & Chelliah, 2016; Rauf et al., 2018). Children with dyslexia, for example, may be misidentified and categorized as lazy or disobedient because of a parent's lack of knowledge regarding a reading disability's effect on a child (Rauf et al., 2018). Therefore, students with an SLD need to have access to emotional support along with academic support. One study showed that students with nonverbal learning

disabilities and students with reading disabilities had higher levels of anxiety than their typically developed peers (Mammarella et al., 2016). Students with reading disabilities worry more about reading aloud in class or performing poorly due to their disability, which may trigger social anxiety, causing these students to have limited oral reading experiences (Barber & Proops, 2019; Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013).

Furthermore, it was found that students with reading disabilities had more severe symptoms of depression than those students with nonverbal learning disabilities or with their typical peers (Francis et al., 2018; Livingston et al., 2018; Mammarella et al., 2016). Students with a reading disability also display poor stress management, which is another cause of anxiety and depression (Livingston et al., 2018). Female students with a reading disability tend to exhibit more anxiety and depression than males due to internalizing their problems (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Francis et al., 2018). Male students tend to use more task-based coping strategies, whereas, female students are more emotionally based, which affects the risk of poor self-esteem and depression (Alexander-Passe, 2016b). Those students who struggle in school due to a SLD then have feelings of low self-esteem and may believe that their situation cannot improve. This sense of hopelessness then becomes an obstacle for future success (Kalka & Lockiewicz, 2018; Panicker & Chelliah, 2016; Rauf et al., 2018). However, one study showed that students with a reading disability were not at a higher risk for depression than those without a reading disability (Haverinen, Savolainen & Holopainen, 2014). Haverinen et al. (2014) suggested that those students with a reading disability have developed coping skills and that as they move into adulthood there is a decrease in stress related to their disability. Another study indicated that if people with a reading disability have a higher IQ, then those persons demonstrate higher adult-age reading ability; whereas, people with a reading disability and a lower IQ tend to be at a

higher risk for unemployment and psychosocial difficulties (Livingston et al., 2018). Even so, educators should be aware of the risks of anxiety and depression among those students with reading disabilities and be ready to respond when necessary.

Bullying is another risk factor for students with a SLD (Rodriguez-Hidalgo, Alcivar, & Herrera-Lopez, 2019; Rose, Espelage et al., 2015; Turunen et al., 2017). Research suggests that students with a SLD are victimized more often than their typical peers (Rose, Espelage et al., 2015; Rose & Gage, 2017; Rose, Stormont, Wang, Simpson, Preast & Green, 2015). Since reading difficulties are more visible to other students, this makes poor readers a target for bullying (Turunen et al., 2017). One study suggested that adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16 participated in more harassment and intimidation acts toward students with disabilities (Rodriguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019). Victimization of students with a SLD in reading is also due to a lack of social and communication skills. One study reported that students with a SLD are 3.5 times more likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers (Rose, Simpson & Moss, 2015). This victimization, including physical harm along with emotional and psychological problems, is reportedly higher in students with disabilities when compared to their peers without disabilities. Students with autism spectrum disorder and those with learning disabilities experience higher rates of bullying when in an inclusive classroom compared to students in a more restrictive setting (Rose & Gage, 2017).

However, students with a SLD are also identified as the perpetrator in bullying situations more frequently than their typical peers (Eisenberg, Gower, McMorris, & Bucchianeri, 2015; Rose, Simpson & Moss, 2015). In fact, girls with a learning disability are more likely to bully others than girls without a learning disability (Turunen et al., 2017). The lack of interpersonal skills, social exclusion, or ostracism may contribute to increased bullying by students with a SLD

(Alexander- Passe, 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2015; Rose, Simpson et al., 2015). Students with disabilities may be reactive victims as well as bully-victims, in that they use aggressive behavior as a way to communicate due to their lack of age-appropriate social cues, which may inflate the rate of bully perpetration toward students with disabilities (Rose & Gage, 2017; Rose, Simpson, & Preast, 2016; Rose, Stormont et al., 2015). These students may be less resilient to chronic exposure to bullying and have reported higher levels of psychological, physical, and emotional harm when compared to their nondisabled peers (Rose, Stormont, et al., 2015; Rose, Simpson & Preast, 2016). Students with disabilities who are involved in bullying are at a greater risk for suicide, which is why bullying needs to be addressed and monitored (Rose, Stormont et al., 2015). Schools should provide support for students with a SLD in reading in such areas as social skills and mental health supports in order to help decrease the number of incidences of bullying (Rose, Simpson, Preast, 2016).

Another risk for students with severe reading disabilities is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Alexander-Passe, 2016a). PTSD can be defined as “an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events, . . . [and] relive the events via intrusive memories, flashbacks, and nightmares” (Alexander-Passe, 2016a, p. 91). Students with a reading disability can develop PTSD through exclusion from their peers, anger from an adult authority figure, physical bullying at school, and the realization that they are abnormal or cannot learn like their peers. These students experience a harsh environment when they have difficulties in the areas of reading, writing, and spelling (Alexander-Passe, 2015; 2016a). Students with dyslexia may not hear the sounds of a word correctly, and consequently misspell the word based on their own mispronunciation (Mills, 2018). These students compensate for these difficulties by avoiding reading in class, becoming a class clown, submitting to the humiliation, or being truant



(Alexander-Passe, 2016a). PTSD has also been seen in adults who have a reading disability, specifically when they need to return to school for their own children. Recalling the feeling of being different, stupid, lazy, or ashamed may leave lifelong scars, even into adulthood (Carawan et al., 2016). It was found that male adults had a higher level of school avoidance and anxiety toward school than females, but female adults felt more powerless in schools than males (Alexander-Passe, 2015).

When looking at successful adults with severe reading difficulties, research findings point to creative adults who had perseverance and resilience (Alexander-Passe, 2015; 2016a). Many successful adults with a reading disability have been able to identify their strengths and focus on those strengths to help them cope with their reading disability (Carawan et al., 2016). Some of the adults used the traumatic events they endured during school to prove that they could be successful by taking risks and solving problems in unique ways (Alexander-Passe, 2016a). Another coping strategy found in highly successful adults with a reading disability includes a sense of control (Haft et al., 2016). In order to create supports that will help students use their creativity to be successful, educators need to be aware of the dangers in the path of students with a reading disability and the trauma it may cause them. This support can be facilitated by identifying a student's strengths, developing a support system for the student, and by developing a student's coping skills (Sutton & Shields, 2016).

### **Students with a Reading Disability and Attitudes**

Secondary teachers are often hesitant about how to best support students who lack basic reading skills (Ruppar, 2017). One rationale as to why educators seem to be reluctant about teaching basic reading skills is because they question how an older student may respond to this type of intervention (Ruppar, 2017). Focusing on motivating struggling readers is crucial

because unmotivated students usually are reluctant to participate in interventions that will aid in acquiring the necessary skills to become a better reader (Barber & Proops, 2019; Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013). This sometimes stems from students' lack of self-confidence in their abilities. As a result of this, finding appropriate interventions can be difficult. Furthermore, the interventions need to be both evidence-based and appealing to the high school student with a reading disability (Josephs & Jolivette, 2016). When developing a student's IEP, the goals and objectives need to target the specific needs of each child and support to reach those goals, and objectives must be available for intervention (Musyoka & Clark, 2017). By researching all available supports within the school, teachers will be better able to target instruction for struggling readers.

Teachers also struggle with defining literacy and knowing how to find the correct delivery method for students with reading disabilities (Huford et al., 2016; Ruppap, 2017). Teachers may have general knowledge regarding remediation strategies, but struggle with actually carrying out these methods in the classroom (Ruppap, 2017). Research reveals that students with disabilities who struggle with reading and literacy skills can improve these skills through the use of "targeted, language-rich instruction" (Ruppap, 2017, p. 114). Moreover, providing training and support for teachers will give them the confidence to work with students with disabilities and to provide appropriate interventions.

Another way to support students with a disability in reading is to access the general curriculum through accommodations. Furthermore, accommodations are "changes in how instruction and tests are typically provided in order to facilitate learning" (Witmer et al., 2018, p. 174). Some of these accommodations include extended time and having the test read aloud by another person (Witmer et al., 2018). However, many times accommodations are not used as

frequently as they should be. Even when students are included in their own IEP meetings, they may not understand the importance of the accommodations that they can use for support. Many adolescents view the accommodations as simply another label added to them, rather than seeing these changes as a positive support. Furthermore, sometimes accommodations are not used due to a lack of communication between intervention specialists, general education teachers, and the student (Witmer et al., 2018). This reiterates the importance of and need for team communication in the decision-making process.

Students with disabilities in the area of reading deserve the opportunity to improve their literacy skills. When basic reading skills are taught, students who struggle with reading start to display higher levels of self-efficacy (Gallardo et al., 2016). Academic self-efficacy can be defined as “the belief of individuals in themselves in terms of being able to successfully complete academic tasks given to them” (Girli & Ozturk, 2017, p. 93). Regrettably, little is known about a student’s reading fluency and self-efficacy because studies have focused more on reading comprehension and self-efficacy (Aro et al., 2018). However, research has shown that students with a high reading self-efficacy were found to be more persistent in working at improving their reading skills, whereas those students with a low reading self-efficacy avoided challenging reading activities (Aro et al., 2018; Stevens, Walker, & Vaughn, 2017). When students with a reading disability spend less time reading, their vocabulary acquisition is negatively affected (Stevens et al., 2017). This demonstrates the need for districts to provide interventions and remediation programs for those students who need to improve their reading skills. However, students may be apprehensive about being placed in a remedial program as a result of previous experiences and perspectives with reading (Frankel, 2016). The goal is for educators to empower struggling readers.

Special education teachers need to be more of a mentor or coach to see positive results. Jensen et al. (2019) found a direct association between a student's reading self-concept and the perceived teacher support. While high-achieving students tend to be self-motivated to read, students with reading difficulties are less likely to be motivated to read (Gooch et al., 2016; Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013). When students increase their basic skills, then their self-efficacy increases (Gallardo et al., 2016; Girli & Ozturk, 2017). Current research suggests that students' negative feelings about themselves when they are required to read generate negative feelings about the entire reading process (Jeffes, 2016; Girli & Ozturk, 2017; Jeffes, 2016).

Educators can help students with reading disabilities improve their self-efficacy (Majorano et al., 2016). One way is to encourage the student to set short, attainable goals so they can experience success in achieving these measures. By experiencing success, students with a reading disability will gradually become open to new experiences, which can assist educators in planning activities and programs to reinforce skills for future academic success (Brown & Cinamon, 2015). Moreover, there is a difference between self-concept and self-esteem. Self-concept typically refers to a person's individual perception in a particular skill area, whereas self-esteem refers to a person's well-being as a person (McArthur, Castles, Kohlen, & Banales, 2016). Furthermore, teachers can provide support and protection against the damaging impact of negative peer rejection due to their students' SLD in reading. Students who have a positive relationship with their teachers can approach interactions with their peers in a more positive way (Kiuru et al., 2015; Learned, 2016). When students have that supportive teacher relationship, they tend to behave in more socially appropriate ways and concentrate better during educational experiences (Jensen et al., 2019; Kiuru et al., 2015). Educators need to be aware of the role they

play in shaping a student's self-concept and self-esteem and how that role influences academic skills (Haft et al., 2016; Kiuru et al., 2015).

It has been found that while students with a SLD in reading often feel good about themselves and are successful outside of school, they may feel incapable of success in the classroom (McArthur et al., 2016; State & Kern, 2017). However, as they learn to utilize strategies to increase their reading abilities, their academic self-efficacy also increases (Aro et al., 2017; Girli & Ozturk, 2017). Research indicates that students with a reading disability tend to be more successful when they pursue an interest in which they are passionate, and they develop a persistence when struggling (Alexander-Passe, 2016b). A favorable school environment also contributes to positive academic self-efficacy. A positive academic self-concept implies that a student is motivated and exhibits help-seeking behavior (Jensen, Solheim, & Idsoe, 2019). Implementing programs to improve how students perceive their abilities, not necessarily directed at their skill levels, can influence students' self-efficacy (Battistutta, Commissaire, & Steffgen, 2018). If students with a SLD have a high self-concept, then they may be able to cope in areas that they find difficult (Foley-Nicpon, Assouline, & Fosenburg, 2015). Educators need to provide experiences that foster success for students with academic struggles to bring about a more positive self-concept (Aro et al., 2017). Encouraging students to participate in extra-curricular activities helps students develop positive experiences that improve self-esteem and self-efficacy (Palmer, Elliott III, & Cheatham, 2017; Price & Payne, 2018). Everyone has areas where they excel, and students with disabilities are no exception. To aid in promoting a positive self-concept, adults who interact with adolescents with a reading disability should help them focus on what they can do and not on what they cannot do (Price & Payne, 2018).

Educators need to provide students with reading disabilities strategies and skills that foster reading improvement so that these students can achieve academic success.

### **Students with a Reading Disability and Self-Perceptions of Ability**

Students with SLD have projected lower self-esteem than their typical peers, especially in the academic setting (Battistutta et al., 2018; McArthur et al., 2016). The educational environment provides the most direct experiences for success and failure, which may have a direct impact on student motivation and self-esteem (Battistutta et al., 2018). If students see themselves as separate from their disability, then they will have a higher self-concept and can better cope with their disability (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2015). This supports the idea that a diagnosis of a reading disability can be a relief to the student and parents (Lithari, 2019; Novita, 2016). One study found that children who were diagnosed with a SLD in reading early on had higher self-concepts than those who were not diagnosed until later (Battistutta et al., 2018). When explaining a diagnosis of dyslexia or any other reading disability, professionals must be careful to provide a clear explanation, so the diagnosis is not interpreted as something traumatic or damaging to a student's self-esteem (Livingston et al., 2018). Early interventions help students understand their disability and how to cope with it.

Furthermore, students who start school with higher literary interests displayed a stronger self-image, even if they did not have basic literacy skills (Walgermo, Frijters, & Solheim, 2018). While it is possible to provide interventions to help with basic reading skills, ultimately, reading is an interaction between a reader and a text (McNamara & Kendeou, 2017; Pearson & Cervetti, 2015). Providing proper interventions allows educators to help young children develop an interest in literacy, which can directly impact both reading development and self-esteem.

Since reading is the first academic skill encountered at school, students who experience difficulties in basic reading skills, even at an early age, will often experience a lower self-image (Walgermo et al., 2018). Students diagnosed with a reading disability as young as eight were unhappier and experienced more anxiety when completing academic tasks (Novita, 2016). Consequently, students with a SLD in reading often do not feel they are equipped with the necessary skills to complete academic tasks without help and are left with feelings of shame, failure, helplessness, and loneliness (Erricker, 2013; Ozernov-Palchik & Gaab, 2016). However, if students feel a connectivity to school and parents, then they experience less emotional stress, suicide attempts and other violent activities (Livingston et al., 2018).

### **Students with a Reading Disability and Relationships**

Students with a SLD in reading also suffer in their quality of relationships (Bonifacci, Storti, Tobia, & Suardi, 2015; Kalka & Lockiewicz, 2018; State & Kern, 2017). Academic difficulties are often associated with poor motivation and low self-esteem; consequently, some students use their learning difficulties to adopt positive or negative mechanisms to cope with their challenges and to protect their self-esteem (Hakkarainen & Holopainen, 2016). Relationships with peers, parents, and teachers can be impacted either by the feeling of failure or by a lack of understanding of the academic material.

Students with disabilities tend to have a lower social status when compared to their regular education peers (Pinto, Baines, & Bakopoulou, 2019). Poor academic skills are predictive of lower peer acceptance, which decreases motivation to participate in the classroom and reduces collaborative learning (Kiuru et al., 2015; Rabiner et al., 2016; Rauf et al., 2018). Students with a SLD may have difficulty developing social relationships with peers due to a deficiency in communication skills and struggle in taking part in group discussions (Majorano et

al., 2016). One possible explanation for the lack of peer acceptance is that students with disabilities are seen as inferior, so nondisabled peers are less willing to accept them into their peer group (Kiuru et al., 2015). According to the SIT, this type of negative comparison leads to students with disabilities being categorized in the outgroup among their peers (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998). Additionally, students with a reading disability have trouble developing quality relationships with their peers and often display deficits in social competence (Bonifacci et al., 2015). Isolation then becomes preferred because it is less stigmatizing than rejection (Wang, Rubin, Laursen, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2013).

Positive relationships with significant adults can help increase self-concept and self-esteem in students with a SLD in reading. Social supports from adults provide protection, thus helping adolescents with a SLD cope with difficulties in social relationships and with individual self-esteem (Carawan et al., 2016; Majorano et al., 2016). Students who have support from a teacher can use the teacher as a resource when working through other social relationships and thus may approach their peers with more positivity (Kiuru et al., 2015). Parents and teachers who understand and accept students' SLD help students not only with their self-esteem but also with coping strategies related to their disability (Livingston et al., 2018; Rauf et al., 2018). Being diagnosed with a SLD in reading does not have to define a person; therefore, identifying strengths and developing strategies may help bolster the self-esteem in individuals with a SLD in reading. In addition to that, teachers are instrumental in helping students with a SLD in reading understand their disability. Many studies have revealed that teacher support is essential in helping students develop positive self-esteem and staying in school (Dierking, 2015; Groff, 2014; Kiuru et al., 2015; Roorda et al., 2017; Smart et al., 2018). Teachers are the people who are in the best position to spark an interest in reading with struggling learners so that students are



willing to persist through interventions and become more receptive to reading (Roorda et al., 2017). The relationship between a teacher and struggling readers plays a part in the self-efficacy of students when going through the remediation process (Scammacca et al., 2016). Students who have a positive relationship with their teacher can use the teacher as a resource in approaching social relationships, which allows them to have more meaningful relationships with their peers (Kiuru et al., 2015).

However, if teachers do not fully understand the disability of their students, then their actions can unintentionally have an adverse effect on students with a SLD in reading (Einat, 2017). For example, some teachers assume that students with a SLD in reading are lazy, unmotivated, or less intelligent (Alias & Dahlan, 2015; Einat, 2017; Lithari, 2019; Livingston et al., 2018). This adverse reaction of teachers reduces student confidence and contributes to a negative emotional experience in school (Lithari, 2019; Livingston et al., 2018; Majorano et al., 2016). As the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom is becoming the norm, regular education teachers need to examine how they design their instruction while considering the diversity of learners within their classroom (Moreau, 2014; Navarro, Zervas, Gesa, & Sampson, 2016). Teachers who model learning strategies and interventions for high school students with a learning disability in an inclusion classroom can increase higher-order thinking and reasoning skills, but this takes time and effort on the part of the general education teacher (Hock, Bulgren, & Brasseur-Hock, 2017). Inclusion teachers find it challenging to use strategies and design lessons that can reach all of the students in a diverse learner classroom (Kauffman & Badar, 2016). This reinforces the need for both open communication and further training for educators.

The amount of access students with disabilities have to their regular education peers varies and can result in greater or lower benefits in the areas of emotional, social, and academic self-concept (DeVries, Voß, & Gebhardt, 2018). Research has shown conflicting results regarding the benefits of inclusion classrooms. Students may face more loneliness and bullying in the inclusion classroom and have fewer friends (DeVries et al., 2018). Furthermore, if expectations in the inclusion classroom exceed the abilities of a student with disabilities, then that can harm the student's self-esteem (Kauffman & Badar, 2016). However, other research has shown that students with disabilities have improved self-concept and are accepted by their peers when they are in an inclusive classroom as compared to being in a self-contained classroom (DeVries, Voß, & Gebhardt, 2018; Doikou-Avlidou, 2015; Stiefel et al., 2018). While the social impact of inclusion may benefit students, it should not come at the expense of appropriate education (Kauffman & Badar, 2016). Every student's lived experience is shaped by their interactions with others and their environment, as well as, their personal attributes (Leitao et al., 2017). Inclusion teachers continue to need professional development to provide high-quality instruction for those students who have diverse literacy skills within the inclusion classroom (DeVries et al., 2018; Livingston et al., 2018; Moreau, 2014). This is just one measure to help ensure the success of each student learner.

Adolescence is a crucial time in children's lives, as they are redefining who they are by becoming more independent and spending more time with their peers. The extent to which individuals are liked or preferred by their peers is one of the best indicators of academic success and social well-being (Gallardo et al., 2016). Likewise, high-quality relationships with peers or a best friend contribute to better self-worth, especially for students with a SLD in reading (Gallardo et al., 2016; Haft et al., 2016). Higher levels of peer acceptance can be a contributing

factor in increasing academic achievement (Bonifacci et al., 2015). Self-esteem and self-concept are strongly influenced by the choices people make. These choices include the people with whom they associate and the effort they put into their relationships (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). The SIT supports this idea that individuals need to be a part of a group to increase their self-esteem. The primary purpose of individuals is to achieve a positive social identity. This positive social identity is achieved through comparisons between the ingroup and the outgroup (Trepte, 2006). As students with a SLD in reading progress through school, the groups to which they belong have a significant impact on their self-identity and ultimately on their academic success.

### **Students with a Reading Disability and Friendships**

Friendships are an essential part of a person's social development (Gerhardt, McCallum, McDougall, Keenan, & Rigby, 2015). These bonds between two people are formed through mutual interests and interactions (Sigstad, 2016). As an essential part of a person's social identity development, friendships provide both emotional and social support (Gerhardt et al., 2015; Grutter, Gasser, & Malti, 2017; Sigstad, 2016). Research has indicated that having supportive friendships can improve a student's attitude toward school and reduce social isolation and bullying (Leitao et al., 2017; Pinto et al., 2019; Potter, 2014). Many students with learning disabilities use non-academic areas to compensate for their difficulties in the classroom (Cavioni, Grazzani, & Ornaghi, 2017). These areas may include sports and non-academic extra-curricular activities. The combination of healthy friendships and engaging in meaningful activities has a positive impact on any student's social development and proves to sometimes have an even greater impact on students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities can experience difficulties in making meaningful and intimate friendships (Gerhardt et al., 2015; Pham & Murray, 2016). These difficulties could be due, in

part, to social skill deficits and the stigma associated with having a learning disability (Pham & Murray, 2016). Students with a SLD tend to have fewer social interactions than their peers, which may result in a lack of meaningful relationships with peer groups (Riahta & Kurniawati, 2018; Sedgewick, Hill, Yates, Pickering, & Pellicano, 2015). Peer groups are formed, and these groups may socially exclude those who seem to be less popular (Grutter et al., 2017). Students with learning disabilities compare their performance in the classroom with their peers and may consider themselves less valuable due to their differing skill levels (Cavioni et al., 2017). Students identify more positively with their ingroups, and those students in the outgroups become excluded (Grutter et al., 2017).

It has been found that students with disabilities have fewer friends than their peers and that their friends are more likely to be other students with disabilities (Pinto et al., 2019; Schwab, Gebhardt, Krammer, & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2015). Academic success is one area of social importance for these ingroups (Grutter et al., 2017). However, the relationships in a group depend on the value that individuals place on various social attitudes. Even though a child may understand that it is wrong to exclude a student with disabilities, they may place a priority on loyalty to their own group of friends over the harm exclusion that it may have on the other child (Mulvey et al., 2018).

Students with disabilities who also face peer alienation are at a higher risk for failing academically (Abrams & Killen, 2014; Pham & Murray, 2016). Students who are alienated during their youth may have difficulty developing lasting relationships even into adulthood (Abrams & Killen, 2014). Social media also presents the potential for alienation. For example, as students with a reading disability try to write a post on a social network site, they risk negative feedback about writing errors (Reynolds & Wu, 2018). Students with a reading disability may

already struggle to express themselves and can miss the benefits of being well-liked and boosting their self-esteem as a result of social media activity (Reynolds & Wu, 2018). Even though social media behaviors take place outside the classroom, it is important for educators to provide students with disabilities the appropriate interventions that will aid in all areas of their lives.

When viewing friendships through the lens of SIT, the “exclusion of others often arises through a process of ingroup preference” (Abrams & Killen, 2014, p. 4). One study found that non-disabled students may exclude students with disabilities because they are fearful of how their peers will respond if they include these students in social activities (Mulvey et al., 2018). Those who have a disability in the area of reading may feel excluded because they are unable to fit into the norm of school, family, or society (Alexander-Passe, 2016b). Understanding which students are included indicates which students will be excluded (Abrams & Killen, 2014). While the social identity of a student is based on a friend’s social identity, this can lead to broadening the circle of friends within a specific ingroup (Grutter et al., 2016). It is the involvement of a core member of a group that improves a student with a disability’s sense of belonging (Pinto et al., 2019). The broadening of these ingroups can lead to cross-group friendships which serve to bring about a more positive attitude towards those in the outgroup (Grutter et al., 2016).

Inclusive classrooms can be one way to increase student interaction and promote social skills (Petry, 2018). Exposing students with disabilities to settings where they can interact with non-disabled peers gives them opportunities that they may not have if they were in an isolated classroom (Gerhardt et al., 2015). The premise of inclusive classrooms is the belief that by educating students both with and without disabilities in the same classroom, students will be more accepting of those who are different from themselves (Holt, Bowlby, & Lea, 2017; Stiefel et al., 2018). Those students without the opportunity to interact with their nondisabled peers tend

to experience more loneliness than their nondisabled peers (Cavioni et al., 2017). However, students with disabilities may experience challenges in acceptance from their nondisabled peers, especially in the area of social integration (Riahta & Kurniawati, 2018; Schwab et al., 2015). The acceptance of students with disabilities depends on the attitudes of their nondisabled peers (Grutter et al., 2017; Riahta & Kurniawati, 2018). These attitudes are based on the stigma associated with students with disabilities, academic achievement goals, and social opportunities (Cavioni et al., 2017; Riahta & Kurniawati, 2018; Schwab, 2017). Peers who perceive students who have a learning disability as inferior are less likely to include these students into their ingroup (Kiuru et al., 2015; Stiefel et al., 2018). Research has revealed that students without disabilities who have a positive attitude toward students with a learning disability are directly related to developing friendships outside of their ingroup (Grutter et al., 2017). Those students who develop cross-group friendships have a more positive view of those in the outgroup (Cavioni et al., 2017; Grutter et al., 2017).

Additionally, students with disabilities who feel included in the classroom can predict a student's academic self-efficacy (Stiefel et al., 2018). It is essential that students with disabilities not only personally integrate into the classroom setting, but also are fully included with all others within that classroom environment (Pinto et al., 2019). Therefore, teachers need to foster opportunities for friendship development through their inclusive classroom's activities, which requires achieving a common goal (Grutter et al., 2017; Haft et al., 2016; Holt et al., 2017). In this way, students with disabilities will feel better about themselves and, therefore, gain the confidence to focus on academic tasks.

## Summary

According to Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory, people want to belong. As students with a SLD in reading progress through school, they start to see the differences between themselves and their typical peers. These differences can lead to lower self-esteem, lack of motivation, and engagement in risky behavior. While research has examined remediation for students with a reading disability and student self-efficacy and self-esteem, most of the research focuses on elementary and middle school students or college students and adults. The research that has been completed at the high school level has focused on the self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-concept of students with a SLD in reading.

Furthermore, the literature supports the idea that schools have tried to include students with disabilities in the general education setting, hoping to improve both their academic and social skills. While using the inclusion classroom as a way to expose a student to others, this type of classroom is not always best suited for a student with a reading disability and can lead to depression, bullying, and exclusion. Most of the research includes quantitative methods to determine the effects a reading disability has on a student; however, there is little qualitative research to suggest how a reading disability affects high school students and their social identity. The current study filled this gap by listening to the shared self-identity experiences of students with a SLD in reading in order to provide ways to assist these students to create a positive self-identity and enable educators to help reduce at-risk behaviors in this population of students. Understanding their social relationships and social identity is essential to improving not only the self-concept and self-esteem of students with a SLD, but also with their success both in and out of school.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of high school students who have a specific learning disability (SLD) in reading. As outlined in the literature review, despite the numerous studies conducted regarding the implications a reading disability can have on a student, further research is necessary to investigate and determine how the reading disability affects their social identity. Most studies examining students with a reading disability have been quantitative in nature, using numerical data to highlight at-risk factors for students with a SLD in reading (Alexander-Passe, 2016a; McArthur et al., 2016; Panicker & Chelliah, 2016; Stiefel et al., 2018), examining teacher or parent attitudes (Leitao et al., 2017; Musyoka & Clark, 2017) or looking at strategies to improve reading skills (Dierking, 2015; Solis et al., 2015). In contrast, research on the correlation between a student's reading disability and social identity will help educators find ways not only to help students with their reading skills but also to help them avoid at-risk behaviors. This chapter explains the methods that were used to complete this qualitative study, based on Moustakas's (1994) research steps, by describing the overall research design, data collection methods, and process of data analysis.

### Design

Qualitative research is an inquiry process used to understand the "meaning of human action" (Schwandt, 2015). This type of research explores a social or human problem through the use of interviews to create a holistic picture of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is unique in that the researcher is the instrument of inquiry (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, qualitative research tries to make meaning in order to understand the world and



how things work (Patton, 2015). A theoretical framework drives the research while collecting data in the participant's natural setting. The final report gives a voice to the participant and develops themes and patterns through the thick, rich description and interpretation of the problem being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A phenomenological approach was used to study the shared experiences of students with a reading disability and examine how this disability impacts their social identity.

Phenomenological research attempts to gain a deeper understanding between the shared experiences of participants with a common phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1994) stated that the phenomenological approach “involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions . . . that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) explained that phenomenological research describes the way people see the world around them. Instead of interpreting, phenomenology focuses on the thick, rich descriptions of the participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Examining the shared lived experiences of students with a reading disability allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of what these students think and how they navigate through school with their disability.

Transcendental phenomenology focuses on the description of the experience of the phenomenon instead of the researcher's interpretation of it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher views each experience individually, and each experience is considered by itself, so it is “perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Edmund Husserl was instrumental in developing the study of transcendental phenomenology and had a philosophic method that used “subjective openness” instead of the traditional scientific approach (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25). Husserl wanted to understand the meaning and essence of a phenomenon, despite

the fact that most contemporary researchers did not view phenomenology as a valid scientific study. He believed that the shared phenomenon was the basis for all knowledge. Because of this type of knowledge, Husserl's phenomenology is founded on the idea of intentionality, which is the knowledge that a person's world and their self are inseparable elements of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

The primary evidence used in the transcendental approach is the shared experience of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). One aspect of transcendental phenomenology is epoché, which refers to the researcher refraining from judgment and being as objective as possible. The epoché is essential in the research process for the researcher to set aside any bias in order to objectively observe the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994).

A transcendental phenomenological approach as described by Moustakas (1994) was selected for this study because the descriptions of the experiences of students with a reading disability allowed me to explore and to understand the lived experiences of students with a specific learning disability and their social identity. A phenomenological approach also allowed me to seek the meaning and essence of those experiences. By interviewing high school students with a reading disability, educators can learn from these students and determine the best practice for supporting students with a reading disability in the classroom and prepare them for their future.

### **Research Questions**

**CRQ:** What are the lived experiences of high school students with a specific learning disability in reading who read significantly below grade level?

**SQ1:** How do the participants believe their learning disability in reading defines who they are as a person?

**SQ2:** How do the participants believe that their learning disability in the area of reading impacts their identity with their peers who also have a reading disability?

**SQ3:** How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading impacts their identity with their non-disabled peers?

### **Setting**

The researcher purposefully selected participants from multiple high schools in Northeast Ohio for this study. It is essential to use students from different public high schools in order to see if all the participants experience the central phenomenon in the same manner. In the tri-county area, there are 51 public high schools; 31 of those schools are in the most densely populated county (Ohio Department of Education, 2017). This area of Ohio includes urban, suburban, and small-town school districts. By using participants from the various school sizes, I reasoned that the participants would be more typical of all students with a disability in reading (Shenton, 2004). Participants came from a pool of students from high schools in four urban school districts and one suburban school district. Two of the districts, Adams and Buckeye (pseudonyms), granted me permission to recruit students. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I obtained parental permission through email for students from the other three schools. According to the Ohio Department of Education's website (2017), the urban school districts average between 1500-1700 students with approximately 14% of their student population identified as receiving special education services. Pseudonyms for all high schools are provided. One of the urban school districts, Adams City Schools, has one high school, two middle schools, six elementary schools, and one alternative high school. Buckeye City Schools has three high schools, three middle schools, and eight elementary schools. I obtained parental permission for students from the other two urban school districts, Campbell City Schools and Davis City

Schools. Campbell City Schools has one high school, one middle school and two elementary schools, while Davis City Schools has one high school, one middle school and four elementary schools. The suburban school's average attendance is between 680-690 students with about 10% of their student population identified as receiving special education services. Parental permission was also obtained for two students who attended East City Schools, a suburban school district that has one high school, one middle school, one elementary school, and one primary school. Each district is led by their own superintendent. This part of Ohio is very diversified in culture, and students from various backgrounds are represented in the special education programs at these schools.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were selected through purposeful criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants must meet three criteria. First, the students must be a current high school student with a specific learning disability in the area of reading. These students are identified by being substantially below the reading level of their peers who have received the same opportunities in education (Snowling & Hulme, 2012). When a student qualifies for special education, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is developed. An IEP is a written plan for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed yearly, and revised (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Therefore, the second criterion is that each participant must have a current IEP with a reading goal. Third, they must have an IQ of at least 70. The IQ score was determined from the most recent Evaluation Team Report (ETR). The IQ score is necessary to determine if the participants' disability is due to an SLD in reading and is not attributed to an intellectual disability, which is generally defined as an IQ score below 70 (Moll, Kunze, Neuhoff, Bruder, & Schulte-Korne, 2014). Since boys outnumber girls two-to-one in special

education, it would be expected to have more boys than girls as participants (Hulme & Snowling, 2016; Severence & Howell, 2017). From a pool of 540 students on IEPs (Ohio Department of Education, 2017), the sample size included 12 students with a specific learning disability in reading from the participating two school districts, as well as students with parental permission from four other schools. Participants were identified through local school special education departments as well as through parent confirmation. Given the nature of qualitative research, pseudonyms were provided to protect the identity of all participants.

### **Procedures**

Permission from local school districts was obtained so I was able to contact students who qualified for my study (see Appendix B). Next, approval from the Liberty IRB was obtained (see Appendix A). After approval, students with a specific learning disability in reading and their parents were approached for permission to conduct the research (see Appendix D). I then sought assistance from the administration from the different school districts in locating students and parents who fit the criteria for this study. Upon identification, parental permission was sought, and then student assent was obtained. I verified that the selected participants met the requirements of having a specific learning disability in reading, have a current IEP, and have an IQ of at least 70. This information was obtained with parental permission from the most recent ETR. Once the participants were identified, and consent and assent were obtained, the parents and students were provided with the expectations of the study. Due to COVID-19 and the subsequent school closures, my committee and the IRB granted me to use signed parental consent instead of going through the schools. Parent permission and student assent were obtained, and the parents verified that their child met the criteria of my study.

Following parental consent and participant assent, participants were given a disposable

camera with a list of pictures they were to take (see Appendix E). After the students took the pictures, I collected each camera and developed the images. These photos served as a visual record of the social identity of the participant, as well as the ingroup and outgroups of which they are a part. Students were also asked to provide archival data through previously taken photos. These pictures were held in a locked, secure safe until the interview session. Moreover, these images served as a tool that the interviewer used to help guide the beginning of the interview session and ease the participant into the interview. Next, a face-to-face interview was arranged. The interview session consisted of any follow-up questions about the photos, and then the open-ended interview questions focused on the social identity of the participant and helped determine to which ingroups and outgroups the subject belongs (see Appendix F). Finally, the interview was concluded with the word association task (see Appendix G). Each word was connected to the idea of social identity and attitudes towards ingroup and outgroup participation. The data were then decoded to look for recurring words, phrases, or ideas. Codes, categories, and emerging themes were developed through data analysis. I used NVivo to organize, store, and retrieve the data. Through horizontalizing, I examined every statement about the phenomenon as being equal while determining the essence of the meaning (Moustakas, 1994). I then found themes and significant statements in order to develop meanings from those statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I then looked for emerging themes from the data that gave thick, rich descriptions of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The themes and meanings aided in writing a thick, rich description of the data in order to present the essence of the central phenomenon. Data from the pictures, interview, and word association were collected and stored in password-protected computer files and kept in a home safe.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The human instrument was the primary instrument used for this transcendental phenomenological study. Conducting interviews and collecting data required epoché, or the refraining from judgment (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas, epoché requires a “new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn to see what stands before our eyes” (p. 33). It is essential for a novice researcher to understand what biases and experiences they bring to the research. Therefore, the credibility of qualitative research hinges on “the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork—as well as the things going on in a person’s life that might prove to be a distraction” (Patton, 2015, p. 22).

As a researcher, my experiences in teaching special education, my graduate studies, and my role as a parent of a student with a SLD influenced my dissertation goals. I taught elementary education in a private school before accepting a role as an intervention specialist at a local school district. It is relevant to note that my perspective on this study is influenced by my own experience in having two sons who have struggled with reading and were on an IEP throughout most of their school years. At that time, I was homeschooling my sons and could not figure out why I could not teach my middle son to read. I had previously earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education, but after watching my son struggle, I went back to school and earned my master’s in special education. A few years later, my youngest son was also diagnosed with a SLD in reading. Watching my sons struggle in reading has made me compassionate for my students who also struggle in this area.

I have taught high school language arts in a special education classroom for 11 years. Students have come into my classroom with limited reading ability and are asked to perform at grade level proficiency for high stakes testing. As a result of this, my administrator asked me to

develop an intervention reading class at my high school for students who read significantly below grade level. This class focuses on basic reading skills which include decoding skills, vocabulary, and spelling rules. One student came into this class as a freshman and could not even write his alphabet in order. He knew a limited number of sight words and did not know how to sound out any words. After only working with the student for six months, this student is now able to read at a level where he can function within society. He continues to improve and work on his basic reading. The time I have invested in developing the reading skills of both my own children and my students has provided me with the motivation for being objective when listening to the participants in my study.

While collecting data, epoché was used to understand my personal perspective of students with a reading disability (Patton, 2015). I bracketed out my presuppositions about the phenomenon in order to hear the voices of the participants (Patton, 2015). Bracketing is a means of understanding one's experiences without letting that knowledge influence the interpretation of the experiences being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moustakas (1994), "epoché requires the elimination of suppositions and the raising of knowledge about every possible doubt" (p. 26). Therefore, I used journaling to write down my personal biases and suppositions in order to view the participants and their experiences without judgment. In this way, I was able to give a voice to the participants in my study. Bracketing helped me develop an awareness of any assumptions or expectations I had prior to interviewing the participants (Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg, & Pollio, 2017).

### **Data Collection**

For a phenomenological qualitative study, multiple methods of data collection are required. Extensive data collection from numerous sources of information is essential for a



quality study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study used photographs, interviews, and word association techniques to gather rich data from the participants. Since the participants in this study all have a reading disability, the sources for data collection will include both hands-on and verbal techniques.

### **Photographs**

After approval from the IRB was granted and consent and assent forms were signed, I either gave each participant a disposable camera or asked them to text me pictures from the list of prompts either to take pictures or to provide a previously taken photo to be used for this study. Photography allowed the participants to communicate lived experiences and share their lives (Winton, 2016). The purpose of using photographs was not necessarily to analyze the contents of the photos themselves, but rather to document the comments elicited by participants during the interview (Catalani & Minkler, 2009). The use of photography took the focus off the participant and allowed the student to lead the interviewer through their life as it unfolded in the pictures. When an interviewee had a connection with a photograph, it was easier for them to articulate how the photograph represented them, their identity, and how they wish themselves to be represented and understood (Parker, 2009). After compiling the previously taken pictures, I collected their cameras to develop the images. Follow-up questions about their photographs were used in the interview session.

List of pictures to be taken:

1. Take a picture of something that represents who you are.
2. Take a picture of your favorite color.
3. Take a picture of you doing something that you are good at doing.
4. Take a picture of something you wish you could do better.

5. Take a picture of something that makes you anxious.
6. Take a picture of something that makes you calm or comfortable.
7. Take a picture of a location where you have met most of your friends.
8. Take a picture of how you think others view you.
9. Take a picture of how you want others to view you.

Photos previously taken that participants brought with them to the interview (archival data):

1. Provide a previously taken picture of or with your group of school friends.
2. Provide a previously taken a picture of a group of friends you hang out with outside of school (if different).
3. Provide a previously taken picture of your friend who is most like you.
4. Provide a previously taken picture of a friend who is very different from you.

The pictures were designed to let the participant communicate their lived experiences through photography. Of the pictures students were to take with their camera, the first six photos focused on the personal identity of the participant. People tend to compare themselves to others based on the similarities and differences others have to one's self (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Stets & Burke, 2000). Moreover, photo seven of the images taken by the participants, as well as the four archival photos focused on the ingroup of the student. A person's definition of their self-identity is comprised of distinguishable characteristics of the groups to which they belong (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). Finally, pictures eight and nine targeted how the participant viewed the outgroup. Comparing the differences between the outgroup and the individual validates one's ingroup. For the members of an ingroup to dislike an outgroup, they must first have a strong sense of fitting in with their group, which is distinctly different from the outgroup that they dislike (Tajfel, 1974).

After the pictures were compiled, the participants were asked to schedule an interview. During the interview, I asked follow-up questions about the pictures to gain a clearer understanding of the participants' social identities.

Follow-up questions for photographs

1. Tell me about this picture.
2. Why did you choose this color, activity, place, or group of friends?

### **Interview**

After completing the photographs, I conducted a face-to-face taped interview with each of the participants. The interview consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions that focused on their experiences and lives as students with a specific learning disability in reading. In a phenomenological study, the interview should be informal and interactive, using open-ended questions (Moustakas, 1994). The interview should open with a social conversation creating a relaxed atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a little bit about who you are.
2. What grade are you in at school? (If not answered in question one)
3. What is an IEP? Why is an IEP used? How do you know this?
4. What is your favorite part of school? Least favorite part of school? Why?
5. What do you like to do outside of school?
6. What do you think are your strengths (in school and out of school)?
7. What is something you wish you could do better? Why?
8. Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?
9. Tell me about your group of friends.

10. How would your friends describe your reading strengths and weaknesses? How does your struggle with reading affect your friendships?
11. What type of activities do you and your friends like to do together?
12. What are you and your group of friends known for by others?
13. How are you and your friends alike? Different?
14. Which one of your friends is the most like you? How?
15. Which one of your friends is the least like you? How?
16. How did you meet your friends?
17. How long have you been friends?
18. Name a group from your school in which you would not want to be a part. Why?
19. If you could be part of a different group of friends, what would that group of friends be? Why?

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to obtain details about the participant's social identity as a person, as a group member, and as an outgroup member. Questions one through eight focused on the personal identity of the participant. Each question allowed the participant to give identifying characteristics to them. Each of these questions looked at how a person is unique. Questions nine through 17 focused on the ingroup identity of the participant. The last two questions focused on the outgroup identity of the participant. These questions helped identify the ingroup and outgroup for the participants (Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel, 1974). The participants' answers provided an understanding of the phenomenon and how it affects the participants' lives (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Word Association**

After the interview, I asked each participant a series of 13 words and asked them to tell

me what each word made them think. In a word association technique, the participants are asked to respond with the first word or words that come to mind when they hear the word given by the researcher. Furthermore, word association is used as a way to collect data on a participant's perceptions toward more delicate topics (Tang, 2009). Since a reading disability and a student's social identity are topics that can be sensitive, word association is a way to illicit more information that the interview may not be able to reveal. The word association model provides the researcher with information about the participants' way of thinking and relating to the words given (Nielsen, 2001). It has been found that word association techniques are able to "grasp affective and less conscious aspects of respondents' mindsets better than methods that use more direct questioning" (Roininen, Arvola, & Lahteenmaki, 2004, p. 21). When analyzing the data, the researcher looked for synonyms to see which words or phrases were used more frequently. This type of analysis allowed the researcher to find the commonalities between participants (Tang, 2009).

#### Word Association List

1. (participant's name)
2. School
3. IEP
4. free time
5. anxiety
6. calm
7. friends
8. best friend
9. video games

10. sports
11. reading
12. books
13. popular

The word association activity gave the researcher insight into the thinking process of the participants in relation to their social identity. The diversity of responses to a keyword helped determine the participants' understanding and perception of the subject (Yucel & Ozkan, 2015). The first six words examined the personal self-identity of the participant. Words seven through 10 focused on the ingroup of the participant. Finally, words 11 through 13 considered the outgroup identity of the participant. This method helped the researcher identify how the participants obtained their identity from the social groups to which they belong (Hogg & Adams, 1989).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis took place using the phenomenological data analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994). Typically, phenomenological investigations use interviews as the primary source of data collection. These interviews used open-ended questions in an informal and interactive setting. Even though the researcher had interview questions that she had created ahead of time, each person's experience is different, so the researcher, at times, needed to vary the questions to obtain the participant's full story (Moustakas, 1994).

The organization of the data starts when the researcher begins to look at the transcriptions of the interview through a process called horizontalizing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used Temi to transcribe the interviews and then personally went through each interview to check for accuracy. Horizontalizing is looking at every statement about the

phenomenon as being equal while the researcher seeks the essence of the meaning (Moustakas, 1994). After the horizontalizing, statements were reduced to those statements that “contain a moment of the experience that is necessary” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The researcher then generated themes using NVivo and significant statements to develop clusters of meanings from those statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher looks at the transcripts to “determine the significant, relevant, and invariant meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 130) to describe each participant's experience. Through the clustering process, statements that are related become the core themes of the phenomenon. Themes then emerge from the data that allow for thick, rich descriptions of the experience, which turns into meanings and essences of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then writes a description of the participants' experiences. Moustakas described the final step of a phenomenological study as synthesizing the data into a “fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon” (p. 100). The researcher uses a written form using thick, rich description to present the essence of the central phenomenon of the study.

One of the challenges of phenomenological research is bracketing out one's personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of phenomenological research is to describe the experiences of the phenomenon as it is, and not how the researcher would interpret the experience (Gall et al., 2007). This process called bracketing, or epoché, is when the researcher sets aside his/her own experiences as much as possible, to get a fresh look at the central phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A Greek word, epoché means to “refrain from judgment” (Patton, 2015, p. 575). Epoché provides the challenge for researchers to “create new ideas, new feelings, new awarenesses and understanding” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). Another challenge is carefully choosing participants who have all experienced the chosen phenomenon for the study.

Finding participants who have all experienced the central phenomenon may be difficult to locate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants must be willing to participate in an interview process and grant permission for the researcher to publish the data collected.

A transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because it sought to understand the shared experiences of high school students with a disability in reading as it impacts their lives inside and outside of school. This transcendental phenomenological study utilized interviews, photography, and word association. Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenological research focuses on the shared phenomenon of the participants. Before the interview process, I used journaling to set aside my personal biases, so my thoughts did not direct the interview (Moustakas, 1994). The photographs, interview questions, and word association process all addressed the same series of questions while using three different methods. The use of multiple methods of data collection resulted in triangulation of the data. Triangulation is how a researcher explores the different perspectives of the same phenomenon (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Photographs were analyzed alongside the interview. The transcripts of the participants' narratives about their pictures were analyzed using coding (Shortt & Warren, 2017). Many of the interview questions were similar to the pictures the participants were asked to take. By using interviews, photography, and word association, I was able to find common themes using NVivo, a service that helps organize, store, and retrieve the researcher's data. I looked for common words, phrases, and ideas regarding how students with a disability in the area of reading interact with their peers, which gave meaning to their experiences in school and out of school. These common words, phrases, and ideas were then organized into themes.



## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness increases the rigor of a qualitative study. This is achieved through credibility, dependability, and transferability (Patton, 2015). Through the use of triangulation of data, member checking, an audit trail, and thick, descriptive data trustworthiness was attained.

### **Credibility**

Credibility is likened to internal validity, which seeks to ensure that the methods used for the study test what is intended (Shenton, 2004). Gathering descriptive information from the participants to provide a clear picture of the phenomenon increased the credibility of this study. Member checking allowed the participants an opportunity to approve the interpretation of the data they provided (Carlson, 2010). Since the participants in this study all have a reading disability, member checking created some challenges. Participants were given a choice regarding transcript approval. Participants were offered hard copies, electronic copies, audio copies, or had someone read the transcripts to them (Carlson, 2010).

Triangulation was also used to increase credibility. Furthermore, multiple data sources were used to provide corroborating evidence. According to Carlson (2010), if researchers can substantiate the various data with each other, then “the interpretations and conclusions drawn from them are likely to be trustworthy” (p. 1104). The three data sources for this study—the photographs, the interview, and the word association activity—were compared for cross-comparison to ensure what was said in the interview was comparable with the photographs and word association.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability authenticate the data and ensure that the study is well documented. To provide dependability, the way in which the research is completed should be

reported in detail so others may replicate the work (Shenton, 2014). Confirmability is ensuring that the study's findings are "the results of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). An audit trail is documenting the process by which the researcher reaches their final findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used memoing to create an audit trail for this study. Memoing began with the first reading of the transcripts. The use of memoing helped document the development of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Transferability**

Transferability is the ability to assess if the findings may be true of other people in different settings, using the same methods of research (Shenton, 2004). It is the researcher's responsibility to provide readers with enough information about the study and how the findings of the study might be transferred to other settings (Schwandt, 2015). Transferability is increased with rich, thick, and deep descriptions of the study so those reading the study can determine whether they can apply the findings elsewhere (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, 2014). Strong action verbs, direct quotes, and interrelated data were used to provide details about the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the study to be transferable, the researcher provided sufficient details about the study, so that the reader can make their own judgment as to whether the findings apply to other settings with similar circumstances (Schwandt, 2015).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were given throughout the entire process of this study. Moreover, ethical considerations took place during the planning, the research, and the presentation phases of this study. Liberty IRB approval was obtained before beginning any data collection for this study in order to protect all participants from any undue harm.

Prior to any data collection, parental consent was given before talking to high school students and receiving their assent. Additionally, participants were not pressured to participate. Since the phenomenon is of a personal nature, participants and their parents understood that no information gathered from the research would be given to their schools except what is published in the findings. Transcripts were transcribed using an online program called Temi and then I went through each transcript to verify accuracy of each transcript. Students were given the opportunity to listen to the interview to correct any misrepresentation of intended messages from their interview. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all the participants. Interview transcripts and audio files were being stored on a password-protected personal computer. Photographs taken by the participants were being kept in a locked file cabinet. The identities of the people in each picture were being kept confidential, and all photos will be destroyed after the study is complete.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three explains the methods and processes for the research regarding the social-identity of high school students with a SLD in reading, including the researcher's role, data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. I used a transcendental phenomenological approach to answer the research questions which sought to find the essence of social-identity for students with a reading disability. The process outlined by Moustakas (1994) guided the analysis of the data and focused on the shared experience of the participants. In order to seek meaning, triangulation was used to examine multiple data sources including photography, interviews using open-ended questions, and a word association activity to answer the central research question. Before the interview process, I used epoché, or bracketing, to ensure that I looked at the data with fresh eyes. Detailed methods were implemented throughout this study to

increase trustworthiness through the use of strategies that addressed credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Furthermore, ethical considerations were considered throughout the study to protect the rights of the participants and the data. Next, Chapter Four lists the findings of the study, including specific results from the multiple forms of data collection.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences and social identity of high school students with a disability in reading. Gall, Gall, and Borg, (2007) defined phenomenology as “the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they lay aside the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit their immediate experiences of the phenomena” (p. 495). A phenomenological study details the lived experiences for a group of individuals who share a common phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study aimed to find a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and its impact on the students who experienced it.

Chapter Four will present the results of the data analysis and use thick, rich descriptions to allow the voices of the participants to resonate. Data analysis using phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) illustrates the themes across the data collection methods used in this study. I had the participants participate in a face-to-face interview, take photographs from a list of prompts, and finally complete a word association activity. The interview was semi-structured and designed to prompt the students to open up and share their stories. Showing me their photographs put the participants at ease and letting them describe their pictures made it easier for them to share some of their thoughts. The word association activity brought the interview to a close; however sometimes the words would trigger a thought and the students would expound on their response. The chapter concludes with textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon from the 12 participants who took part in this study.

## Participants

A selection of 12 high school students participated in this study. All participants in the study were enrolled in a local high school and had a current IEP with a reading goal. The participants represented five different schools. Eight of the students came from school districts that helped recruit students. The other four students were recruited by using social media and word of mouth. The demographics of the participants may be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

### *Participant Demographic Data*

Student Name*	Grade	School*	Age	Ethnicity
Asia	12 <sup>th</sup>	Adams High School	17	African American
Brittany	9 <sup>th</sup>	Buckeye High School	14	Caucasian
Chuck	10 <sup>th</sup>	Adams High School	17	Caucasian
Donnie	11 <sup>th</sup>	Adams High School	17	Caucasian
Ethan	10 <sup>th</sup>	Adams High School	15	Caucasian
Frankie	10 <sup>th</sup>	Adams High School	16	Caucasian
Gabby	10 <sup>th</sup>	Campbell High School	16	African American
Hailey	9 <sup>th</sup>	Davis High School	14	Caucasian
Isaiah	11 <sup>th</sup>	Adams High School	17	African American
Jenny	9 <sup>th</sup>	Elliot High School	15	Latino
Kylie	11 <sup>th</sup>	Adams High School	17	African American
Luke	11 <sup>th</sup>	Elliot High School	16	Caucasian

\*pseudonyms

I started my recruitment process by contacting local schools to help identify possible participants. After the school closures due to Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19), I utilized social media and word of mouth to recruit my final four participants. I obtained parental consent and student assent before setting up interviews. Students were given a list of photos to take before the interview. Due to COVID-19, most of the interviews were conducted through Zoom, and instead of using disposable cameras, students either emailed or texted their pictures to me

prior to the interview. No participants withdrew from the study. The following is a description of each student who participated in the study. Pseudonyms are used to ensure the participants' confidentiality is not compromised.

### **Asia**

Asia is a 17-year-old senior at Adams High School. Asia is on an IEP for reading and received her instruction for reading in the special education classroom. She was a member of the dance team her senior year. When asked to describe herself, Asia said, "I'm a funny, loving, respectful person. I love kids. I love doing work. Um, let me see. Uh, I love to reach my goals." One of those goals is to become a pediatric nurse.

### **Brittany**

Brittany is a 14-year-old freshman at Buckeye High School. Brittany is on an IEP for reading and receives all of her instruction in the special education classroom. She is involved in band and plays the flute in her high school band. Brittany would like to become a nurse "to help other people." She also finds reading "boring" because the "words are too hard and too, too many. They make me dizzy."

### **Chuck**

Chuck is a 17-year-old sophomore at Adams High School. Chuck receives his instruction for reading in the special education classroom. When talking about his participation on the football team, Chuck stated, "I actually made varsity last year, but I got in trouble because I wasn't eligible because I had a bad grade. I worked hard all summer too. I felt it was just so bad, but my grades are a lot better now." He claims he is "down to earth" and wants to "look for jobs where I don't, . . . that I have to rely on school, but more, you know, like hard work, work ethic . . . hands-on type of stuff."

**Donny**

Donny is a 17-year-old junior at Adams High School. He receives his instruction for his reading goal in the special education classroom. Donny is a member of the high school football team and is in a vocational program for auto mechanics. He described himself as “a keep to myself kind of dude.” He said that he does not “do well in like large settings of people. I realize that I like to stay in my own corner, keep to myself, and don’t worry about anything that’s going on.”

**Ethan**

Ethan is a 15-year-old sophomore at Adams High School. He also receives his specialized instruction for reading in the special education classroom. He hopes to get into the construction program at his high school and become a carpenter. Ethan recognized his weakness in reading, saying, “I don’t like stop after the period for like a second and then probably like pronouncing the words.”

**Frankie**

Frankie is a 16-year-old sophomore at Adams High School. He is on an IEP with a reading goal and receives his instruction for reading in the special education classroom setting. Frankie is a member of Boy Scouts and hopes to become an Eagle Scout one day. He loves professional baseball and football. When talking about friends, Frankie stated, “I would like more friends than I do.”

**Gabby**

Gabby is a 16-year-old sophomore at Campbell High School. She receives specialized instruction for her reading goal in the regular education setting. She also has an intervention specialist who is responsible for specialized instruction per her IEP. When asked about her



strengths, Gabby stated, “I’m a good listener.” After high school, Gabby wants to attend college. She also enjoys swimming and staying at home because “I really don’t go nowhere other than my one friend’s house.”

### **Hailey**

Hailey is a 14-year-old freshman at Davis High School. She has an IEP with a reading goal and receives her instruction for reading in the regular education classroom. She also has an intervention period where she receives additional help. While Hailey participates in sports and various clubs at her school, she mentioned that they “all intertwine together somehow” in that many of her friends or their siblings are in these different groups, “so they all come together in a way.” When asked about her plans, after high school, Hailey commented, “I’ve been thinking about becoming an interior designer. I love decorating.”

### **Isaiah**

Isaiah is a 17-year-old junior at Adams High School. He is in a co-taught language arts class where he receives specialized instruction for his reading goal. He also has a tutor to help with his IEP goals. Isaiah was new to Adams High School but felt like he was not able to make as many friends “because the school was closed” due to COVID-19. His closest friends come from his previous school. His favorite class is English because “we do a lot of fun stuff” and have a lot of “activity.” For a future career, Isaiah would like to become a disc jockey (DJ) and run his own studio. In 10 years, he hopes to “be making millions.”

### **Jenny**

Jenny is a 15-year-old freshman at Elliot High School. She has a reading goal and receives instruction for her goals in the regular education class. It should be noted that English is a second language for Jenny, but she no longer receives services in this area. When describing

herself, Jenny stated that “If I know people, I’m loud, and if I don’t, I’m quiet.” Her favorite part of school is “lunchtime.” When talking about reading, Jenny expressed that she does not like to read aloud because “I sound like a robot.”

### **Kylie**

Kylie is a 17-year-old junior at Adams High School. She is on an IEP with a reading goal and receives reading instruction in the special education classroom. Kylie has her future planned. After high school, she wants to “spend some time with the kids a little bit. Go down to my hometown in North Carolina . . . and my brother [will] help me get ready to go into the army.” After she gets out of the army, she wants to go to college “to be a police officer or be like a nurse to work with babies.”

### **Luke**

Luke is a 16-year-old junior at Elliot High School. He receives his instruction for his reading goal in the special education setting. Luke has participated in soccer and wrestling but is no longer a part of those teams. He is also a part of a vocational program in masonry. After high school, Luke wants to work in construction. When asked about something that would represent him, he showed me a picture of his work boots because he is a “hard worker.” His favorite part of school is his study skills class, so “I can hang out with my friends.” His least favorite part of school is “talking.” He does not like to be called on because “I don’t like talking out loud.” When asked if he could pick any seat in a classroom to sit in, where would it be, Luke quickly replied, “The back.”

## **Results**

The transcripts of the one-on-one interviews and the word association activity, along with the photographs, provided a wealth of data for analysis for this phenomenological study.

Throughout the data collection process, I used Moustakas's (1994) process for phenomenological reduction to bracket my personal feelings before data analysis. I needed to understand my presuppositions in order to hear the voice of my participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), bracketing is defined as understanding one's experiences without letting that knowledge influence the interpretation of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, I used journaling as a way to bracket my personal feelings prior to interviews and before data analysis. As a special education teacher and as a mother of children with reading disabilities, I needed to set aside my thoughts and feelings, so I could focus on the study and remove as much personal bias as possible regarding students with a disability in reading and their social identity.

### **Theme Development**

After receiving parental consent and student assent, I gave each participant a list of pictures to take. These pictures were taken either on a provided disposable camera or on the participant's cell phone and then sent to me before the interview. Next, a time was set up for the face-to-face interview. The interviews started with a discussion about the participants' photographs, followed by the 19 interview questions. I then proceeded with the word association activity in which students were given 13 words and were to tell me the first word or phrase that came to mind. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes to one hour. I was able to complete four interviews in person, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, the rest of the interviews were conducted using Zoom. I used a mini voice recorder to record my interviews. I tested the recorder before each interview for functionality and sound. After each interview, I immediately downloaded the content from the voice recorder onto my personal laptop. My laptop and the voice recorder were securely locked in my house when I was not conducting interviews. The responses to the

interviews were transcribed using Temi software. I combed through each transcript to verify the accuracy of the conversations and made corrections before I coded and added the data analysis.

Instead of just using coding on the word association activity, I used cut-up printed transcripts so I could visualize the responses to each word. Each participant's transcript was printed on a different color of paper. I then cut out the section of each one used for the word association activity and was able to look at each word individually. Moreover, I analyzed each word separately and created a list of words and phrases each student used. I was then able to identify common themes within each of those words.

I used NVivo to organize the data. This program was able to record my codes and allowed me to save participants' statements under each code. Through this process, I was able to identify shared experiences and identify which participants shared those experiences. After horizontalization, I established meaningful clusters that formed emerging themes. I was then able to set aside and exclude information that was not essential to the research. I compared identified themes from each set of data collection, such as comparing the themes of the photographs to the personal interviews and to word association activity. Table 2 outlines the specific photographs, interview questions, and word association terms as it is associated with the specific research question. The top six themes that emerged were: (a) positive self-concept, (b) insecurity, (c) anxiety, (d) commonality, (e) social dynamics, and (f) maximizing differences.

Table 2

*Research Questions Alignment with Data Points*

SRQ	Photographs	Interview	Word Association
SRQ 1: How do the participants believe	Take a picture of something that represents who you are.	Tell me a little bit about who you are.	(participant's name)

<p>their learning disability in reading defines who they are as a person?</p>	<p>Take a picture of your favorite color.</p> <p>Take a picture of you doing something that you are good at doing.</p> <p>Take a picture of something you wish you could do better.</p> <p>Take a picture of something that makes you anxious.</p> <p>Take a picture of something that makes you calm or comfortable.</p>	<p>What grade are you in at school? (If not answered in question one)</p> <p>What is an IEP? Why is an IEP used? How do you know this?</p> <p>What is your favorite part of school? Least favorite part of school? Why?</p> <p>What do you like to do outside of school?</p> <p>What do you think are your strengths (in school and out of school)?</p> <p>What is something you wish you could do better? Why?</p> <p>Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?</p>	<p>School</p> <p>IEP</p> <p>free time</p> <p>anxiety</p> <p>calm</p>
<p>SRQ 2: How do the participants believe that their learning disability in the area of reading impacts their identity with their peers who also have a learning disability in reading?</p>	<p>Take a picture of a location where you have met most of your friends.</p> <p>Provide a previously taken picture of or with your group of school friends.</p> <p>Provide a previously taken a picture of a group of friends you</p>	<p>Tell me about your group of friends.</p> <p>How would your friends describe your reading strengths and weaknesses? How does your struggle with reading affect your friendships?</p> <p>What type of</p>	<p>friends</p> <p>best friend</p> <p>video games</p> <p>sports</p>

	<p>hang out with outside of school (if different).</p> <p>Provide a previously taken picture of your friend who is most like you.</p> <p>Provide a previously taken picture of a friend who is very different from you.</p>	<p>activities do you and your friends like to do together?</p> <p>What are you and your group of friends known for by others?</p> <p>How are you and your friends alike? Different?</p> <p>Which one of your friends is the most like you? How?</p> <p>Which one of your friends is the least like you? How?</p> <p>How did you meet your friends?</p> <p>How long have you been friends?</p>	
<p>SRQ 3: How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading impacts their identity with their non-disabled peers?</p>	<p>Take a picture of how you think others view you.</p> <p>Take a picture of how you want others to view you.</p>	<p>Name a group from your school in which you would not want to be a part. Why?</p> <p>If you could be part of a different group of friends, what would that group of friends be? Why?</p>	<p>reading</p> <p>books</p> <p>popular</p>

### Research Question One

The first research question, “How do the participants believe their learning disability in reading defines who they are as a person?” aimed at finding the personal social identity of

students with a disability in reading. Three themes were revealed after a thorough analysis: (a) positive self-concept, (b) insecurity, and (c) anxiety as seen in Table 3.

Table 3

*Open-Codes and Themes in Light of Research Question Number One*

Open Codes	Frequency of open-code appearance across all data point	Theme
Self-description Strengths Favorite part of school Out of school activity Future plans	143	Positive Self-Concept
Want to improve IEP/learning skills Least favorite part of school	70	Insecurity
Anxiety Reading skills	39	Anxiety

**Positive self-concept.** Throughout the interview sessions and looking at the photographs submitted, the students repeatedly indicated that they had a positive self-image. All of the participants used words with a positive connotation when asked how they viewed themselves. For example, Hailey replied, “I’m just like a positive person. I always look at the bright side of things” (Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020). Asia’s response was, “I’m a funny, loving, respectful person” (Asia, Personal Interview, March 31, 2020). During the word association activity, words such as “sweet,” “nice,” “kind,” and “happy” were mentioned repeatedly. Chuck described himself as “down to earth” (Chuck, Personal Interview, February 13, 2020), while Chuck and Hailey both responded that they like to live “in the moment” (Chuck, Personal Interview, February 13, 2020; Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020).

One student, Luke, had two pictures that represented him. The first was a pair of dirty, worn, work boots, and the other was a picture of peanuts. He told me that the work boots represented him because he is “a hard worker, and that’s who I am” (Luke Personal Interview, June 11, 2020). When I asked him about the peanuts, his reply was, “I’m always in a shell” (Luke, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020). Even though he viewed himself as a loner, he still had positive thoughts about himself.

When asked about future plans, most of the students knew what they wanted to do after high school. Four students said they wanted to go to college. Six students indicated that they would like to have a career in a trade such as construction or mechanics. One freshman student did not know what she would like to pursue as a future career, and one stated she wanted to join the military. Asia, Brittany, and Kylie all want to go into nursing, while Hailey and Gabby are interested in interior design. Kylie plans to join the military and then go to college. Ethan, Franky, and Luke want a career in construction, whereas Chuck and Donny are looking into a career in mechanics. Isaiah wants to become a DJ and own a studio. Jenny is unsure what she would like to do after high school, although her mom has told her that she is not allowed to leave high school without first enrolling in one of the tech programs offered at her school. Each of these students exhibited a positive self-image and was able to set long-term goals. They all had a reading disability, and yet they were able to see beyond their disability and exhibit a healthy self-image.

**Insecurity.** While the participants had a positive self-concept, they also revealed their insecurities. The insecurities stemmed mostly from experiences at school, which prompted these students to either try to blend into the background or to keep the attention off of themselves because they do not want to have a vocal presence in the classroom. Several of the students



spoke of not wanting to be the center of attention. Chuck addressed his lack of confidence in school when asked what he thought when he heard the word “IEP” by replying, “It’s kind of a burden, . . . I hate, you know, getting help, asking for help. I hate that” (Chuck, Personal Interview, February 13, 2020). Jenny commented that she does not like to be around people, and “I like to be in my own little bubble” (Jenny, Personal Interview, June 10, 2020). She also commented that when in the classroom, “I’m more of a hermit, I don’t talk to people that much” (Jenny, Personal Interview, June 10, 2020). Even though he was on the football team, Donny commented, “I just don’t like attention drawn towards me . . . I just don’t like a lot of attention” (Donny, Personal Interview, January 30, 2020).

While in school, several students revealed that they struggle with being in a classroom. When asked what the worst part of school was, Luke replied, “talking” (Luke Personal Interview, June 11, 2020). When I pressed him about his answer, he told me that he does not like to be called on and is worried he might get an answer wrong.

Several students commented that they did not like reading aloud. Brittany claimed that reading is boring because “the words are boring” (Brittany, Personal Interview, March 4, 2020). When asked to explain, she stated that “words are hard to read” (Brittany, Personal Interview, March 4, 2020). Ethan echoed Brittany’s thoughts when he stated that he did not like his regular education classes because when reading, the words were “more difficult. . . and longer words” (Ethan, Personal Interview, June 2, 2020). Hailey stated, “I don’t really like reading out loud cause I’m a lot better reading to myself and going at my pace. . . if I’m reading like a book out loud at school, that’s something else” (Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020). Jenny said that she “sounds like a robot” when she reads out loud (Jenny, Personal Interview, June 10, 2020). Gabby continued this theme when she stated, “When I start to read out loud or in big groups, I

start to stutter. I don't like it, I get scared and I don't want to do it" (Gabby, Personal Interview, June 4, 2020). As students start to notice a difference between their reading ability and the reading ability of their non-disabled peers, they often develop a lack of confidence in school (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Girli & Ozturk, 2017).

**Anxiety.** Several of the students presented school-related pictures for what made them feel anxious. For example, Gabby and Asia had pictures of a test, while Luke and Kylie showed pictures of their schools. Asia discussed how distance learning during the school closure caused her stress and anxiety. She said, "All the work. It's like more work than it was in school. . . this is too much!" (Asia, Personal Interview, March 31, 2020). Hailey was a bit more specific with a picture of an online class she was taking. She was taking an online course and was having difficulty with the program. When asked to explain her picture, she replied, "I had no problem with online learning until I got that program" (Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020). Kylie talked about her anxiety when she was asked to read aloud in class. She said,

I know how to read, but it's like, I can't read in front of people where I'm gonna get anxiety. I was scared to read, even though it was a little class, everybody knew each other, everybody was in there for a specific reason . . . but it was just still like, you know, it was just, I still couldn't. Even though they had trouble reading too. (Kylie, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020)

Franky claimed he worries when he needs to take a test. He explained that "Some of the questions are hard, I guess" (Franky, Personal Interview, June 3, 2020). Isaiah talked about how he became frustrated in his chemistry class. He stated, "I got irritated one day and walked out of class" (Isaiah, Personal Interview, June 9, 2020). He went on to explain that when something was hard to understand, it caused frustration, and "then I get stressed out" (Isaiah, Personal

Interview, June 9, 2020). A lack of confidence regarding the learning process may cause students with a SLD to have higher levels of anxiety (Jensen et al., 2019), and the students in this study confirmed this.

### **Research Question Two**

The second research question, “How do the participants believe that their learning disability in the area of reading impacts their identity with their peers who also have a learning disability in reading?” was designed to determine the students’ ingroup and how that impacts their social identity. Two major themes emerged after thoroughly analyzing the data: commonality and social dynamics. However, within the overarching theme of commonalities emerged two minor themes: (a) common interests, and (b) academic challenges as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

#### *Open-Codes and Themes in Light of Research Question Number Two*

Open Codes	Frequency of open-code appearance across all data point	Theme
Friend description Friend similarities and activities	50	Commonality Common interests
Impact of reading on friendships	12	Academic challenges
Fitting in Impact of reading on friendships How we are different	32	Social Dynamics

**Commonality.** People are naturally drawn toward others who are similar to themselves.

Having similar interests helps to create each person’s ingroup. Under the umbrella of

commonality, moreover, two subgroups were identified. Therefore, shared interests and academic challenges represented the two subthemes. Except for Jenny, all the other students met their friends at school. Jenny's best friend is homeschooled and lives in her neighborhood.

***Common interests.*** When asked about their shared activities, Asia commented that “My best friend, we are alike. We like doing sleepovers together. We like watching movies. We both like to shop” (Asia, Personal Interview, March 31, 2020). Isaiah stated, “We both like music. We're all into music” (Isaiah, Personal Interview, June 9, 2020). Jenny made the general comment that “we all like the same stuff” (Jenny, Personal Interview, June 10, 2020). Ethan's response went a bit further when he said, “We all just like, kind of act the same in some sort of way” (Ethan, Personal Interview, June 2, 2020). Donny continued this thought when he laughed and said, “We all do the same stupid stuff when we get together” (Donny, Personal Interview, January 30, 2020).

When prompted during the word association activity to say the first word(s) they thought of when they heard the term “friends,” the participants replied with words such as “fun,” “hang-out,” and “crazy.” When asked what activities they did together, Chuck, Isaiah, Donny, and Kylie responded by saying that they hang out together. Gabby and Hailey both mentioned going swimming with their friends. Jenny expressed drawing together. Donny mentioned that he enjoys fishing with his friends. Asia, Brittany, Chuck, Donny, Gabby, and Hailey all mentioned participating in sports with their closest friends. In addition to that, Brittany was excited to show me a picture of her friend who participated with her on a community swim team. Even though this friend was younger than her, and they attended different schools, the common interest of swimming competitively built their friendship. The idea that each participant had developed friendships with others that have a similar personality and similar interests or had built their

friendship through competition was a common thread throughout the interviews and word association activity.

**Academic challenges.** Another commonality was that many of the participants' friends were in the same classes, and many had the same struggles in reading. When Luke showed me a picture of his friend that was the most like him, he told me that, "He has trouble reading, too" (Luke, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020). I asked Gabby how her friends viewed her reading ability, and she replied, "We are in it together" (Gabby, Personal Interview, June 4, 2020). When asked the same question, Donny stated, "It doesn't really matter. Me and [friend's name], we sit in class, and we text each other. Since I know everyone in the class, it's easier to trust them" (Donny, Personal Interview, January 30, 2020). Additionally, Asia, Ethan, Kylie, and Luke mentioned that most of their friends came from their special education classes. Hailey is in all regular education classes and had a slightly different take on how her reading disability impacted her friendships. Hailey put it best when asked if her friends knew she was on an IEP and how they viewed her reading skills when she said, "Most of them know . . . They like to think about, they're like, okay, like she's a pretty good reader, but like, does she really need it? And I'm like, sometimes. They just like, let it be" (Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020).

**Social dynamics.** While there were many commonalities between friends, there were also some differences. The second major theme in this section looked at the social dynamics of the participants and their ingroup. Most of the data for this section came from the face-to-face or Zoom interviews. Ethan commented that the difference between him and his friends is that "We all have different weaknesses" (Ethan, Personal Interview, June 2, 2020). Franky stated that his one friend "is more serious than the other" (Franky, Personal Interview, June 3, 2020). Jenny

spoke to the differences in their academic skills when she said, “I’d say that they are a lot smarter than I am because I don’t always get what they’re talking about” (Jenny, Personal Interview, June 10, 2020). Moreover, Jenny went on to say that while she likes to be quiet and keep to herself, one of her friends is “more of a social butterfly” (Jenny, Personal Interview, June 10, 2020). Similarly, Luke stated that his one friend “likes to talk more” (Luke, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020).

Some of the participants and their friends embrace their differences. For example, Chuck told me,

Some people are more outgoing, some people are more, you know, introverted, extroverted. Um, and I think, I think that’s why we work together, because a lot of us are able to like kinda feed off each other, and we like to feed off each other’s energy. (Chuck, Personal Interview, February 13, 2020)

Chuck went on to say,

I have like two basic groups. It’s more or less, it’s my friends who were kind of obnoxious and loud, kinda like myself, but, and then there’s like the quiet, like chill, cool-out group, which is, um, the main group I try to hang out with. (Chuck, Personal Interview, February 13, 2020)

Hailey also talked about the numerous groups of which she is a part. She said,

It’s basically a group. Like I have this different type of friends from my, um, from my school group, cause I have volleyball, I have lacrosse, I have ski club, and like obviously have drama club, but they all intertwined together somehow. Cause like one of my other friends, her sister plays volleyball, and like some, my other friends have sisters and brothers that play lacrosse and stuff like that.

So, they all like come together in a way. (Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020)

Another social dynamic was created when some of the participants joined a new ingroup. Entering into a new group of friends was not always easy for them. For example, when Asia decided to join the dance team at school, she said,

It was kind of weird, a little bit like, on a first time, like getting to know everybody, cause you know, it was kind of a little awkward. But then when we started having practices, and we started getting to know each other, it wasn't uncomfortable for me. (Asia, Personal Interview, March 31, 2020)

Donny mentioned that, "I don't talk to anyone new that I don't really have to. May sound funny, but I play football, but I don't, I don't talk to any of the football players when we aren't in season" (Donny, Personal Interview, January 30, 2020). Gabby echoed Donny's thoughts as she talked about her volleyball team. She said, "They are all in like accelerated classes. I think of them as friends, but like outside of volleyball, we don't hang out" (Gabby, Personal Interview, June 4, 2020). While some of the participants had very small friend groups, some were able to cross into other groups and had a wider range of friends.

### **Research Question Three**

The third research question, "How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading impacts their identity with their non-disabled peers?" was created to evaluate the students' outgroup. This question focused on groups of which the student may or may not want to be a part. After a thorough analysis of the data, the central theme of maximizing differences was identified as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Open-Codes and Themes in Light of Research Question Number Three*

Open Codes	Frequency of open-code appearance across all data point	Theme
Outgroup – not want to join Outgroup – want to join	33	Maximizing Differences

**Maximizing differences.** A person’s self-identity is derived not only from the group of friends they have but also from the groups of which they are not a part. The differences between one’s self-identity and ingroup are what identifies the outgroup (Hogg & Reid, 2006). SIT says that the ingroup is made up of similar people who see each other in similar ways and hold similar views, which contrasts with members of outgroups. Therefore, through an awareness of the outgroups, one’s ingroup is reinforced (Stets & Burke, 2000).

I asked the participants to name a group of which they would not want to be a part. Four of the students, Ethan, Franky, Isaiah, and Luke, do not wish to be a part of the band. When I asked why, Franky, Isaiah, and Luke all said it was because they are loud. Ethan said that they were “annoying” (Ethan, Personal Interview, June 2, 2020). This was interesting because each boy specifically mentioned that they did not like to talk in front of or they dislike being around big groups of people. During the word association activity, when asked what he thought when I said the word “popular,” Luke said, “They are annoying. . . I don't know; they just talk back” (Luke, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020). Isaiah had the same thoughts when he replied, “Kids who talk a lot” (Isaiah, Personal Interview, June 9, 2020). Based on their entire interviews, these boys were quiet and expressed that they did not like loud noises.

Another group that was mentioned was “girls,” and along with that “drama.” Jenny commented that “They're over dramatic. . . and they're always in everybody's business” (Jenny, Personal Interview, June 10, 2020). Hailey said something similar during her word association activity when she referred to the popular girls at her school as “just kind of just annoying”



(Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020). When talking about the drama with girls, Asia stated, “I used to do it all the time and sometimes like if I do keep to myself, the people they will like bring me into it. It’s like I get tired of it” (Asia, Personal Interview, March 31, 2020).

Kylie identified the differences between her and the drama club when she said, I just never understood about drama club like that. . . It’s like, what was so special about it and likewise, it’s just, I don’t know . . . I can’t do that. That’s going to be my biggest anxiety; I can’t get up on the stage, I can’t! (Kylie, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020)

Donny also noticed the differences when he talked about the football team and how, although he plays on the team, he does not “feel accepted by them. They’re all cocky people. I don’t like them. I don’t like their egos” (Donny, Personal Interview, January 30, 2020). When asked why he did not think the team accepted him, Donny replied, “They said you’re in like slower classes. I just say we’re learning the same stuff as you. They say you’re not as smart, you know, it’s . . . Like it kinda hurts” (Donny, Personal Interview, January 30, 2020).

While each of the students found a group they would not want to be around, we also talked about groups that they might want to join. Interestingly, Gabby and Luke could not think of a group that they would like to join. Gabby said, “I like the friends that I’m with” (Gabby, Personal Interview, June 4, 2020), while Luke just replied, “I don’t know” (Luke, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020).

However, some participants knew exactly which group they would like to join. Kylie expressed an interest in joining the art club, but when asked why she was not a part of that group, she said, “I really didn’t know where to sign up at. So, I’m . . . I can’t really stay because I have to go get kids. I wouldn’t have time to stay in the club if I had time” (Kylie, Personal Interview,

June 11, 2020). Hailey commented that she would like to be a part of student council because, “They just make a ton of decisions about like school dances, school fundraisers, the spring fling, stuff like that . . . but for me, I don’t really like being in charge” (Hailey, Personal Interview, June 5, 2020). Ethan expressed a desire to join the auto mechanics vocational class at his school. Brittany mentioned that even though she is in band, she would like to try out for the color guard, but “I don’t know if I could join because I play the flute and how am I supposed to do both?” (Brittany, Personal Interview, March 4, 2020).

Other participants did not express a specific group they would like to join but instead identified characteristics of people with whom they would like to socialize. Asia said that she would like to find a group of Christians at her school because “They’re just a nice, cool, you know group” (Asia, Personal Interview, March 31, 2020). Donny stated that although he does not like to be the center of attention, he would like to be a part of a “crazy people, maybe” (Donny, Personal Interview, January 30, 2020).

Sports teams were another group that some of the students determined they would be interested in joining. Franky wanted to spend time with the basketball team because “They would be different personalities and things” (Franky, Personal Interview, June 3, 2020). Isaiah said he would also like to try out for the basketball team because he enjoys sports but did not this year because “I don’t really know them that well” (Isaiah, Personal Interview, June 9, 2020). It should be noted that Isaiah was new to his school this year, and with the school closure, he did not have much time to develop friendships. Chuck, who plays football, said that he would like to “be a little bit more into like the jock side, cause I’m kinda, I am athletic in the, in that sense. But I don’t really associate with like the jocks outside of when like the season starts” (Chuck, Personal Interview, February 13, 2020).

The participants looked at outside groups and mentioned some of the differences between these groups and themselves. To summarize this thought, when talking about this type of group, Chuck remarked, “I’m kind of a, I’m kind of outcast in that way” (Chuck, Personal Interview, February 13, 2020). Whereas Franky stated, “Sometimes I’m not included” (Franky, Personal Interview, June 3, 2020). One’s self-esteem is determined by comparing one’s ingroup and outgroup where the ingroup is looked at positively, and the outgroup is judged based on the differences (Stets & Burk, 2000).

### **Summary**

Through photographs, semi-structured interviews, and a word association activity, the 12 participants shared stories and perceptions of how their reading disability impacted their social identity. An analysis of the data revealed several themes: (a) positive self-concept, (b) insecurity, (c) anxiety, (d) commonality, (e) social dynamics, and (f) maximizing differences. These themes address the CRQ and subsequent SRQs and provide a framework to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of high school students with a disability in reading.

The results of the semi-structured interviews, photographs, and the word association activity confirmed the social barrier that impacts high school students and their social identity. Quotes from the participants were used to support these themes. Additionally, the photographs that the students submitted were insightful into the lives of the students and substantiated the analysis.

I reviewed the data related to research question one and identified an emerging theme of positive self-concept based on the participants’ experiences as a high school student with a reading disability. Each of the students described themselves using positive adjectives.

Consequently, they did not allow their reading disability to have a negative impact on their self-worth.

In addition to a positive self-concept, insecurity was another major theme revealed regarding the first research question. While the students had a positive self-concept, they shared their insecurities when it came to school and their reading disability. The students lacked confidence when it came to academics. These insecurities caused the participants to avoid attention and to blend into the background, so they would not be called on during class discussions.

I identified a third theme for the first research question as anxiety. This is different than insecurity, in that, insecurity encompasses a lack of confidence, but anxiety focuses on the fear. The participants discussed the fear they had of others knowing their lack of ability in reading. It was evident that the students were afraid of reading aloud in class and would avoid having to do so. The fear of mispronouncing the words, providing an incorrect answer, or reading the wrong words entirely gave the students anxiety.

When analyzing the data for research question two, the first theme I identified was commonality. Under this major theme were the two subthemes of common interests and academic challenges. The first subtheme, common interests, recognized the participants' friends and their shared activities. Most of the participants either participated in an extracurricular activity with their friends or enjoyed being together. Many of the students implied that they just liked to hang out with their friends.

The other subtheme was academic challenges. Several of the students revealed that their group of friends was also on IEPs. The participants felt comfortable around them because their friends face the same challenges as they do. For some of the participants, though, their reading

disability did impact their friendships. For other students, however, the impact was minimal due to the shared reading disability.

The next theme that emerged with the second research question was social dynamics. When listening to the experiences of the participants, it became evident that while there were commonalities, there were also differences in their friend groups. Some of the participants spoke to the differences in both abilities and social skills. Some saw their friends as being smarter, and some saw their friends as being more outgoing. Students discussed what it was like when they joined a new group and how that impacted them personally. Entering a new group was not always easy. This was seen especially when students became part of sports teams. Most of the students did not maintain the new friend group after the sports season was over. Participants who did maintain those friendships found that their friend groups overlapped, which helped.

Research question three focused on the groups to which the participants did not belong. The theme I identified regarding question number three was maximizing differences. Students looked at other groups within their respective high schools, and focused on the differences between themselves, their friend group, and the other groups at school. People want to be around those who are similar to them. They want to have those shared interests because it provides a sense of comfort, consequently, there are groups the participants identified that were so different that they could not imagine being a part of that circle. However, students also have desires to have friends, so they saw groups they thought might be intriguing peers for them to get to know. While there were still differences, the students saw something in another group which they thought would be interesting to belong. These students were able to identify their self-identity by examining their friend groups and comparing them to groups in which they were not a part.

In the next chapter, a summary of the findings will be presented along with a discussion of the themes as they relate to the theoretical framework of the study. Furthermore, a discussion of the implications of the study, recommendations for future research, and limitations are discussed.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences and social identity of high school students with a disability in reading. Chapter Five will begin with a brief summary of the findings, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and relevant literature, implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and finally recommendations for future research. Chapter Five then concludes with a summary.

### Summary of Findings

This transcendental phenomenological study was guided by the following central research question: What are the lived experiences of high school students with a specific learning disability in reading who read significantly below grade level? This question was directed more specifically by three research sub-questions, and this section details a concise summary of the findings. The following three research questions informed the study:

**SQ1:** How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading defines who they are as a person?

**SQ2:** How do the participants believe that their learning disability in the area of reading impacts their identity with their peers who also have a reading disability?

**SQ3:** How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading impacts their identity with their non-disabled peers?

Twelve high school students with a reading disability volunteered as participants for this study. Before the interview, each participant took photographs from a list of prompts. The pictures were discussed with the participants during their semi-structured interview, which was

followed by a word association activity. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology process seeking to find the common themes of the shared lived experiences of the phenomenon of the impact a reading disability has on a student's social identity. The NVivo program was used to organize transcripts and effectively code clusters of meaning for theme identification. An analysis of the data revealed six major themes: (a) positive self-concept, (b) insecurity, (c) anxiety, (d) commonality, (e) social dynamics, and (f) maximizing differences.

The first research question was: How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading defines who they are as a person? When discovering how the students viewed their self-identity, three themes were determined: (a) positive self-concept, (b) insecurity, and (c) anxiety. When describing themselves during the interview, students were quick to use words that portrayed a positive connotation. The participants were asked to take a picture of something that represented themselves. The students thought that their participation in activities such as sports or clubs, represented themselves. Students used words to describe either personal attributes or hobbies when describing themselves. They were also asked to describe their strengths. All of the students had areas of strength, most of which were activity or sports-based. When asked about their future plans, all but one student had an idea for their future. While some desire to attend college, others were looking into trades. One student wanted to join the military and then go to college. The idea that the participants desired to be viewed in a positive light is an essential step in a positive self-concept. The most important strength demonstrated by these students is their resilience in not allowing their reading disability to negatively impact their self-concept.



A second theme that emerged was insecurity. Students described their lack of confidence when reading in front of their peers. When asked to describe an IEP and what it meant to them, the participants responded that the IEP was something that helped them with their learning disability. All of their responses suggested that the IEP was a way to get help for their reading disability. Photographs of something they wanted to do better revealed that most of the students wanted to improve either their academics or their sports abilities. When asked about their least favorite part of school, again, the insecurity around academics came to light. This lack of confidence reveals that the students understand their weaknesses and because they want others to see them in a positive light, they try to blend into the background, so their weaknesses will not be exposed.

The third theme under the first research question was anxiety, which is different than insecurity, in that a person can have confidence and yet still experience apprehension. Pictures of academics answered the prompt that asked for a picture representing something that caused them anxiety. During the interview, some of the students said that even though they knew how to read, reading aloud gave them anxiety. Being the center of attention was also an added source of stress. When discussing their fears, some of the students mentioned that they did not like to be in large groups. One girl described herself as a hermit, while one of the boys said he “was always in a shell.” When asked how they viewed their reading skills, many of the students expressed that their skills were not as sharp they should be. The most common fear was not being able to read a word correctly when reading in front of others. During the word association activity, schoolwork and tests were a significant source of anxiety. As students with a reading disability navigate through high school, they have a fear of their weaknesses being noticed.

The second research question was: How do the participants believe that their learning disability in the area of reading impacts their identity with their peers who also have a reading disability? The second research question examined how high school students with a reading disability interact with their friend group. It sought to reveal if their reading disability impacted those friendships in any way. Two major themes emerged: (a) commonalities, and (b) social dynamics.

The first theme was commonalities, which can further be broken down into two subthemes: common interests and academic challenges. The first subtheme, common interests, was revealed through the activities that the participants engaged in with their friends. As the students described their friends, they discussed similar interests they have with their peer group. Participants were asked how they were similar to their friends and for what their friend group was known. Again, the idea that their group of friends participated in many of the same activities became evident. Pictures of their groups of friends also started a discussion about the common interests they have with those friends. People enjoy being with others who are like them. Common interests are a source of finding one's friend group.

The second subtheme, academic challenge, came to light when students discussed the friend that was the most like them. Both the pictures and the interview helped to reveal this theme. The participants stated that many of their friends were also on an individualized education plan (IEP). Several of the students mentioned that their friends "had the same thing" when discussing their reading disability. Those students who receive their core instruction in the special education classroom told me that most of their friend groups were in the same classes. The students appeared to be comfortable with those who understood the reading struggles they endure.

The second major theme was social dynamics. While there are several commonalities among the participants' friend groups, there were also some differences. Some of the students discussed how they perceived their friends to be smarter or that they all had different weaknesses. Students were asked to tell how they were different than their friends. They were also asked to identify the friend who was the least like them. Contrasting personalities were the most common difference. However, two students talked about how their friends were not as responsible as they were. Two students noted that their groups of friends were intertwined and that their differences were what made their friend groups work.

The third research question that drove this study was: How do the participants believe that their learning disability in reading impacts their identity with their non-disabled peers? This question examined how students view their outgroups or groups they are not a part of, specifically those without a reading disability. The theme that emerged through the interview was maximizing differences. When looking at groups that they would not want to be part of in their respective high schools, most of the students referred to groups that were perceived as loud. The band was mentioned several times when the participants commented that the loudness of the band deterred them from being interested in joining that group. Another frequently mentioned cluster were groups that came with a certain level of drama attached to them. By recognizing the differences between themselves and this other group, the students easily provided reasons they would not want to be a part of the band or groups with a lot of drama.

On the other hand, when asked what group in which they would like to be involved, most students gave examples of groups that had common interests, but there were reasons they did not see themselves socializing with those people on a more personal level. It was mentioned by a few students that due to prior responsibilities, they could not join a particular group. Other

students desired to be part of sports teams but followed up with the idea that they did not seem to be accepted by these groups. One student even said that he felt like an outcast when he was around members of the football team. These students demonstrated that they had a desire to be accepted by those who were different than themselves.

### **Discussion**

This study was conducted to understand the lived experiences of high school students with a reading disability and how their disability impacts their social identity. During this study, I discovered six main themes: (a) positive self-concept, (b) insecurity, (c) anxiety, (d) commonality, (e) social dynamics, and (f) maximizing differences. The following section explains the relevancy of the theoretical and empirical foundation of information found in the literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study's theoretical framework was centered on Henri Tajfel's social identity theory first proposed in the early 1970s, and later by Tajfel and J. C. Turner in 1979 (Trepte, 2006). The SIT seeks to explain how individuals view themselves. In the SIT, it is through social comparison that enables an individual to define themselves as it relates to their social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

A person obtains their identity from the social groups to which they belong. This process, known as self-categorization, comes from the idea that all social groups share characteristics that distinguish each group from other groups. It is the shared characteristics that comprise one's ingroup (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel, 1974). As long as this ingroup contributes positively to a person's social identity, then they remain with that same ingroup (Turner, 1975). Most of the participants have had the same group of friends for multiple years.

They met their friend groups at school, and even though they do not have many classes together, they still look to this same group of friends because they contribute to their positive self-identity.

Another way ingroups are formed is through personal failures within the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When one shares a common failure, they want to surround themselves with others who understand the challenges that they face. When the participants in this study talked about their group of friends, it was evident that many in their friend group shared not only common interests, but also a reading disability. The students found acceptance within their friend groups, which helped them have a positive self-concept when describing themselves.

Additionally, according to Stets and Burke (2000), there is a sense of uniformity within the ingroup members, which develops the ingroup culture. Those who use their ingroup to label themselves are more likely to participate in the ingroup culture. When asked what their group of friends was known for, the participants were able to describe their group of friends in detail. One student mentioned how others might think of his group of friends as “hillbillies,” while others used words such as “nice,” “kind,” and “crazy.” The participants saw their ingroup as unique and adopted the culture within their group.

Individuals not only compare themselves within a group, but they also find that they compare themselves to different groups. These comparisons can have both a positive and negative impact on a person’s self-identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). A group with which one does not belong is described as the outgroup and is categorized by an individual as a group that is different from a person’s ingroup (Hoggs & Adams, 1998). When defining ingroups and outgroups, members maximize the differences between those groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). According to Tajfel (1974), being aware of the outgroup’s features substantiates one’s ingroup. For members to dislike or discriminate against an outgroup, they must first have a strong

identification with their ingroup. According to Girli and Ozturk (2017), students with a SLD in reading begin to notice the differences in abilities between themselves and their typically developing peers. This study found that this was true with many of the participants. Some mentioned that while they were part of some sports teams, they noticed the differences in academic abilities, and comments were made about their struggles in reading. Some of the comparisons were not specific to academics, but to personality differences. Several of the students did not like attention drawn to them, so they tended to be quiet and did not like to socialize with more outgoing groups. Students with a SLD in reading find it challenging to take part in classroom discussions and often feel lonely or isolated due to difficulty in social relationships (Majorano et al., 2016). A couple of students mentioned that while they were part of a sports team, their teammates were in advanced classes, which impacted their feeling of acceptance on the team. However, students with a SLD in reading who develop quality peer relationships were more likely to feel accepted and less likely to experience rejection (Rose, Espelage et al., 2015). The two students who seemed to be able to cross into multiple groups expressed the quality friendships they had made, and those relationships helped them become a part of various social groups.

The SIT has been primarily used to examine how groups interact within an organization. Intergroup behaviors within business organizations, racial groups, and sports teams have been the focus of this theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1998; Tajfel, 1974). However, this theory has not been used to examine students' behaviors with a SLD in reading. This study extends the SIT to a classroom setting, specifically targeting students with a reading disability. This study will enable educators to identify how and why students with a SLD in reading behave as they do. By

understanding their social relationships and social identity, educators can look for ways to foster the self-concept and self-esteem of a student with a SLD.

### **Empirical Framework**

The most current research focused on students with a disability in reading has targeted those in elementary school and middle school with an emphasis on reading comprehension interventions. There was little qualitative research to suggest how a reading disability affects high school students and their social identity. This study was conducted to address the gap in the literature related to this problem. In this study, I examined the social identity of students with a reading disability as a lived experience. This section will focus on the relationship between the empirical literature reviewed and information revealed in the data analysis of this study.

Previous research has examined the academic and behavior risks for students with a reading disability. When considering academic risks, Wilkerson et al. (2016) noted that while most students have learned the concept of putting letters and sounds together in early elementary school, some older students have not mastered these skills and benefit from remedial instruction. Additionally, if a student cannot derive meaning from a text due to their reading struggles, then their motivation to read decreases (Gooch et al., 2016; Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013). As students struggle with reading, they may find that they struggle with their social experiences. The presence or lack of social experiences among peers has a direct impact on the social, emotional, and cognitive well-being of a student and their adjustment in life (Gallardo et al., 2016). The current study supported this as students commented on their social experiences with their peers. Most of the participants in this study commented they had positive interactions with their peers, but only with those in their ingroup. A couple of students talked about how they did not feel accepted by others outside of their friend group. However, as students find areas in

which they can excel, this will help them to focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot do (Price & Payne, 2018). Those who seemed to have a more positive experience with their peers had a higher self-concept and higher self-esteem. Those students who both received their instruction in the regular education classroom and participated in extra-curricular activities seemed to have acceptance with their non-disabled peers. Those who received their core instruction in the special education classroom and participated in sports revealed that they had more social issues with their non-disabled peers. One participant mentioned that the other members of the football team made fun of him and his reading ability. Two other participants commented that while they felt accepted on the team during the sports season, they did not feel like they were part of that group when the season was complete.

Behavior risks were another factor that current research focused on when addressing students with a reading disability. Although my study did not examine external behaviors related to risky behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, depression, suicide, or school dropout, it did look at internalized behaviors. When students with a reading disability compare their academic abilities with their non-disabled peers, the revealed differences can influence their behaviors within the classroom (Alexander-Passe, 2016b; Turunen et al., 2017). Insecurities and anxiety were two internalized behaviors that participants in this study revealed during their interviews. For students who struggle with reading, school can be a harsh environment which is revealed in avoidance behaviors such as forgetting homework, being a class clown, or fading into the background (Alexander-Passe, 2016a). Students with reading disabilities worry more about reading aloud in class or being called on to answer questions due to their disability, which may trigger social anxiety (Barber & Proops, 2019; Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013).



Furthermore, research suggests that students' negative feelings about themselves when they are required to read aloud in class generate a negative feeling about the reading process (Girli & Ozturk, 2017; Jeffes, 2016). The current study confirmed this notion, as students reported that they try to stay in the background during class so they will not be called on to answer questions or to read aloud. One student, Kylie, commented that she knows how to read, but she cannot read in front of others because she becomes anxious. She said that when reading in front of others, "I get to stuttering on my words, and it won't come out" (Kylie, Personal Interview, June 11, 2020). Other participants echoed her thoughts when they said that they have told teachers they will not read in class or have tried not to be noticeable during class. This trend, moreover, did not change whether the students received instruction in the special education setting or the regular education setting. When asked during the word association activity what they thought of when I said the word "reading," most of the participants responded with negative thoughts, saying that reading was boring or that the words gave them problems. A couple of the participants, who demonstrated higher self-confidence, responded with titles for a series of books they have enjoyed reading in the past. Their positive thoughts on reading highlight that they can overcome the negative impact of their reading disability. It should be noted that these students received most of their instruction in the regular education classroom.

Adolescence is a critical time in a student's life as they define who they are by becoming more independent and spending more time with their peers. When they have a high-quality relationship with peers or a best friend, students with a reading disability obtain higher self-worth (Gallardo et al., 2016; Haft et al., 2016). The SIT supports this idea that individuals need to be a part of a group in order to increase their self-esteem and self-concept. When asked to identify their best friend, the participants quickly answered with the name of the person. As they

discussed their best friend, most of the students referred to that individual as the friend who is most like them. The friends' common interests became apparent as they told me how they spend a significant amount of time with their best friend. The bonds between best friends are formed through mutual interests and interactions (Sigstad, 2016). Several of the participants mentioned that their best friend also shared academic struggles and was on an IEP for reading. The participants' commonalities support the idea that these friend groups helped with their self-esteem.

Relationships within a group rely on the values individuals place on social attitudes. As peer groups are formed, some groups may socially exclude those who seem less popular. Students identify more positively with their ingroups, and those in the outgroups become excluded (Gutter et al., 2017). Students with a reading disability compare themselves with their peers in the classroom and may consider themselves less valuable (Cavioni et al., 2017). In fact, one qualitative study found those with a reading disability felt different than their peers and that feeling this way for an extended time was emotionally damaging (Alexander-Passe, 2016b). The social identity of a student is based on a friend's social identity, which can widen the circle of friends within a specific group (Gutter et al., 2017). It is the involvement of a prominent member of a group that helps improve students with disabilities' sense of belonging (Pinto et al., 2019). The current study extended this concept in that participants who were involved in extracurricular activities seemed to have more social groups. One participant put it best when she talked about how all of her friend groups were intertwined. Another student indicated that even during the off-season for football, he could speak with the other boys on the football team, even if they were not a close group. Still, another student talked about joining the dance team and how it seemed awkward at first, but after many practices, the group became friends and was able

to share time outside of the team. She did say that she developed a close relationship with one particular girl on her dance team and that they were becoming closer friends as a result of their time together.

Understanding the social relationships and social identity of students with a reading disability is essential to improving their self-esteem and self-concept. Each student has their personal identity, which is how a person views one's self. Everyone has a group of close friends, or their ingroup. It is through the comparison of one's ingroup with other groups, the outgroup is established. As each person identifies with a group, their self-concept and social identity are established. By listening to the lived experiences of students with a disability in reading, one can find ways to enhance their social identity and improve their success both in and out of school.

### **Implications**

In this section, the discussion of theoretical, empirical, and practical implications is detailed. A look at the literature and the research findings reveals that students with a disability in reading may have more social issues than other students. The research findings support Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory and the need for students to belong. Each area will be addressed individually.

#### **Theoretical Implication**

The research on the social identity of high school students with a reading disability aligns with the social identity theory. The SIT theorizes that shared characteristics comprise a person's ingroup, and a person will stay with that group as long as it contributes positively to a person's social identity (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975). High school students find themselves with opportunities to join many social groups. However, students with a disability in reading may find it challenging to navigate the different groups due to the nature of their

disability. By understanding how people develop their social identity, educators will be able to help students recognize their weaknesses and provide resources to assist them in overcoming some of the social issues they face.

Furthermore, self-categorization, or the process involved in social identity formation, is based on the perceived similarities between a person and other ingroup members, and the perceived differences between a person and outgroup members (Stets & Burke, 2000). As schools continue implementing more inclusion opportunities for students with disabilities, the similarities and differences will become more pronounced. This pronouncement is especially true of students with a reading disability. While it may be easier to conceal a math or writing disability, it is much more difficult to hide a reading disability. Being harder to hide their disability is why most students with a reading disability try to blend into the background in the classroom. While educators continue to find ways to integrate groups within the classroom so that social experiences can emerge, they also need to be cognizant of students with a reading disability to make sure that they have equal access to the required materials without singling out the student.

Tajfel (1974) calls the group to which one does not belong the outgroup. For a person to dislike an outgroup, they must have a sense of belonging to a group that is distinctly different from the outgroup. Discerning the differences between groups creates a difficult challenge for many students. If students with a learning disability are not comfortable inside the classroom, then they will naturally gravitate toward those with whom they can identify. Most of the time, the implications of this are positive. However, if they choose a group that does not positively impact their education, then the academic outcomes may not be in favor of the student.

Educators need to be aware of the groups forming inside the classroom and find strategic ways to pair students with a reading disability with those who accept the student.

### **Empirical Implications**

The majority of the literature on students with a reading disability focused on how teachers can help students improve their reading skills rather than their experiences (Bachman, 2015; Dierking, 2015; Kang et al., 2015; Solis et al., 2015). Additionally, most of the literature was quantitative in nature (Girli & Ozturk, 2017; Solis et al., 2015; Wilkerson et al., 2016) and did not allow the student with a reading disability to have a voice.

The 12 participants' interview responses provided a variety of perspectives and shared experiences from students with a reading disability. Some of the participants discussed similar stories regarding their insecurities in reading aloud in class. Students tend to compensate for these difficulties by avoiding reading in class, becoming a class clown, being humiliated, or being truant (Alexander-Passe, 2016a). Instead of thinking that a student is lazy or unmotivated, educators need to look below the surface to see if there is an underlying reason causing behaviors that are impacting their learning. Teachers can help students become comfortable in participating in classroom activities by prereading passages with the student, preteaching vocabulary, and building relationships, so the student will self-advocate when they are experiencing difficulties.

The literature also reveals that students with disabilities are more likely to be exposed to risky behavior. Some of the risky behaviors described were drugs, depression, suicide, truancy, and anxiety (Blachman et al., 2016; Daniel et al., 2006; Huford et al., 2016; Learned, 2016; Moses, 2018; Smart et al., 2017). While my study did not include external risks, it did include internal risks. Anxiety was one of these risks. The research revealed that when students do not

fit in with their peers, it results in lower self-esteem and withdrawal from peer groups. When these students start to withdraw from social activities, it can lead to anxiety (Livingston et al., 2018). Educators need to recognize that a lack of confidence and low self-esteem can cause students with a SLD to have higher levels of anxiety and stress (Hen & Goroshit, 2014; Jensen et al., 2019; Piccolo et al., 2017). Students in this study mentioned that they did fit in or that they did not like to talk. These same students expressed anxiety when it came to reading aloud in class, even if they knew everyone in the classroom.

Students with disabilities have areas where they excel. To promote a positive self-concept, adults who interact with students with a reading disability should help the students to focus on their strengths and not their weaknesses (Price & Payne, 2018). Educators should use the strengths of students to find innovative ways to teach them reading strategies and skills that enhance their reading abilities. Several of the students in this study were able to identify their weaknesses more easily than their strengths. Most of these students mentioned an academic skill as a weakness. It is interesting to note that these students took much more time to name their strengths. Most of them finally mentioned listening or focusing as strengths while others named a non-academic skill. Even if a student has difficulty in an academic area, a teacher can find innovative ways to foster those strengths to encourage academic achievement.

### **Practical Implications**

This study provided practical implications for teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders involved in education. The practical implications fill the gap for high school students with a reading disability and their social identity. Students want to be accepted, and most want to do what is right. However, without the social and academic skills, this sometimes causes difficulties in the classroom.

The first practical implication is for educators and other stakeholders in the education process to encourage participation in extra-curricular activities. Educators need to inform students of their available options and introduce them to other students who are a part of these activities. The participants who appeared to be well-adjusted in the classroom were also involved in extra-curricular activities, most notably sports. These students easily fit into multiple friend groups. Those who were not involved in extra-curricular activities at school tended to have a limited number of friends and friend groups.

Another practical implication is to provide additional training for teachers who have students with a reading disability in their regular education classroom. Teachers need to not only understand the content of the IEP, but also need to look for nonverbal signs of insecurity and anxiety during class. A teacher needs to be able to notice what types of assignments seem to be more difficult for a student and then modify the assignment so that the student can master the content with minimal stress and anxiety. As the student becomes more confident in the classroom, their self-esteem will also improve.

Educators are an essential part of a student's education. By building relationships, students develop a positive attitude toward school. The participants who had positive attitudes toward school also shared positive attitudes toward their teachers. These students specifically mentioned their intervention specialists by name because they helped them become more successful in school. Intervention specialists, along with regular education teachers, both play a role in helping students with a disability in reading improve their social identity.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

During any research study decisions are made that result in delimitations and limitations. Delimitations are the boundaries set for the study. In this study, specific criteria were established

to focus on the central phenomenon. The limitations are those influences that were not able to be controlled, which impacted the results of this study. This section discusses the delimitation and limitations present in this qualitative research study.

### **Delimitations**

The study involved several delimitations; however, I believe these did not negatively impact this study. I used criterion sampling in participant selection. The study explored the shared experiences of high school students with a learning disability in reading, as it impacts their social identity. The participating students had to be high school students, have an IEP for a specific learning disability in reading, and have an IQ of at least 70. These requirements eliminated students with other learning disabilities and those students with a lower IQ.

### **Limitations**

Every study has limitations that can threaten the validity or quality of the study (Sumerson, 2013). In this study, several limitations existed. First, the sample size of 12 participants was small. Although this sample size was acceptable for the methodology used, it provided a minimal view of how all high school students with a reading disability view their social identity. Additionally, in the special education classroom, males outnumber females two to one. However, for this study there was an equal number of males and females.

Another limitation is that due to the COVID-19 school closures in the state of Ohio, recruiting had to change from visiting schools in person to utilizing social media platforms in order to find students. Participants then were limited to the children of people who I knew or had mutual friends. COVID-19 also limited in-person meetings, so I used Zoom for several of the interviews. This way, I was still able to see each participant and visualize their reactions to their own stories. Additionally, more of the students came from one local school because I had



access to their information due to my employment at that district. Therefore, the experiences shared in this sample of participants may not be reflective of all high school students with a reading disability.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study intended to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of high school students with a reading disability. The participants for this study were 12 high school students from Northeast Ohio who have a documented reading disability. However, seven of the participants came from the same school. Future research should include students from more schools to see if the lived experiences of the participants are consistent.

Since I only interviewed the students as they shared their thoughts, it would be interesting to see how they behave and interact in a physical classroom setting. While students want to project a positive image, they may not comfortably open up to a researcher with their external behaviors. Therefore, being able to interview teachers of students with a reading disability would help examine some of the other risky behaviors and how that impacts the students' social identity. While students did express some of their anxiety, many would not explain how anxiety affects their social identity. Comparing the teachers' responses with the students' responses would provide an understanding from both sides.

Qualitative studies exploring the type of school a student with a reading disability attends would provide more understanding about their social identity and self-concept. The types of schools to investigate would include students who attend public schools, private schools, parochial schools, or charter schools. A clearer picture of a student with a reading disability and their social identity would emerge by looking at the various types of schools. Including these

students, the researcher could compare the results of the regular education setting to the special education setting in a variety of school types to see if patterns of shared experiences emerge.

### **Summary**

Chapter Five summarized the findings and interpretations of the research questions, which leads to implications for further research regarding the connection between students with a reading disability and their social identity. This study was framed by Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory and aimed to answer one central research question and three sub-research questions. Through the use of photographs, interviews, and word association, I was able to address and examine each of these questions in depth.

The findings from this study suggested that students with a reading disability need guidance in order to help them gain a positive view of themselves. Without a positive self-concept, academics suffer. One of the most significant challenges to students with a reading disability is feeling a sense of belonging within groups. Moreover, becoming actively engaged in extra-curricular activities is one of the best ways to improve a student's self-concept. Additionally, internal risk factors are also a significant concern. This study revealed that students with a reading disability exhibit signs of anxiety when reading aloud in front of their peers. Students were afraid they would mispronounce words, stutter, or sound "like a robot." Therefore, finding strategies to assist these students in overcoming their weaknesses is essential. Consequently, teachers need to examine a student's strengths in order to utilize strategies that maximize their strengths to help their reading skills improve.

Overall, students with a disability in reading want to fit in, have a positive self-concept, and improve their reading. Therefore, teachers and administrators need to look for ways to help students in the classroom, simultaneously enhancing their social skills. Understanding how

students view themselves and determine their friend groups is essential for educators to assist students with their social identity. The findings suggest that students with a reading disability experience both positive and negative reactions in social settings due to their ingroup and outgroup. Teachers and other school staff need to identify those reactions and assist students in making wise choices. Working together, teachers, administrators, and other school staff can provide students with a caring and nurturing learning environment. Only then can students with a reading disability find acceptance and begin to find success in and out of the classroom.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB Approval letter****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 12, 2019

Ellen Ziegler

IRB Approval 4044.121219: A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of High School Students with a Reading Disability

Dear Ellen Ziegler,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Your study involves surveying or interviewing minors, or it involves observing the public behavior of minors, and you will participate in the activities being observed.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

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UNIVERSITY.  
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**APPENDIX B:****School District Consent Form**

[Date]

[Address]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an educational doctorate degree. The title of my research project is A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of High School Students with a Reading Disability, and the purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences and social identity of high school students with a disability in reading. This research will contribute to the growing knowledge of high school students with a disability in reading and the impact that disability has on those students.

I am writing to request that your school or teachers identify potential participants for my study, based on the participant criteria. I would like the opportunity to speak to your high school special education department to gain their help in identifying appropriate participants for my study. Student participants must be on an IEP for a specific learning disability in reading, have an IQ of at least 70, and receive their primary instruction for reading with an Intervention Specialist. After potential participants are identified, that the school or teachers sent the recruitment information to the parents on my behalf. Parents of potential participants will then be asked to reach out to me for further information.

Upon identification, parental permission will be sought for students under the age of 18; student assent will also be obtained. Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. Before the interview, students will be given a disposable camera to take pictures, which will serve as a visual record of the social identity of the participants. Additionally, I will ask students to collect previously taken pictures based on the list of prompts given. Both parents and student participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to [eziegler@liberty.edu](mailto:eziegler@liberty.edu). A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Ellen Ziegler

**APPENDIX C:**  
**Parent/Guardian Recruitment Letter**

[Date]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to study the social identity for high school students who are on an IEP for reading, and I am writing to invite your child to participate in my study.

I am looking for high school students who are on an IEP with a reading goal and have an IQ of at least 70 as stated on their last ETR. If you are willing to allow your child to participate, he or she will be asked to take pictures and compile already taken pictures from a provided list and participate in a one-on-one interview, which will be concluded with a word association activity. It should take approximately a week to compile the pictures and approximately an hour and a half to complete the interview and word association activity. Your child's name will be requested as part of his or her participation, but the information will remain confidential.

For your child to participate, please contact me via email at [eziegler@liberty.edu](mailto:eziegler@liberty.edu), and I will set up a time to meet you and/or your child and provide your child with a disposable camera. The camera will need to be returned at least two days before the scheduled interview in order for me to have time to develop the pictures before the interview. Pictures that have been previously taken can be brought to the interview.

A parental consent document and a student assent form will be provided as attachments on a return email or can be provided to you through mail, if you prefer, approximately two weeks before the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document, have your student sign the assent form, and return both to me when I provide the disposable camera for your child.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Ellen Ziegler  
Doctoral Candidate

**APPENDIX D:  
Parent/Guardian Consent/Student Assent Form**

**PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM**  
“A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences  
of High School Students with a Reading Disability”

This research study is being conducted by Ellen Ziegler, a doctoral candidate in School of Education at Liberty University. Your child was selected as a possible participant because he or she is a current high school student, has an IEP with a reading goal, and has an IQ over 70 as reported on his or her most current ETR. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow your student to be in the study.

***Why is this study being done?***

The purpose of this study is to describe the shared experiences and social identity of high school students with a reading disability.

***What will my child/student be asked to do?***

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, he or she will be asked to do the following things:

1. Take pictures and gather pictures they have previously taken. Students will be given a disposable camera to take certain pictures and be asked to collect previously taken pictures. There will be a list of pictures they will need to take and compile. Taking the pictures will take a few days, but I ask that your child completes this part of the study in about a week. They will then give me the camera, so I can develop the pictures and set up a time for the next step.
2. Face-to-face interview. This interview will be recorded and will take between one and one and a half hours to complete. During this time, I will also allow your child to share any thoughts she or her has on the pictures she or her took.
3. Word Association Activity. At the conclusion of the interview, I will ask your child to listen to a series of words and ask that he or she tell me the first thing that comes to his or her mind when I say those words. This part should only take 15-20 minutes.

***What are the risks and benefits of this study?***

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks your child would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing teachers and schools information that will help students like your child to be more successful in school.

***Will my child be compensated for participating?***

Your child will not be compensated for participating in this study.

***How will my child's personal information be protected?***

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. In order to keep your

child's information confidential, I will assign a pseudonym to their information. I will also complete the interview in a place where others will not easily overhear the conversation. I will keep the data collected on a password-locked computer or in a locked drawer only accessible by the researcher, and it may be used for future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted along with any pictures your child took for this study. All interviews will be taped and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

***Is study participation voluntary?*** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

***What should I or my child do if I decide to withdraw him or her or if he or she decides to withdraw from the study?*** If you choose to withdraw your child or if your child chooses to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should your child choose to withdraw, any data collected from or about him or her will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

***Whom do I contact if my child or I have questions or problems?***

The researcher conducting this study is Ellen Ziegler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [eziegler@liberty.edu](mailto:eziegler@liberty.edu) or XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Meredith Park, at [mjpark@liberty.edu](mailto:mjpark@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.***

The researcher has my permission to audio record my child as part of his or her participation in this study.

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Signature of Minor Date

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Signature of Parent Date



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Signature of Investigator Date

## **APPENDIX E: Photograph Prompts**

After parental consent and student assent was given, students were to take pictures based on the following prompts. After corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions, students were given the option of taking the pictures on their phones and emailing or texting me their pictures.

You have been given a disposable camera. Please take pictures that answer the following prompts and return the camera to Mrs. Ziegler

List of pictures to be taken:

1. Take a picture of something that represents who you are.
2. Take a picture of your favorite color.
3. Take a picture of you doing something that you are good at doing.
4. Take a picture of something you wish you could do better.
5. Take a picture of something that makes you anxious.
6. Take a picture of something that makes you calm or comfortable.
7. Take a picture of a location where you have met most of your friends.
8. Take a picture of how you think others view you.
9. Take a picture of how you want others to view you.

After you have returned the camera, and before you come to the interview, please gather together pictures that you have already taken. These pictures may be on your phone or on social media. Be ready to show these pictures to me at the interview.

1. Provide a previously taken picture of or with your group of school friends.
2. Provide a previously taken a picture of a group of friends you hang out with outside of school (if different).
3. Provide a previously taken picture of your friend who is most like you.
4. Provide a previously taken picture of a friend who is very different from you.

## **APPENDIX F: Interview Questions**

When interviewing participants about their social identity as a student with a reading disability, the following interview protocol adapted from Creswell (2013) was utilized.

Time of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

School participant attends: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview questions:

To begin interview, researcher will use follow-up questions with the pictures:

1. Tell me about this picture.
2. Why did you choose this color, activity, place, or group of friends?

Face-to-face interview questions

1. Tell me a little bit about who you are.
2. What grade are you in at school? (If not answered in question one)
3. What is an IEP? Why is an IEP used? How do you know this?
4. What is your favorite part of school? Least favorite part of school? Why?
5. What do you like to do outside of school?
6. What do you think are your strengths (in school and out of school)?
7. What is something you wish you could do better? Why?
8. Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?
9. Tell me about your group of friends.
10. How would your friends describe your reading strengths and weaknesses? How

does your struggle with reading affect your friendships?

11. What type of activities do you and your friends like to do together?
12. What are you and your group of friends known for by others?
13. How are you and your friends alike? Different?
14. Which one of your friends is the most like you? How?
15. Which one of your friends is the least like you? How?
16. How did you meet your friends?
17. How long have you been friends?
18. Name a group from your school in which you would not want to be a part. Why?
19. If you could be part of a different group of friends, what would that group of friends be? Why?

**APPENDIX G:**  
**Word Association Activity**

At the conclusion of the interview, students were asked to listen to the list of words and tell me the first word(s) they thought when hearing the words. When necessary, participants may have been asked a question to clarify their meaning of their response.

Word association activity

Listen to the following words and tell me the first word or phrase that makes you think.

Word Association List

1. (participant's name)
2. School
3. IEP
4. free time
5. anxiety
6. calm
7. friends
8. best friend
9. video games
10. sports
11. reading
12. books
13. popular