“A LOT OF THE SMARTEST PEOPLE HAVE LEARNING DISABILITIES”: TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH IDENTIFIED LEARNING DISABILITIES ON LITERACY LEARNING AND TEACHING

by

KAREN KLEPPE GRAHAM

(Under the Direction of Jennifer Graff)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is written in a three-manuscript format. Through the lenses of Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986, 1997) sociocultural theory and Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogism, it explores teacher candidates with learning disabilities and their experiences in literacy learning and literacy teaching. The first manuscript looks at one of the six teacher candidate participants’ literacy experiences. An after-class informal conversation with her was the catalyst for this study. The findings include how feeling connected to students and their learning needs is an important part of and benefit for teaching. But for teacher candidates with learning disabilities, these connections are more important since they are experts at understanding why and how students struggle. Even when they experience a lack of confidence in their teaching skills and may not be open about their learning disabilities and/or difficulties in academics, teacher candidates with learning disabilities may still find success with the necessary support from mentors and peers.

The second manuscript examines six teacher candidate participants with learning disabilities and how they came to teaching as a profession, negotiated their learning disabilities in academia, and envisioned themselves engaging in literacy teaching. Findings showed the

importance of small group collaborations, support from both peers and mentors, and self-efficacy. While small in participant pool size, this study could have an impact on the fields of literacy and learning disability studies as a springboard to further research with larger participant pools or a refocus on graduate students with learning disabilities who are also educators. Both the expansion and refocus would maintain the original exploration on the voice of the participants and advocacy for their learning and teaching needs.

The third manuscript focuses on methods used in narrative data analysis. The purpose of this article is to present the narrative analysis methods used in the dissertation study, based on Polkinghorne's (1988, 1995, 2005) analysis of narratives and narrative analysis, while speaking to the differences between the four modes. The process used to analyze the narrative data was constructed through research into Polkinghorne's work and honors his recursive analysis strategies. This article could be used as a demonstration of the modes of analysis mentioned while working through the elements of the method to more fully understand participant data.

INDEX WORDS: teacher candidates; learning disabilities; narrative analysis; sociocultural theory; dialogism; Polkinghorne's analysis method; literacy learning; literacy teaching; strategies for learning disabilities; middle class

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing family. You have believed in me, encouraged me, and supported me through this dissertation journey. You amaze me.

To my incredible husband, Jim, who placed my needs above his own more times than I could possibly count. You have held my hand, my heart, and my love for so long, and I cannot imagine my life without you. Your constant belief in me allowed me to follow my dreams, even when I was not sure where those dreams would lead. You are my Hobab, my lobster, and God's beautiful gift. Thank you for all that you are. Forever and ever, amen.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

LIST OF TABLES xi

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION and LITERATURE REVIEW 12

Statement of the Problem 12

Purpose for and Significance of the Study 15

Definitions of Key Terms 16

Personal and Research Interests 18

Review of the Literature 20

What are Learning Disabilities? 21

College Students with Learning Disabilities 23

Transitioning to Classroom Instructors 32

Teacher Candidates with Learning Disabilities 35

Teachers with Learning Disabilities 44

Pilot Study Information 47

Conclusion 50

Dissertation Structure 52

2 METHODOLOGY 55

Theoretical Frameworks 55

Research Design 62

Methods 64

Process of Narrative Analysis 76

Polkinghorne's Approach to Narrative Analysis 78

3 "I NEED YOU TO HELP ME LEARN HOW TO LEARN THIS SUBJECT": HOW ONE TEACHER CANDIDATE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITIY NEGOTIATED ACADEMIA 89

Abstract 90

Background of the Study 93

Literature Review 95

Theoretical Perspective 100

Methods 101

Findings 105

Discussion 113

Conclusion and Implications 116

References 118

4 TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES MAKE MEANING OF THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH LITERACY LEARNING AND TEACHING 123

Abstract 124

Theoretical Framework 127

Literature Review 130

Method 134

Data Analysis 146

Findings ... 148
Discussion ... 160
Conclusions ... 162
Implications ... 163
Limitations and Further Research Directions ... 163
References ... 165
5 NARRATIVE ANALYSIS METHODS IN QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDIES: A LOOK AT POLKINGHORNE'S METHODS ... 172
Abstract ... 173
Background of the Study ... 174
Methodological Literature Review ... 175
Narrative Data Analysis Methods ... 179
Narrative Analysis Framework ... 186
Summary ... 188
References ... 190
6 CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE BIRTH OF THIS DISSERTATION ... 193
Revisiting the Purpose and Research Questions ... 196
Article 1: Learning How to Learn ... 197
Article 2: Literacy Learning and Teaching Through the Lens of Learning Disabilities ... 200
Article 3: Narrative Analysis Methods in Qualitative Interview Studies ... 206
Implications for Research and Practice ... 207
Moving Forward ... 209

REFERENCES 211

APPENDICES

A SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT'S SHARED EXPERIENCE 232

B RECRUITMENT EMAIL 236

C REVISED RECRUITMENT FLYER 238

D TIMELINE SCRIPT AND FOCUSED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 239

E DATA SOURCES AND ANALYSIS INFORMATION 242

F PARTICIPANT WRITE-UP FOR DATA ANALYSIS 245

LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table 1: Learning Disabilities, High Incidence Disabilities, and Disorders 22

Table 2: Participant Demographics 67

Table 3: Interview Excerpt Illustrating Co-Construction of Interview Between Researcher and Allison 69

Table 4: Participant Pseudonyms, Recruitment Tools, Interview Times and Places 71

Table 5: Example of Narrative Smoothing: Haley, Third Interview 79

Table 6: Data Analysis Paragraph: Erin, Third Interview 81

Table 7: Steps for Polkinghorne's Narrative Analysis Method 82

Table 8: Round One Data Analysis Example: Transcribed, Highlighted, and Coded 83

Table 9: Example of Code Family, Code, and Related Quotations 85

Table 10: Stigma Examples from Excerpted Transcriptions 87

Table 11: Labov and Waletzky's Six Components of Narrative Analysis 176

Table 12: Example of Narrative Smoothing: Excerpt from Elena, First Interview 181

Table 13: Data Analysis Paragraph: Excerpts from Haley, All Interviews 183

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The only one who is educated is the person who has learned to learn; the person who has learned how to adapt and change; the person who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security.

(Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p.152-153)

Although I did not set out to become an advocate for teacher candidates with learning disabilities, through my work with my students and participants, I have seen a growing need to know more about the kinds of support students with varying learning needs require to become their best teacher-selves. Literature in the field often addresses struggling learners and coping strategies (Proctor, Prevatt, Adams, Reaser, & Petscher, 2006; Riddell & Weedon, 2013), motivations to succeed (Schiller et al., 2012), effective remediation strategies (Lee, Gable, & Klassen, 2012), and educational policy (Franzak, 2008; Spencer, 2012). But, missing from the research are participants sharing what they know to be true about their experiences with and through their learning disabilities, the ways they are challenging stereotypes, as well as their critiques of the educational system. They want the system to improve for all children, but especially children who struggle to learn. In the following section, I provide the statistics behind and goals for this dissertation research study.

Statement of the Problem

According to a recent report on students with learning disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016c), the numbers of students receiving special education services has

risen from 4.7 million (or about 11% of the 3-21 year old population in US schools) in the 1990-1991 school year to 6.4 million (or about 13%) for the most recent yearly statistics available, 2012-2013. Of that 6.4 million students served, about 35% of those, or 2.24 million, receive services for specific learning disabilities (para.2). All of the numbers shared indicate the need id on the rise for special education services in our nation's Pre-K-12th grade classrooms.

As sociocultural models of teaching and learning are taken up in K-12 public education (Perry, 2012), there are difficulties with curriculum development. Government agencies have aggressively instituted more and more practices and policies targeted towards increasing literacy skills, including *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation and ever-evolving state standards for classroom learning requirements (Davidson, 2010; Gredler, 2011; US Department of Education, 2001). Expectations that students will master literacy skills at linear developmental levels are not realistic for most young learners. Students are coming into educational environments with varying skill levels without similar academic and cultural contexts.

In direct opposition to more traditional educational practices, the "sociocultural standpoint is that literacy learning is socially situated and that it is appropriated from more knowledgeable others in one's social and cultural environment" (Davidson, 2010, p.255). Students learn best when instructional choices focus on learning processes embedded in social contexts. As both an involved educator and passionate researcher, Vygotsky believed educational contexts should provide parameters for developing "conceptual thinking" (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992, p.553), and as the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests, curriculum development and instruction should be "tied… closely to the level of potential development than to the level of actual development" (p.549). For, it is through instruction for

potential development that students work together to "learn how to learn" (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p.152-153) and are best able to benefit from teacher scaffolding.

Sociocultural learning theory tenets enable teachers to better "understand how people learn in social contexts…and…how we, as teachers, construct active learning communities… [that] maximize the learner's ability to interact with each other through discussion, collaboration, and feedback" (Neff, n.d., para.1). For both current teachers and university students enrolled in teacher education programs, it is important that planned, differentiated instruction addresses varying learning needs, enhances learning, positively influences "individuals' learning and achievement" (Phan, 2012, p.3), and builds a community of learners for whom equitable access to literacy learning (Davidson, 2010; Freebody, 2005) is afforded to all students.

Students with learning disabilities who have been academically successful are positioned to be "more knowledgeable others" in contexts where they are experts, as suggested by sociocultural learning theories. Because more students with learning disabilities are entering college <u>and</u> more college students with learning disabilities are choosing education as their career field (Papalia-Berardi, Hughes, & Papalia, 2002; Stevens, 2001), there is a definitive uptick in teacher candidates with learning disabilities who can not only speak to varied academic strategies for learning with their peers, but can recognize and support young learners who struggle to make meaning within educational situations (Baldwin, 2007; Nam & Oxford, 1998; Nordell, 2009). There is a lack of research focusing on academically successful teacher candidates with learning disabilities who want a career in education. Therefore, it is important to understand how teacher candidates with learning disabilities have found academic success as well as how they envision working with future students through their background experiences and successes in learning environments.

Purpose for and Significance of the Study

Teacher candidates who have previously struggled in academic environments but have become successful in school-based settings are uniquely capable of connecting with students who struggle (Glazzard & Dale, 2013; Griffiths, 2012), even when the struggles are dissimilar, due to inherent understandings of what it means to have difficulties finding success in academic settings. Those students who have struggled and found success are better equipped to support others who are struggling and to share their stories so that people without first-hand disability experience can learn from them (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Nistler & McMurry, 1993).

All teachers need to know more about the various ways students with differentiated learning needs require academic support to best help them learn and prepare for future educational experiences. Just as there are more students with special needs placed in inclusion classes in K-12, there are now more freshmen with learning struggles than ever before entering college. Maydosz and Raver (2010) and Heiman (2006) agreed, although it is difficult to determine the exact number of students with learning struggles entering higher education due to the required "self-identify" guidelines, the reported numbers have been steadily increasing since the beginning of the 1990s. Teacher educators are uniquely positioned to teach education majors with various learning needs about the methods of instruction for all young learners. Then, as education majors with learning disabilities are introduced to and explore differentiated methods of instruction, they take up these methods while strategizing how they will work through and with the lens of their learning disability to engage with the curriculum in teaching. The primary purpose of this interpretive qualitative interview study was to understand how teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities affecting their literacy learning come to the teaching

profession and negotiate their own disabilities as they engage in literacy instruction with their students. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are these education majors' experiences in their own K-12 education in negotiating the learning disabilities affecting their literacy?
2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to elementary education majors' development as literacy learners?
3. Based on these teacher candidates' own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for elementary students?

Definitions of Key Terms

To clearly communicate the findings in the literature review and in the research, it is necessary that key terms/phrases are defined to indicate how they are being used in this context.

- <u>Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder</u> (ADHD): is a "brain disorder marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development" (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016, para.1).
- <u>Differentiated Instruction</u>: how "teachers tailor the curriculum and pedagogic practices to the unique cognitive and sociocultural understandings and practices that each child brings to the classroom, while… maintaining group cohesion" (Freebody, 2005, p.225).
- <u>Learning Disability</u>: formally identified learning difficulties in one or more of the following areas: reading, spelling, written language, oral language, math, speaking, thinking, or writing (Baldwin, 2007; Barga, 1996; McCormick & Zutell, 2011).
- <u>Learning Disability Affecting Literacy</u>: learning difficulties concentrated in areas of literacy, such as "reading, writing, and a variety of social and intellectual practices that

call upon the voice as well as the eye and hand" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006, p.2; see also Venable, 2003).

- Self-identified: in Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12, students with perceived learning disabilities are identified by a teacher, parent, counselor, or other adult, evaluated and tested, and then receive services as needed (Cavendish, 2013; Maki, Floyd, & Roberson, 2015). As adults, students in a college setting must actively seek help for any perceived learning disabilities from a disability center, usually located on the college campus (Hadley, 2007; Sparks & Lovett, 2013; Werth, Hammer, & D'Abadie, 2014). The term is used in this study to mean someone with a learning disability formally identified in K-12 as a minor, but upon reaching age 18, they identified themselves as having a learning disability to receive learning accommodations as an adult.
- Teacher Candidates: education majors who have been admitted into a degree program and are seeking teaching certification.
- Zone of Proximal Development: "Distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Vygotsky argued ZPD should be used to guide instruction within the classroom and as a way to assess intelligence to determine the "actual and the potential levels of development" (Wang et al., 2011, p.298).
    - The actual level of development is the one at which a person is currently working without adult or peer assistance.
    - The potential level of development is the one at which students can understand and participate with their peers and/or adults with more experience.

ZPD is used to support higher mental functions in the classroom and as a tool for developing instructional interventions (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Phan, 2012). As students are able to assist each other, they are fulfilling the role of the "more capable" student in support of the "less capable" peer.

Personal and Research Interests

Throughout my tenure in education from preschool to the doctoral program, there have been a mere handful of learning situations in which I truly struggled and felt as though I could *not* learn. The classes were difficult, the material was incomprehensible, or the environment was inhospitable. My sole reason for attendance in these mostly math-based classes was for degree completion. If I did not take and pass the classes, I could not graduate. So, I registered for each one, attended all classes, studied both independently and with tutors, and with the exception of one undergraduate advanced level economics class, I successfully passed each one.

It is important to note, though I diligently applied excessive time and energy to these classes, I did not excel. I was frustrated with my inability to understand and wanted to simply be done. I was quite certain whatever career I chose, it would not involve concentrated application of any mathematical formulas, economic trends, or depreciative accounting.

Upon entering my teacher-education classes, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief that I would never again have to struggle in an educational setting. I specifically chose English Language Arts as my focus as much for my love of language and literature as my hatred of all things numerical. In fact, I could not imagine choosing a career in which I was destined to struggle daily with understanding of foundational concepts and applications.

I have held public school teaching positions in 4th-8th grades in both upper elementary and middle school. I have had inclusion students with special needs ranging from Emotional &

Behavioral Disorders (EBD) to Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to information processing disorders such as dyslexia and dysgraphia ("Information processing disorders," 2013) in my classes. I have been trained in ways to engage struggling learners and modify instruction so students with learning difficulties can best be supported in their acquisition of information. And even though I would diligently seek new ways to differentiate the content, the process, and the product (Tompkins, 2014), I was often not able to entice my students with learning struggles into reading or writing for *pleasure* – both things loved. Due to my own struggles with math-based courses, my students' struggles with literacy, and the avoidance we all practiced for the subjects with which we struggled, I made *gross* assumptions that most people would circumvent any and all associations with whatever subjects gave them trouble.

As a graduate assistant and instructor, I worked mostly with students majoring in education. They were beginning their junior year of college and were either focused on middle grades or elementary education. At the beginning of each semester, I typically received notification from several students that they were either working with the campus Disability Resource Center or they previously had learning difficulties, but felt that they had overcome them and did not need additional resources that the Disability Center could provide. In order to receive services, students at the college level must self-identify with their admission to the university (Hadley, 2007; Sparks & Lovett, 2013; Werth et al., 2014). However, inadequate learning strategies, deficient study skills, or undiagnosed disabilities (Proctor et al., 2006), make self-identifying difficult.

The first time I received disability paperwork from students, I made the required modifications. After a few weeks together, I began to wonder how my students with identified learning disabilities out-performed many of their non-identified peers and what drove them to

succeed academically. The students with learning disabilities consistently turned in assignments before scheduled due dates, paid close attention in class, and scored higher than most students on assessments. I questioned how they were able to overcome various learning disabilities to earn top grades in their classes. My inquiry led to a pilot study discussed later in this chapter. That pilot study led me to this larger interview study of teacher candidates with learning disabilities.

Review of the Literature

"Research is formalized curiosity…poking and prying with a purpose" (Hurston, 1942, p.143).

In his research rebuttal to Boote and Beile's (2005) article claiming the literature review "as a key component of a research project" (p.12), Maxwell (2006) argued instead, "a literature review is an essential tool, and any researcher must learn to use it competently and appropriately" (p.30). An exhaustive listing of any and all research even peripherally pertaining to the topic of study should not be the goal for foundational research. Instead, the focus should be on striving to incorporate a detailed, "thick" (Creswell, 2007) review of the most important, relevant topical literature in order to anchor a research study.

Using Maxwell's (2006) ideas of the literature review as a "conceptual framework" in which the "goal is an integrated set of theoretical concepts and empirical findings" (p.30), this section of my dissertation focuses on fluid examinations of relevant and applicable research conceptualizing the term "learning disabilities." More specifically, I explore college students with learning disabilities, education majors with learning disabilities, complexities associated with the degree and learning disability designation, and the support they have had to work through their disabilities to realize academic success.

Included in the research for this section is a detailed exploration of articles speaking to the intersection of teacher candidates who have learning disabilities. The articles were published

from 1993-2015. This timeframe coincides with the one given by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) for noticeable increases in formal identification of students with learning disabilities and in special needs services at all academic levels.

In my searches for applicable research information, I used several terms, combinations of terms, and various databases. Key words were used in isolation or in combinations. I eventually narrowed my focus to the following terms: *pre-service teachers*, *teacher candidates*, *student teachers*, *teacher educators, learning disabilities*, and *academic success*, in order to choose the most relevant literature to my study. I specifically searched from 2010-present in peer-reviewed journals such as: *Action in Teacher Education, American Educational Research Journal, Cambridge Journal of Education, Education, Educational Researcher, Exceptionality Education International, International Journal of Disability, International Journal of Educational Research, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, International Journal of Special Education, International Review of Qualitative Research, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, JoLLE (Journal of Language & Literacy Education), Journal of Learning Disabilities, Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, Journal of Teacher Education, Language Arts, Reading Research Quarterly, Teacher Education and Special Education*, *Teaching Exceptional Children.*

What are Learning Disabilities?

According to Scott (1997), learning disability is an umbrella term for various disorders affecting "how individuals receive, encode, store, and retrieve information" (p.88), which complicates previous ideas that a learning disability was one simple thing that could be understood through "biological truth" (Gabriel & Lester, 2012, p.11), or genetic predisposition to suffer from learning difficulties. According to Mulligan (2012), a "child's educational

performance must be adversely affected due to the disability" (para.2) in order for the difficulty to be officially labeled a "disability." Disorders affecting a person's "attention, memory, coordination, social skills, and emotional maturity" (Learning Disabilities Foundation of America, 2017a) influence learning. Some conditions affecting learning are termed 'high-incidence disabilities' (Bouck & Satsangi, 2015; Gage, Lierheimer, & Goran, 2012), so labeled because they "occur most frequently in the population" (Haager & Klingner, 2004, p.24). Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is a disorder related to learning disabilities as well as a high-incidence disability (Bouck & Satsangi, 2015; Gage et al., 2012; Learning Disabilities Foundation of America, 2017b). Listed in the table below are terminology for learning disabilities, high incidence disabilities, and related disorders that impact learning (Table 1), included to show the depth and breadth of disabilities and disorders influencing learning.

Table 1

Terminology for Specific Learning Disabilities, High Incidence Disabilities, and Related Disorders that Impact Learning

Auditory Processing Disorder	Emotional and/or Behavioral Disorders
Dyscalculia	Mild Intellectual Disability
Dysgraphia	High-Functioning Autism
Dyslexia	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Language Processing Disorder	Speech and Language Impairment
Memory	Dyspraxia
Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities	Executive Functioning
Visual-Perceptual/Visual Motor Deficit	Memory

Students with learning disabilities often struggle with “organization, time management, and/or attention” (Scott, 1997, p.88). Many have average to above-average intelligence with difficulties in “reading, mathematics, spelling, written expression, and oral language” (Scott, 1997, p.88). Gilbert (1998) explained, “Individuals with a learning disability are of at least average intelligence but experience difficulty in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language” (p.323). To be eligible for special needs services, students must have struggles in using language that will likely cause communication difficulties in understanding various language forms. In addition, affective problems such as anxiety (Glăveanu, 2011) can manifest when students have not learned strategies to support their needs.

Learning disabilities are typically prominent and noticed in early elementary school, but by the time students reach secondary school, they have frequently learned strategies to help them be successful. These same strategies are oftentimes not successful in college due to increasingly difficult academic expectations (Nordell, 2009). When potential education majors with learning disabilities are admitted into a teacher-education program, they are eligible to receive services as long as the modifications do not invalidate the rigor of the program of study (Ferri, Gallagher, & Connor, 2011). Once students with learning disabilities go to college, they are often not prepared for the academic requirements and fast-paced lecture of a college classroom.

College Students with Learning Disabilities

“Preparing students with learning disabilities…for success at college requires a focused effort by everyone involved, most importantly the student” (Hamblet, 2011, p.59).

Because students must self-identify a disability to receive services in college, it is often difficult to know the actual number of students with learning disabilities (Heiman, 2006).

However, for over two decades, there has been an increase in the number of students with learning disabilities admitted into American universities. Thus, more and more students entering university have been supported in their learning needs in larger, more impactful ways than in generations past. Students with learning struggles have had lawful accommodations (US Department of Justice, 2014), through inclusion in general education classes in the least restrictive environment, with differentiation strategies designed for their learning needs. They leave high school, but quickly find themselves "at risk" (Mason, 2013, p.6) in their university learning context or they have become dependent on accommodations that are not typically available in a college classroom environment.

According to Gilbert (1998), college students with learning disabilities, usually manifested in "academic skills and performance" (p.324), comprise the largest recognized group with special needs. The most common learning disabilities are in "reading comprehension, writing fluency, calculation, quantitative concepts, memory, attention span, dyslexia, and dysgraphia" (Heiman, 2006, p.466). To narrow it down a bit more, in a 2010 report, the *Carnegie Council on Advanced Adolescent Literacy*, a program dedicated to the issues of adolescent literacy and research, identified potential reading struggles many students, but especially those with learning disabilities, faced in college involved struggling to read simple words aloud, reading accurately but non-fluently, reading fluently but with little comprehension, or comprehending grade-level texts but being unable to think critically about those text.

There are numerous research studies that highlight struggling learners and coping strategies that have been successful. They mainly focus on motivations to read (Melekoglu & Wilkerson, 2013; Schiller et al., 2012), effective remediation for specific content (Frijters, Lovett, Sevcik, & Morris, 2012; Lee et al., 2012; Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2011), and

governing policies affecting struggling readers (Franzak, 2008; Spencer, 2012). There are several reports, essays, and surveys that address college students with learning disabilities. The studies reviewed in the following sections focus on research studies detailing how learning disabilities have been previously examined, exploring college undergraduate learning disabilities and coping strategies, and the ways they set themselves up for academic success.

How Learning Disabilities Have Been Previously Examined

As more students with formally identified learning disabilities graduate from high school, there has been an escalation of students with learning disabilities entering undergraduate programs. According to recent educational statistics for the United States, enrollment in university undergraduate programs has continued at an overall increase from approximately 14.4 million in the fall of 1991 (Snyder & Hoffman, 1993) to approximately 20.5 million expected in the fall of 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a), an approximate 42.8% increase. As students enter college, it is expected they will seek out degrees in fields where they have interests and have previously found success. What is less of an expectation, perhaps, are students with literacy-based learning disabilities pursuing careers in literacy fields.

Learning disabilities do not disappear in adulthood; they are not outgrown. In fact, when students are no longer in a structured learning environment, their disabilities may become more pronounced and difficult to work through (Gilbert, 1998) because the bounded support structures have been removed. Students need to be able to adapt to different sociocultural contexts in college environments, but may not have the independent coping strategies and support systems in place to navigate increased pressures of higher learning. For example, young adults *may* struggle with using effective study strategies, making decisions, “lack of parental support,” “low academic self-concept” (Mason, 2013, p.76), feelings of inadequacy, managing stress, and

depression (Heiman, 2006; Nordell, 2009; Wootton, 2002). In speaking about students with learning disabilities in higher education environments, Nordell (2009) explained, "Students who need the help the most are the least likely to seek it out" (p.41), in part because they internalize their struggles, realizing they did not learn in the "general" educational environment in the same ways as other students. In high school, they may have suffered from non-inclusion in cultural and academic identity groups (Maydosz & Raver, 2010; Nordell, 2009) coupled with a desire not to call attention to their learning needs. Therefore, more students are coming from high school with learning disabilities that may intensify when they do not receive the structured support as they had in their prior educational career and may not fully anticipate the added pressures of college classes and heightened expectations for success.

Exploring College Undergraduate Learning Disabilities and Coping Strategies

In order to cope with the stress of entering college and striving to be academically successful, all students, but especially students with learning disabilities, depend on social connections (Heiman, 2006) for support. As Yuen and Shaughnessy (2001) discussed, academic learning leads to social acceptance, which "promotes retention and persistence" (p.204). So, the more social support, the less academic stress – placing even more importance on the role of a social support networks ("National study ties social support to student success," 2010). Students tend to model their behaviors after their peers (Aikens, 2013), which makes choosing academically minded social contacts vital to their own academic learning success. When students have encouraging social contacts, they depend on them for support and acceptance as they navigate new challenges faced in higher education.

Social contacts influence and help create social identities, which in-turn, form social statuses (Gee, 2012). Emotions are intertwined with social status (Dennis & Osterholt, 2011;

Heiman, 2006), and taken together, play essential roles in the ways in which students learn. They bring their social identities and emotions with them into the classroom, which influences how and what they learn. Then, when their intrinsic motivation, positive self-concept and self-efficacy, goal-setting, and developed coping strategies are added in, all of these facets play a part in how students work towards academic success.

Intrinsic motivation. A person is "intrinsically motivated" if the act is "inherently rewarding" (Bouwma-Gearhart, 2010, p.32) and is pursued out of curiosity or for the love of learning without a tangible reward, with an "excitement" for knowing more. Being intrinsically motivated is directly opposed to being "extrinsically motivated," meaning a person has performed for a reward besides the act itself with the expectation that receiving the reward was contingent on successful completion of the task (Bouwma-Gearhart, 2010; Dev, 1996; Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley, & Abarbanell, 2006; Wery & Thomson, 2013). Intrinsically motivated students are prompted by something inside themselves to achieve their idea of success.

Unfortunately, in many programs serving students with learning disabilities, extrinsic rewards or "tokens" are used to encourage learning (Sanacore, 2008). These rewards may negatively influence building intrinsic motivations for wanting to learn independently and "lead to behavior directed at getting the reward (avoiding punishment) in the easiest way" (Adelman, 1978, p.46). They run the risk of attributing academic successes and failures to outside factors such as teacher support or token awards, instead of aligning their success or failures with their own efforts (Dev, 1996). For students with learning disabilities, intrinsic motivation leads to more academic achievement (Wery & Thomson, 2013) and higher levels of educational competency, which "may help them to overcome some of the disadvantages caused by their disability" (Dev, 1996, p.19). In addition to an appropriate, strong academic curriculum, teachers

are encouraged to “communicate high, but realistic expectations,” and provide “challenging tasks and activities,” (Wery & Thomson, 2013, p.106) so students begin to feel more capable and confident, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation. Motivations are self-regulated (Kim, Schallert, & Kim, 2010) and when students choose to focus on academic success through social support networks and personal, intrinsic prompting to move ever-forward through their educational requirements, they are more likely to find success for which they have been striving.

Positive self-concept and self-efficacy. When college students have formally identified learning disabilities, have received services at the K-12 level, and have an awareness of “learning differences” (Leonard, 2009), they are more likely to have an “enhancement of self-concept and motivation… as a positive outcome” (Green, Nelson, Martin, & Marsh, 2006, p.543), than those students who have struggled without these supports. Self-confidence impacts learning (Ryan, Carrington, Selva, & Healy, 2009), and students who feel supported in their social contacts as well as their learning needs have a greater chance of experiencing positive self-concept.

There are some potential drawbacks in a socially structured, “normed” educational setting that should be anticipated. The first is no matter how confident a student feels coming into a higher education setting or how much social and emotional support he/she has, if academic success is not achieved, the positive self-concept will not be long-lasting (Green et al., 2006). This blow to self-confidence can lead to depression, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, as addressed earlier in this review of the literature. The second may seem like a positive outcome, but under closer scrutiny, can be unsettling. If struggling students find their *self-concept* in social status, and they experience identity as conforming to societal norms and expectations (Kim et al., 2010), then their self-concept depends on their peers for validation. What happens when and if they lose those social contacts/social statuses? Does their self-concept get “lost?”

Self-efficacy is slightly different in meaning than self-concept, although both are important for young adults navigating academic experiences. *Self-efficacy* is defined as:

> The belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome. Students with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves with difficult tasks and be intrinsically motivated. These students will put forth a high degree of effort in order to meet their commitments, and attribute failure to things which are in their control, rather than blaming external factors. (Kirk, 2013, para.1)

According to Schunk (1996), students with high self-efficacy work harder, are more engaged with their tasks even when difficult, and have higher success, which influences their "choice of activities, effort, persistence, and achievement" (p.5). So then, self-efficacy differs from self-concept in that the first is an intrinsic belief not drastically affected by outside circumstances and the second is flexible with context. People with high self-efficacy are more determined to work towards their goals, no matter the obstacles, while people with high self-concepts base their self-worth on other people's ideas of their value.

Although students with learning disabilities may have a higher self-concept, this feeling is transient if it is based on social status. When they are no longer receiving intense academic, social, and physical supports at the college level that they had previously received in their PreK-12th grade experiences, their self-concepts may deflate and feelings of self-worth may drop. It is important for all students, but especially students with learning disabilities, for instructors to encourage and support positive *self-efficacy* by modeling educational goal-setting (Green et al., 2006). Teachers can then support students in their understandings about the process works (Aikens, 2013; Atwell, 1998), and structure the curriculum so goal setting and progress-checks are part of the expectations for all students (Gallagher, 2006).

In a study about self-regulated learning, Schunk (1996) determined students who set goals are successful, more confident, more motivated to try new tasks, and more likely to set new goals. Kim (2008) argued that not only are they setting new goals, but they are using new goals to "channel the dispositional desires in a more concrete direction in self-regulatory process" (p.30). Students are focusing their energies into successful accomplishment of the new goals they set as they see they can be successful with their previous goals – which brings the topic back to higher education classrooms.

When many students enter universities and strugge in intensified and different ways than in K-12, they create coping strategies, enabling them to find success in their academic worlds (Petersen, 2014). If they have social support, intrinsic motivation, high self-efficacy, developed self-concepts that are positive and realistic, and are able to set authentic, "doable," goals, they will be more likely to realize the academic success they desire.

Coping Strategies. Once students with learning disabilities set goals and gather the necessary support systems, how do they cope with their disabilities to find this elusive success? Some researchers believe students with learning disabilities need to be taught explicit strategies, such as reading comprehension strategies, organizing routines, and paraphrasing, to actively process and retain information (Boyle et al., 2003; Damer & Melendres, 2011). Others believe if students are encouraged to make decisions about their learning, design their own instructional materials, and develop learning strategies in response to their disabilities, they will feel more invested in their own learning and develop authority as students (Rochford, 2006). As with most concepts in education, it is generally better to take a balanced approach. There will be students who feel more comfortable with explicit instruction and others who feel burdened by it. There will be students who feel empowered by the freedom to design their own curriculum to fit their

needs and others who feel lost without structure. The least harmful environment that challenges students to think and learn should be the goal for university-level classes.

There can be difficulties with coping strategies for students with learning disabilities (Smagorinsky, 2011). According to Gilbert (1998), strategies students use in higher education to cope with their learning disabilities, such as accommodations of extra time or having someone read any text to the student, may not easily transfer into the job market, having the opposite of the intended effect of bringing their literacy skills up to on-level in comparison with their age-group peers (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010). There is the consideration that even with accommodations and specific coping strategies, there are “no guarantees that students will be in a position to transcend their difficulties without support” (Petersen, 2014, p.100). The very strategies put into place to support young struggling students, such as extra time or having a reader available, could cause them to fall behind their peers later in the educational context when they may not have structured supports available, or cause dependence on the support and an inability to function at acceptable literacy levels without it.

Ways College Undergraduates with Learning Disabilities Seek Academic Success

To mitigate dependency circumstances, “universities should be advocates and teach individuals to learn productive advocacy techniques” (Obiakor et al., 1995, p.20). All students, but especially students with academic struggles, should learn to advocate for their learning needs. Although professors and classroom teachers may understand not all students are alike, they need to also understand what kinds of teaching strategies and contexts best support and promote student learning (Dennis & Osterholt, 2011; Wootton, 2002), and to appreciate that students may have difficulties not previously anticipated. Each student needs to be her/his own best advocate – championing learning strategies that best support individual instructional needs.

As undergraduates in a university setting, they are "negotiating" their identities through knowledge-based learning, class discussions, applications of strategies as students and as future professionals (Bloomfield, 2010; Gravett, Henning, & Eiselen, 2011; Ryan et al., 2009). Students must learn "how to learn"(Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p.152-153). Whether they are high-achieving, on-level, academically struggling, or somewhere among these choices, students must know themselves, their own needs, and how to best advocate for their own futures in order to chart the surest course for their eventual career destinations.

Transitioning to Classroom Instructors

"A good teacher must be able to put [themselves] in the place of those who find learning hard" (Levi, 1975, p.174).

The Early Childhood and Middle Grades programs at the target university are highly competitive, with each spot in the cohorts being sought-after and hard-won. When students officially enter into "major" classes, like teacher candidates in education programs nation-wide, they are focused on learning *what* and *how* to teach (Olson & Finson, 2009). They must be comfortable with their content knowledge and must learn ways to determine best strategies and methods of instruction to support all students' learning needs (Gravett et al., 2011). At many universities, education majors must pass edTPA, as part of their student teaching requirements, and state licensing exams to be certified to teach (American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, 2015; Henson, 2015). These requirements can be difficult for students with learning disabilities needing accommodations, so they may choose not to seek them. Their accommodations may not be covered in services mandated by government legislation.

All teacher candidates come into the program as novice instructors, gathering experiences as they progress through their university classes and two or three semesters of field placements.

When they have earned their student teaching positions, they go into their last placement ideally having adequate content knowledge and beginning teacher experience, so once they are comfortable with their mentor teacher, procedures, and curriculum, they can then focus on getting to know their students and supporting their academic needs. However, for teacher candidates with learning disabilities, progress through the program can be more difficult due to legislative mandates and required teaching competencies, addressed below.

Legislative Mandates

Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act*, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA), all mandate students with learning disabilities have accommodations so they may participate to the fullest extent possible in the least restrictive environment. Gilbert's (1998) research specifically addressed the fine line universities and cooperating school districts walk when teacher candidates with disabilities are enrolled in their teacher education programs. "Legal mandates designed to ensure equal educational opportunity for individuals with disabilities require teacher education faculties to modify program requirements" (p.323). Legal terms used in the mandates are defined as:

- qualified individual with a disability – one who can perform the most fundamental duties of the position (held or desired) with or without reasonable accommodation
- essential functions – fundamental job duties of the employment position
- reasonable accommodations – include modifying existing facilities; restructuring of the job; adjusting of examination, training materials, or policies; and providing qualified readers or interpreters

Universities and school districts are required to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities so they have the same opportunities as non-disabled students (Papalia-

Berardi et al., 2002; Stevens, 2001; Wakefield, 2007). However, even with accommodations, students must be able to perform essential functions of the position "in ways that do not compromise outcomes for either the teacher with disabilities or the…students" (Gilbert, 1998, p.336), or they do not meet the criteria for a qualified individual for that position.

Teaching Competencies

Although "teaching competence is seen as a commodity to be developed [over time] and attained by the individual pre-service teacher" (Bloomfield, 2010, p.228), new teachers are expected from the first day on the job to be knowledgeable and fully prepared to teach (Gravett et al., 2011). Newly hired educators must depend on "real-world experiences" (Ryan et al., 2009, p.156) to help them understand their responsibilities and roles within the classroom environment; even though research has shown most teacher candidates undergo a "transition shock" (Gravett et al., 2011, p.S138) as they begin teaching in their own classrooms and look to mentor teachers for advice and approval, especially in unfamiliar instructional situations (Cocks & Thoresen, 2013; Flavian, 2015). It is important for *all* teacher candidates to understand:

> Certain abilities are necessary for teaching: the ability to process information quickly and respond to that information, the ability to attend to more than one thing at a time, an adequate content knowledge of subject-matter taught, and a level of literacy skills that allows a person to plan and enact ways to meet student needs. (Gilbert, 1998, p.337)

Teachers need to know that they must be able to communicate quickly, be flexible with scheduling, and take advantage of "teachable moments," because there may not always be available accommodations for every situation (Gilbert, 1998). To convey "subject content knowledge" and model "discourse communities" (Petersen, 2014, p.92), educators must be able to communicate effectively, scaffold new knowledge, and assess each student's specific short

and long-term learning needs (Wilson & Kittleson, 2012), supporting them with best teaching strategies. Learners with varying needs are in each classroom, and lead instructors must be able to differentiate teaching curriculum so each student is reached in ways they learn best.

Teacher Candidates with Learning Disabilities

"There is no single road to becoming a teacher, nor is there a single story of learning to teach" (Bloomfield, 2010, p.221).

For teacher candidates, learning all they need to know before graduation in tandem with application of their own theoretical/methodological learnings, can be daunting. When realities of academic struggles and learning disabilities are considered, getting through school and finding a job can seem insurmountable. Teacher candidates with learning disabilities need support in forms of explicit teaching, modeling organizing strategies, and supporting students with written and verbal feedback from their professors (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Nistler & McMurry, 1993; Wertheim, Vogel, & Brulle, 1998), school administrators, non-disabled colleagues, and mentors in securing and maintaining instructor positions (Couzens, Poed, Kataoka, Brandon, Hartley & Keen, 2015; Obiakor et al., 1995; Smagorinsky, 2011). Gilbert (1998) argued a person should not be prevented/excluded from a career in education based on a disability. Each person should be assessed individually, on their own merits. US laws governing accommodations for people with special needs state, "The intent of the laws regulating treatment of individuals with learning disabilities is the notion that the disability must not be a discrimination factor in employment or daily living" (Gilbert, 1998, p.336; see also: Akins et al., 2001; Georgia Professional Standards Commission Educator Certification Section, 2016; Wakefield et al., 2007). Individuals should not be barred from seeking jobs or pursuing specialized career paths based on a disability, as long as they are able to perform the essential functions of the position.

Abilities vs. Disabilities

In a perfect world, Section 504, IDEA, and ADA (disability laws) would not be needed because it would be assumed individuals would be evaluated based on *abilities* not prevented from applying due to *disabilities*. Smagorinsky (2011) wrote an "enlightened society" can only come when fewer people are "treated as abnormal, deficient, and disordered" (p.1728). In an educational context, as referenced in the last section, the criteria for evaluation are very different.

In truth, an "educator with a disability has additional demands and challenges to meet" (Obiakor et al., 1995, p.10) and researchers question whether providing some kinds of accommodations (such as a reader or extra time) would be fair to other non-disabled teacher candidates or realistic in this fast-paced, high-stakes world American school systems have become (Bouwma-Gearhart, 2010; Gilbert, 1998; Petersen, 2014; Wilson & Kittleson, 2012). It is one thing for an undergraduate to have extra time on a test or for someone to read an assessment aloud to her/him in a college class, and quite another for a teacher to not be able to respond to a note from a young child's parent because a reader is unavailable or to need extra time for daily informal student assessments without extra time in the school day to accomplish these assessments. The schedule is already packed with mandatory activities, and it would be almost impossible to find extra time each day for a slower response process, especially in the younger grades where multiple daily formal and informal reading assessments are taken.

Research Results

Academically successful teacher candidates have coping strategies they use in learning. To translate success into classroom achievement, they need to support all students – struggling, general education, and gifted – in ways that allow the students to participate in their own knowledge acquisition using their own strategies or ones learned from their instructors. Teacher

candidates should be flexible in planning so they can be fully engaged with their students in learning. They must strive to be caring educators who teach and learn with their students. Learning to teach is a process not accomplished in a short timeframe; but with patience – with oneself and with one's students – education majors can successfully transition from student teacher to instructor-of-record.

Included in the research for this section are articles specifically speaking to the intersectional topics of teacher candidates with learning disabilities. The articles were published from 1993-2015, which coincides with the timeframe given by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) for the noticeable increases in formal identification of students with learning disabilities and in special needs services at both the PreK-12 and the college level.

In the literature for teacher candidates with learning disabilities, there were 16 published articles/essays from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Israel. One mixed-methods study (Leyser, Greenberger, Sharoni, & Vogel, 2011) five literature/legislation reviews (Akins et al., 2001; Brulle, 2006; Papalia-Berardi et al., 2002; Stevens, 2001; Wertheim et al., 1998) one quantitative research study (Baldwin, 2007), five personal narratives (Gilbert, 1998; Harrison & Lemke, 1999, 2000; Nistler & McMurry, 1993; Wakefield, 2007), and four qualitative research studies (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Glazzard & Dale, 2013; Griffiths, 2012; Riddell & Weedon, 2013) were found. Although this is by no means an exhaustive list, these published articles are the most recent and relevant to my research.

In the quantitative study, Baldwin (2007) explored administrators' beliefs about available and effective accommodations for education majors with learning disabilities in place at an American university. This study backed-up previous work in the field and stated:

> Teacher education programs are willing to provide accommodations that do not change the standards or requirements of the program, but are not as willing to provide accommodations that alter the program requirements or change the level of competence expected of a teacher candidate. (pp.137-138)

The administrators understood "available" accommodations meant "effective" ones, even when the accommodations were broad-based and homogeneously offered. Program coordinators expected teacher candidates with learning disabilities to receive services, leaving the "standards" of their program unchanged, such as extra time on tests or alternate locations, a reader for extensive texts, or a note-taker, but not accommodations for alternate assignments or field placement experiences. The study ended with a recommendation for administrators to develop accommodation training for faculty, streamline the process of self-identifying for students, and to closely monitor students with learning disabilities in order to "council them out" (p.138) as needed to establish and maintain a rigorous teacher-education program.

There were three personal narrative essays and one qualitative case study that each focused on one teacher candidate with a learning disability. Each of these narratives and the case study delved deeply into the lives of their participants and shared stories of heart-break/success, exclusion/inclusion, and public/private decisions about their lives and their learning. In the first of the three narratives, an essay about one US elementary education major with severe literacy-based learning disabilities, Gilbert (1998) related the struggles she, as the teacher-supervisor, and Carrie, a student with an learning disability, had separately and together as the semester of focus progressed. Carrie was an adult who did not want to disclose she had learning disabilities or the nature of those disabilities. Because the author was the field placement supervisor, she was the liaison between the teacher candidate and the mentor teacher. Gilbert was prohibited by law from

disclosing Carrie’s private information, even though she was struggling to find success in her placement and her mentor teacher was struggling to understand why Carrie had difficulties with first-grade level phonics instruction or reading aloud to the students. The essay ended with pleas for students to disclose any learning disabilities to their mentors and frustration that legislation prevented the researcher from sharing any information with the mentor teacher, who had been a long-term colleague and friend.

In the second and third narrative essays, US researchers, Nistler and McMurry (1993) and Wakefield (2007), discussed two female education majors with learning disabilities and their challenges in finding success in school-based activities. For the participant, Heather, in Nistler and McMurry’s (1993) qualitative study, learning to read was met with failure after failure, covered up by her mother. Instead of seeking the academic help she needed, Heather’s mother taught her to hide her disability and her struggles, worked with her daughter to teach her to write and read, and assisted in her learning. It was not until Heather was an education major in college that she disclosed to the professor, the lead author, she had literacy-based learning disabilities. The authors closed with three important thoughts. First, since Heather did not receive services for her learning disability and was taught “differently” by her mother so she could be academically successful, her situation offered insight on ways to reach students individually who learned in a different way. Second, throughout her educational tenure, it was the learning environment that encouraged this participant. She was able to learn from others what she could not independently grasp. And finally, the authors urged all educators to encourage students to speak about their literacy understandings and to really listen when they talked. If Heather had been so encouraged before college, it is possible she could have received services that would have better assisted her learning.

For Hope, the participant in Wakefield's (2007) narrative qualitative study, the challenges came from entrance testing for college admittance. Hope had been a "B" student through high school and had always wanted to be a teacher – but her scores on the college entrance exams were not high enough for admittance. Then, should she finally gain entrance, she still had to contend with state licensing exams, which were similar to the college entrance exams in types of questions and format. Hope was able to find help with a counselor who diagnosed her learning disabilities and connected her with a tutor to help her pass the tests. Even though the participant had since graduated from the program and was a classroom teacher, Wakefield ended her article with the unanswered inquiry into how many other promising future educators were held back from longed-for careers due to difficulties with testing?

In their qualitative case study, Riddell and Weedon (2013) explored one education major in the United Kingdom and her time spent at the university. The participant, Jean, knew she had literacy-based learning disabilities, but was reluctant to disclose this information for fear of dismissal from the program, exclusion from peer groups, and possible struggles with professors over accommodations. However, as Jean fell behind, a doctor recommended she self-identify with the university to receive services and complete the program. Jean followed the doctor's advice and was able to be academically successful. But, she felt her disclosure had jeopardized her professional relationships and would prevent her from securing employment. Jean "jettisoned" the learning disability label, as many other students had done before her. The authors ended the article wondering if an individual previously identified as learning disabled could throw off the label so easily when it had become part of a person's identity?

In the realm of personal narrative essays were two separate papers presented at two teacher conferences with the same two authors addressing similar topics with different

participants. In the earlier one, Harrison and Lemke (1999) described the experiences of four teacher candidates with learning disabilities to show "how adaptations, accommodations, or… a creative look at alternative approaches can create an environment for success" (p.1). The researchers gave a run-down on current (at that time) legislation and how with time, attention, and care, teacher candidates with learning disabilities could be successful. Moreover, they spoke to the ways university faculty and in-service mentors can support and work with teacher candidates with learning disabilities to greater ensure success in the field.

In the later study, Harrison and Lemke (2000) continued their previous ideas about teacher candidates with learning disabilities and how to better ensure their success, but delved a bit deeper. In this narrative, they presented the stories of two teacher candidates with learning disabilities and spoke to the ways they had been successful in contexts previously considered "impossible or unrealistic" (p.1). They argued for a "holistic" environment when teacher candidates with learning disabilities are evaluated in the field. The take-away from both narrative essays was that teacher candidates with learning disabilities can be successful as instructors when care it taken to support them in their training with thoughtful, effective, reasonable accommodations.

Couzens, Poed, Kataoka, Brandon, Harley and Keen's (2015) case study set in an Australian university, is a bit different, as it focused on the university's efforts to accommodate and assist teacher candidates with "hidden" disabilities. After interviewing seven students enrolled in a teacher degree program and eight administrative staff, the researchers found, similar to studies previously mentioned (Nistler & McMurry, 1993; Riddell & Weedon, 2013), students were reluctant to disclose the natures of their disabilities to their university for fear of peer exclusion, faculty indifference, or program dismissal. When asked about their most "effective"

social support system, participants agreed it “came from friends and family” (p.36), rather than the university. Professors and tutors who were “supportive and flexible with students” (p.37) came in as second most effective social support – leaving the university system as a distant third.

The issue seemed not to be that the university did not have accommodations available, it was that the students did not deem the accommodations sufficient or especially effective. The researchers argued, “Different students take different paths and different timelines to pursue their learning goals, and equitable universities are those that provide flexible learning opportunities to all students across the breadth of courses” (p.38). Their recommendations were for more faculty and staff training, easing of time constraints on graduation requirements, and encouraging students with learning disabilities to disclose to the university and their professors the nature of their learning disabilities and work with the university to improve the services – also a recommendation from a previously mentioned study (Baldwin, 2007).

According to Glazzard and Dale’s (2013) qualitative research inquiry focused on two teacher candidates in the United Kingdom struggling with learning disabilities, each of the trainee teachers reported having academic “self-doubts” (p.28) due to low expectations from childhood educators. These self-doubts contributed to “learned helplessness” (p.35). It was only after receiving positive academic support, meaning support from their professors for their learning and social needs, that both of the focus teachers felt empowered to succeed. The researchers concluded, “Creating a ‘can do’ culture of high expectations and a positive, supportive classroom climate is vital for facilitating a positive sense of self” (p.36). These two teacher candidates felt they internalized positive academic and social support from professors who focused on their practical skills and progress made over their academic abilities and comparative skills. They believed they would be able to support their own future students who

might struggle to learn with empathy and inclusive teaching strategies.

Csoli and Gallagher (2012) and Griffiths (2012), in separate qualitative research studies, investigated teacher training programs and teacher candidates' experiences in field placements in Canada and the United Kingdom, respectively. Csoli and Gallagher (2012) sought to understand teacher candidates' placement experiences. They explained teacher candidates "expect to be initiated into an inclusive and accommodating program and profession…[which] is likely to be based on their lived experiences as students with learning disabilities and subsequent beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning," (p.72). The teacher candidates were surprised when previously relied on accommodation they had come to expect were not in place in authentic classroom placements. Just as Nistler and McMurry (1993), Riddell and Weedon (2013), and Couzensa et al., (2015) recommended, Csoli and Gallagher (2012) suggested faculty receive training on making appropriate and effective accommodations for students with learning disabilities, that students disclose to the university, to their professors, and to their mentors they have an learning disability, and more should be done to simplify the process of self-identifying and obtaining services.

For the final research study in this review of the literature, Griffiths (2012) wanted to explore field placement experiences for teacher candidates with learning disabilities and create a space for her participants' "voices" to be heard in their own placement experiences. There were positive and negative comments made by the participants, but the majority of the data seemed to focus on ways the students' believed their teacher training programs could be improved to assist not only their needs, but also other students who may have previously been undiagnosed. The participants recommended students be honest about their need for support, be more active in pursuit of support instead of waiting for the support to happen, to work closely with the

university, and for placement schools to have the best social supports in place. The participants believed their learning disabilities "placed them in a unique position to understand support and encourage their pupils. Their personal experiences… conferred unique insight into what pupils could achieve and enabled students to identify pupil underachievement" (Griffiths, 2012, p.58). These teacher candidates with learning disabilities felt their experiences in navigating their own learning disabilities put them into position to understand and efficiently support future students to help them achieve academic success.

Teachers with Learning Disabilities

"If fewer people are considered to be, and treated as, abnormal, deficient, and disordered, education will come closer to realizing its goals for an enlightened society" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p.1728).

Teachers with learning disabilities in classrooms worldwide must cope with their own ever-present learning needs while teaching their students with varying academic requirements in ways that help them best learn. In this last section of the literature review, one mixed-methods and five qualitative research studies from Finland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Israel are examined for insight on the ways in which educators navigate their learning disabilities while supporting their students as they acquire knowledge needed for academic success.

In his beautifully written, gut-wrenchingly honest, auto-ethnographic narrative piece, Smagorinsky (2011) qualitatively detailed his personal struggles as an American university professor and researcher living with Asperger's Syndrome. In learning about and seeking treatment for his daughter's "atypical mental health" (p.1702), he was able to understand his own previously unidentified social and emotional difficulties. He described himself as "high functioning" and allowed that in some contexts, he had been seen as having "reasonably good

people skills," but believed he had "taught himself" (p.1711) coping skills to compensate for his lack of innate social awareness. He argued for a "day when people can openly divulge their extranormative makeup and do so without becoming stigmatized and thus treated as disordered and in deficit to others" (p.1723). Smagorinsky shared his story and his beliefs about outsiders' views of mental health issues to bring awareness and understanding for students with learning disabilities as well as teachers in stressful environments who have learned to cope with their learning disabilities and can offer support to others through their classroom instruction and social science research.

In a 2001 qualitative multi-case research study, Ferri, Keefe, and Gregg, spoke with teachers from the United States who had experienced learning disabilities, and could speak to being a special needs student and a teacher of students with special needs. Each participant "described [his/her learning disability] as a tool that helped them relate to their students" (p.28). They felt they could connect differently to their students due to their own early learning experiences in which they had felt embarrassed and silenced. The researchers then concluded, "All three participants believed that their learning disabilities made them more successful in the classroom, demonstrating a shift from considering their disability as a flaw to discovering that it was actually an asset" (p.29). In fact, the participants felt pulled toward educational careers where they could support struggling students differently than they had been supported.

In reflecting on their own classes in which education majors with learning disabilities were enrolled, Ferri, Keefe, and Gregg (2001) further stated explained they kept "expectations high but… offered supports to students in reaching those expectations. [They] stressed the need to teach students [explicit] strategies to help them be successful and to regard all students as intelligent and capable, and to prepare them for college" (p.28). The authors' strategies for

student success included: high expectations for teachers and students alike, forming close relationships with students, goal-setting, and teaching with multiple modalities. The authors emphasized all teachers must understand there is no "one" way to teach or learn. It is most important for teachers and students to work together to realize their strengths and for academic success (Nam & Oxford, 1998). Galguera (2011) proposed teacher candidates needed not to learn to teach a specific type of student, but rather they should be "teachers capable of effecting specific learning outcomes" (p.86) that reflect purposeful, deliberate instruction. In other words, teachers should focus their planning and instruction on what students need to know, rather than getting bogged down in labels of special needs, general education, or gifted.

As education majors with learning disabilities prepare to teach, it is important for them to understand literacy strategies successfully used for personal reading and writing and the ways in which they can then reach out to young learners who may struggle with learning disabilities. Ferri, Keefe, and Gregg (2001) and Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, and Volpitta (2005) researched teachers in the US with learning disabilities who had at least five years' teaching experience, and the ways they supported struggling students. In a qualitative interview study, Valle, Solis, Volpitta, and Connor (2004) looked at American teachers with learning disabilities and their reluctance to "come out" to their colleagues and/or administrators about their learning disabilities due to perceived negative reactions. In Vogel and Sharoni's (2011) mixed-methods study of twelve teachers in Israel who struggled with learning disabilities but were successful educators, the teacher-participants had been employed for a few years and felt scarred by their learning disabilities.

Finally, in a qualitative study in which five of the participants were from Finland and three were from the United Kingdom, Burns and Bell (2011) identified and interviewed teachers

with learning disabilities who felt they could "offer constructive support to students in understanding the difficulties, accepting themselves as whole and discovering ways to overcome barriers to learning" (p.959), echoing the findings of Ferri, et al (2005). Putting this all together, educators with learning disabilities may feel connected to their students who struggle, may not feel confident in talking about their own disabilities, and may even be astounded at their own success. What seems to be missing from the research is a narrative inquiry interview study with multiple American teacher candidates with literacy-based learning disabilities exploring how participants coped with ongoing literacy development, and engaged with literacy teaching.

Pilot Study Information

All the time, my parents read to me

all the time, learning to read was difficult

all the time, it was a big challenge

all the time, it was traumatic

It wasn't easy, you know

they said I wouldn't be successful

it would frustrate me

it was hard

my teachers made my family aware of the issues, or potential issues

there's so many different facets

you have no idea what that stuff means

It concerns me

anyone can face anything

at an unexpected time

Now, I come from a place

of wanting to understand the students

what makes them unique

shows off who they are

and all their strengths

what makes them great

I give them a safe place

for when they have struggles

All the time

it wasn't easy

anyone can face anything

I give them a safe place[1]

Learning to read is not easy. Some emergent learners, regardless of age or heritage language, struggle every day to decode the lines, loops, squiggles, or circles in texts that others understand with little difficulty. Why is learning to read difficult for some and less so for others? This pilot study explored what could be learned from education undergraduates who struggled to learn and the ways the strategies they developed could assist emergent learners who struggled.

My participants, two of whom were former students and one was a current student, had all been in an elementary education Reading Instruction and Assessment class where I was the instructor of record. I spoke privately with them about their learning struggles. I confirmed all participants struggled in school and they were either on-track to complete an undergraduate degree to teach in an elementary education classroom or were in graduate school and had not yet been the instructor of record in their own classrooms. The participants struggled with migraine headaches, an incurable infectious disease causing frequent absences, or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) coupled with severe Test Anxiety.

[1] Found poem constructed from participant interviews to show cycles of learning and struggle

The research design was a multi-case study with one scheduled interview for each of the three participants. The purpose of this study was to explore how pre-service teachers coped with their own learning difficulties and then used those coping skills to connect with and support their own students who struggled to learn. Thematic analysis guidelines were followed to effectively identify themes within participants' struggles to learn to read, ways they learned to cope with their difficulties, and how they envisioned using these strategies in their own classrooms. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What kinds of learning strategies were most effective as these pre-service teachers worked through their personal learning struggles?
2. How do these pre-service teachers feel they connected or will connect with students who have learning struggles?

This project was derived from data secured during semi-structured interviews with three elementary education pre-service teacher participants who self-identified as struggling learners. In order to prevent recognition of and to provide anonymity for participants, I used pseudonyms for all individuals included in the study. This was done to protect the privacy of the participants and to ensure no one was harmed as a result of this research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Two types of data were collected: digital audio recordings and field notes from interviews.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis, I analyzed the interview data. The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the ways pre-service teachers cope with their own learning difficulties and then use those coping skills to connect with and support their students who may struggle either with learning disabilities or other life contexts. Each of the participants found social support for their struggles with their parents, one or more significant educators, and understanding others. Despite obstacles that made learning difficult for each of

them, they were high-achieving students with positive spirits who were determined to be successful in their chosen careers. Although they were at differing stages in their academic lives, each one had the motivation and support to overcome their difficulties and achieve their goals.

My research interests then shifted to the ways teacher candidates had overcome learning struggles and how the educational system could support struggling students in overcoming these difficulties. More specifically, how did teacher candidates with learning disabilities that affected their literacy overcome their difficulties to succeed in educational environments? What kinds of services and supports helped them achieve at their highest levels? How did they envision themselves as literacy teachers?

This pilot study was used to assess the feasibility of the larger, planned dissertation study. Working with the initial participants allowed for testing of the interview question guide, data collection, and analysis methods. Assessment of the completed pilot study revealed a need for more participants, a focused definition of "learning disability" rather than "learning struggles," tweaks to the interview questions guide in the form of multiple, focused interviews, and a change in data analysis methods from thematic to narrative analysis to more fully include participants' life experiences and stories so their "voices" were heard. This pilot study was completed approximately six months prior to beginning the dissertation research. It has been included in abbreviated form, here, to illustrate the foundation from which the larger dissertation study came.

Conclusion

Learning disabilities are typically diagnosed in early elementary school with the need for services diminishing in secondary school due to learned coping strategies. But as students leave high school and head into the job market or to higher education, they often feel out of balance because the supports from academic instructors and the educational system as a whole are no

longer in place and the fast-pace of on-the-job training or life in university classrooms far exceeds their previous experiences with new learning. Young adults often find themselves facing new learning contexts with heightened feelings of anxiety and expectations for success.

Strategies for successful navigation of post-high school learning environments often included realistic and positive goal setting, high motivation for learning, and social support in the form of reliable friends, understanding authority figures, and/or a caring parental presence. Universities can help mitigate students' feelings of dependency on previous academic structures through instructions and modeling in the area of self-advocacy of accommodation of their learning needs. In short, students must "learn how to learn" (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p.152-153). It is important that students know how they best learn and what is required for successful completion of courses so that they can be their own best advocates.

For teacher candidates and in-service teachers with learning disabilities, feelings of connectedness with their current and future struggling students are a benefit in learning to teach. Even when these teacher candidates are not yet confident in opening up about their disabilities due to feelings of inadequacy or a lack of confidence in overcoming educational obstacles, if they are given support and a nurturing environment, they are likely to find professional and personal successes. My study adds to the field and goes beyond detailing first-hand accounts of what support would be of benefit for teacher candidates and the difficulties associated with publically sharing one's learning disability, by exploring the ways teacher candidates negotiated their literacy-based learning disabilities as they learned how to teach students with all levels of need. This interview study leads to a better understanding of how these teacher candidates, like the teachers in previous studies, understood their experiences as critical conduits for helping students develop their literacy capabilities.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is written in a three-article format. Chapter 2 is an in-depth exploration of the methodology that provided structure for my research. Research in the field has explored personal accounts of working with preservice teachers with learning disabilities in university classrooms and field placements in which accommodations were available on campus, but not in their entirety in placements where they were interning or student teaching. Discussions of the need for support for all teacher candidates, but especially those teacher candidates with learning disabilities, has been noted and recommendations range from encouraging instructors to make personal connections with the teacher candidates to detailing the need for learning disability accommodation training for all involved parties. This is an interpretive qualitative interview study understood through complementary lenses of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bakhtin's dialogism. Semi-structured interviews were the foundation and Polkinghorne's narrative data analysis methods were the blueprint from which the study was constructed, as information collected is not a synonym for data collected (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007). Chapters 3, 4, and 5, written as stand-along manuscripts, will be submitted to scholarly journals.

In Chapter 3, I explore Erin's literacy learning and teaching through the lens of her learning disability. An impromptu after-class conversation with this participant in which she shared her learning struggles with me was the catalyst for the dissertation study. After speaking with Erin, I began to wonder how teacher candidates with learning disabilities come the teaching profession and how they engage in literacy learning and literacy instruction with students as they negotiate their own literacy difficulties. For Erin, the need for accommodations after graduating from tutoring in 8th grade did not exist. She did not need extra support, but she did feel she

benefitted from socially connecting to and working with her peers and her instructors. The key finding from this participant and her literacy experiences was when she needed support, she leaned on more knowledgeable others and thrived in academia. Then, when Erin was with students in her field placements, she was able to *be* the more knowledgeable other for her students in general and for students struggling to read or write, specifically.

In Chapter 4, I look at each of the six participants individually, and then look across participants for a more holistic understanding of their literacy learning and engagement with literacy teaching. The findings echoed on a larger scale the idea that teacher candidates with learning disabilities value peer collaborations in small groups and feel this format is often the best learning support for their needs. Each of the participants spoke to the need for social and academic support from both peers and mentors, as well as the need for self-advocacy – a building block of self-efficacy.

Then, in Chapter 5, I take an in-depth look at the methods used in analysis of narrative data through Polkinghorne's methods. I speak to the differences between the two modes, 'analysis of the narrative' and 'narrative analysis,' both facets of Polkinghorne's methods. The process used to analyze the data collected for this dissertation honors Polkinghorne's recursive narrative strategies and is offered as a way to construct analysis based on both individual and corporate data.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I look across the dissertation to identify and discuss implications for academic research and teacher educator practice. The conclusions shared reach across the intersectional topics of teacher candidates with learning disabilities and literacy learning and teaching to discuss how future research could build on these findings in ways that advocate for learning disabilities as a diversity. Teacher candidates with learning disabilities have the drive to

succeed, or they would not have been admitted into their major programs. More and more college students with learning disabilities entering education programs and training to be teachers necessitates academic and social understandings of how to best support their needs for the good of our student populations and our profession.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

"We are always already theorized" (St. Pierre, personal communication, 2013)

I am both an educator and a student, which means I teach and learn through the filter of my own understandings of theoretical positioning. I read to make sense of my ideas and to acquire the language necessary to talk through my understandings of theoretical positioning. I am consistently drawn to the idea that people are made up of multiples characteristics, or selves, and everything around them in the social world influences and informs their interactions with themselves, with others, with learning, and with relationships. To speak to the ideas of social influences on our lives and learning combined with making meaning of our every-changing and ever-evolving selves, a combined theoretical approach of socioculturalism and dialogism was taken. In this chapter, complementary theoretical frameworks, research design, methods, and analysis used for this dissertation are detailed.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theories derive from the "socio-historical school of psychology" (Lattuca, 2002, p.714) established by Vygotsky and his colleagues, Luria and Leont'ev, who became known as members of the "Vygotsky Circle" (Redkina, 2013). Aligning with Marxist philosophy (Veresov, 2005), their foundational belief was that a person could only be understood within the social context of his/her existence (Lattuca, 2002). Vygotsky explained, "We could say that the psychological nature of humans represents the aggregate of internalised social *relations that have*

become functions for the individual and forms of his/her structure" (1981, p.164). He believed an individual could only be understood in the context of his/her social world, or culture.

Envisioned by Vygotsky, sociocultural theory includes the following tenets: "human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p.191). In other words, humans perform activities within their immediate social environment using language and/or tools, which can only truly be realized when their entire developmental history is considered (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). We are social beings living in a social world being shaped by contexts, situations, circumstances, and our experiences.

While sociocultural theory has been taken up by many different researchers with varying ideas of how they want to put theory to work, such as with critical theory (Friere, 2000) or literacy as a social practice (Street, 2003), I return to Vygotsky's fundamental concepts of humans existing in a cultural context, structured by their use of language and symbols, with an historical understanding of development in order to best focus my research on the life experiences of my participants.

Sociocultural Theory: Vygotsky

My research into sociocultural theory and its founding father, Lev Vygotsky, met with the discovery that not only were his theories rife with expectations for cultural awareness, his own work and the dissemination of his ideas through future theorists' conceptualizations were shaped by the culture in which he lived. Vygotsky, the heart and soul of socioculturalism, went from being a driving force for his developing theory of learning, to obscurity due to the political climate of his homeland, to celebrated forward-thinking philosopher and theorist nearly 30 years after his death. In the introduction to this section on conceptualizing my theoretical perspectives,

I gave a brief description of sociocultural theory and why I used Vygotsky's original theoretical tenets. I now forge ahead into the specifics of using sociocultural theory in my own research.

Vygotskian theories stated children learn in cooperation with their peers in their social environments with scaffolding from more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986, 1997). Vygotsky (1978) argued his theoretical frameworks consisted of cognitive development stemming from two areas: "elementary processes that are basically biological, and…higher psychological processes that are essentially sociocultural" (Elliott et al., 2000, p.52). In essence, Vygotskian theories focused on biological processes and sociocultural higher mental functions, and the ways these ideas were used together to describe cognitive development in children.

Applying Vygotsky's theoretical tenets, my participants with learning disabilities found themselves in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where they learned with the help of knowledgeable others. They felt socially marginalized due to their learning disabilities, causing them to hide their learning disabilities to achieve acceptance from peers and/or people with authority, which calls their pursuit of a career in education into question. These situations aligned with Vygotskian theories and presented the best possible avenue to understanding my participants' lifeworlds. One of the most illuminating ways my participants and I explored and better understood their life experiences was through language and how language was part of social and cultural contexts.

Dialogic Theory: Bakhtin

Several sociocultural theorists, Wittgenstein, Vološinov, Kagan, Medvedev, Pumpianskii, and Sollertinskii (Brandist, n.d.; Ferri et al., 2005; Redkina, 2013; Wegerif, 2004), believed language was embedded in cultural practices. Their ideas connect directly to the theoretical frameworks of Russian language and literacy theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin. He believed language

was dialogic as all communication was part of all other kinds of communication: language is always in a perpetual state of response; it is dialogic. The ways people think manifest in the ways they speak, which is part of a larger whole of making meaning. People use the past, present, and projections into the future for communications – verbal, non-verbal, textual, or visual. In other words, we are always responding to language happening now or has happened previously in communication with others, with ourselves, or with texts. Those texts can be written, spoken, visual, or embodied as they make meaning for themselves and people with whom we are interacting.

Bakhtin (1981) focused on dialogism – the idea that everything in language was part of a whole and the constant interactions between all parts of the language used affected the others. He believed it was not possible to come to understanding without providing a response, be it written, verbal, non-verbal body language, or through artistic renderings of these understandings. About dialogue, he wrote, "Language essentially needs only a speaker – one speaker – and an object for his speech" (Bakhtin, 1986, p.67). There were voices, or according to Bakhtin, utterances, all around us – society's voices, our internal voices, voices of our peers – which made for continued dialogue. This perpetual dialogue was at the core of my participant interviews and subsequent analysis. We co-constructed the interviews, initiating and responding to centripetal and centrifugal forces (Bakhtin, 1981) in the tensions of being self and formally identified as having a learning disability, choosing to be a teacher, obtaining difficult literacy capabilities, choosing how much to share about their literacy-based learning disability with others, and negotiating those spaces within themselves, and with me, the researcher.

When dialogue, understanding, and response come together, Bakhtin termed this happening as heteroglossia, which meant multiple and differing "voices" within a specific

context. Meanings made in dialogue differed when any element of the heteroglot changes, such as time, place, interactions, people involved, or topic. That was why it was important that I spoke with my participants several times and collected images from them at different times and from different places.

Every idea, thought, word, deed, conceptualization harkens back to our past experiences, to the conglomeration of the heteroglot we bring to our present and those we launch into the future. Necessary to understanding, is the making of meaning from dialogic relationships. Language is an enormous interaction of ideas, experiences, social contexts, and represented time, influenced by our prior social experiences, those with whom we are in dialogue, and where and when dialogue occurs. Language was the mode of communication used between the participants and myself. It was for this reason that Bakhtin's dialogic theories of language and literacy better helped me understand my participants' life experiences and the ways they spoke about them.

Complementing Theories: Sociocultural Learning and Dialogism

Vygotsky wrote, "Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (1978, p.90). He argued that social environments shaped complex ideas and learning. According to Wertsch (2009), "Bakhtin stressed the idea that voices always exist in a social milieu; there is no such thing as a voice that exists in total isolation from other voices" (Kindle Locations 971-972). Bakhtin (1981) argued dialogism was the idea that everything was part of a whole and constant interactions between all parts affected the others.

The purpose for adopting complementary perspectives for this study was to focus on the sociocultural intricacies of teacher education in light of coping with academic struggles. Therefore, in a Vygotskian (1978) sense, my study focused on how the participants made

academic meaning in cooperation with their peers and with support from their mentors. In a Bakhtinian (1981, 1986) sense, the study focused on how these same participants could be in dialogue with themselves, their mentors, and with their support networks coming together in a heteroglossia of social and academic support. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives helped me make meaning of my participants' experiences in academia through their language and their cultural practices.

Sociocultural Theory: Influences on Teaching and Learning

Vygotsky (1978) connected learning and social events with how learners "interact with other people, objects, and events in the environment" (Wang et al., 2011, p.304), arguing they were inseparable (Neff, n.d.; Wegerif, 2004). Vygotsky believed education was essential in becoming a fully-functioning member of the social environment and that "education is realized through the student's own experience, which is wholly determined by the environment, and the role of the teacher then reduces to directing and guiding the environment" (Vygotsky, 1997, p.50). It is imperative students progress in their cognitive development with adult guidance, even with institutions encouraging hierarchically structured, cognitive development (Gredler, 2011), due to expectations of linear stages of learning and the push for testable literacy excellence.

As sociocultural models of teaching and learning are taken up in K-12 public education (Perry, 2012), there are difficulties with curriculum development. Government agencies have aggressively instituted more and more practices and policies targeted to increasing literacy skills and ever-evolving state standards for classroom learning requirements (Gredler, 2011; US Department of Education, 2013). Expectations that students will master literacy skills at linear developmental levels and in sequence are not realistic for most young learners, especially

students with learning disabilities. Students are coming into educational environments with varying skill levels without similar cultural contexts.

In direct opposition to more traditional educational practices, the "sociocultural standpoint is that literacy learning is socially situated and that it is appropriated from more knowledgeable others in one's social and cultural environment" (Davidson, 2010, p.255). Students learn best when instructional choices focus on learning processes embedded in social contexts. As both an involved educator and passionate researcher (Wegerif, 2004), Vygotsky believed educational contexts should provide parameters for developing "conceptual thinking" (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992, p.553), and as ZPD suggests, curriculum development and instruction should be "tied… closely to the level of potential development than to the level of actual development" (p.549). For, it is through instruction for potential development that students work together to "learn how to learn" (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994, p.152-153) and are best able to benefit from teacher scaffolding.

Thinking through sociocultural learning theory tenets, teachers are able to better "understand how people learn in social contexts… and inform us… how we, as teachers, construct active learning communities… [that] maximize the learner's ability to interact with each other through discussion, collaboration, and feedback" (Neff, n.d., para.1). For both current teachers and university students enrolled in teacher education programs, it is important that planned instruction addresses differentiated needs, enhances learning, positively influences "individuals' learning and achievement" (Phan, 2012, p.3), and builds a community of learners for whom equitable access to literacy learning (Davidson, 2010) is afforded to all students.

Besides in-school learning opportunities, Davidson (2010), believed teachers who are "socioculturally conscious… attend to out-of-school experiences" (p.254). Educators consider

social influences and design “instructional strategies [to] promote literacy across the curriculum” contributing to “knowledge construction” (Neff, n.d., para.4). Students’ academic determination and level of success depend on many factors, such as learning communities, curriculum structures, materials used, and desire to learn based on cultural expectations.

Research Design

I conducted an interview study with multiple interviews and collected artifacts (Polkinghorne, 2005; Roulston, 2010; Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003) for each of the participants so that “rich” data could be gathered to allow for construction of meaning through dialogue in the contexts of our interviews – the social realm (Freeman et al., 2007). Because the goal of my research was to understand (Polkinghorne, 2005) and make meaning of my participants’ “life events” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p.476) related to negotiating academia with learning disabilities, the sociocultural aspects of their negotiations, and the ways they spoke about their visions for themselves as future educators, I asked them to share personal narratives of their experiences with learning disabilities (Polkinghorne, 2007, 2010). Recall of information is not the goal, but rather, what meaning participants made with the experiences they shared.

In the research world at-large, one-on-one interviews are a powerful way to explore participants’ life experiences and the educational phenomena of concern. The push in education for construction of knowledge rather than a simple transfer from the teacher to the students fits perfectly with constructivist nature of education today. Through my research into interviewing strategies, the ways they can be used in educational contexts, and how teacher candidates with learning disabilities can become part of their own success story through the telling of their personal narratives, I saw this methodology as a good way to “work” in educational research and as a perfect fit for my own research interests. I used interviews to explore participants’ academic

and life experiences through sociocultural theoretical frameworks to make meaning of their life experiences within the context of their learning disabilities, education, and future goals for themselves as teachers.

After obtaining IRB approval, I contacted the on-campus disability resource center, scheduled a meeting with a staff member, and obtained their consent to solicit for participants for my study using a letter and a flyer I provided. In addition, a professor at the target university who worked with special education teacher candidates sent out an e-blast with my recruitment information on it. My participants had to meet the following criteria to be included in the study (Nealy, 2017, personal communication):

1. Have a learning disability and/or high incidence disabilities that impact learning
2. Enrolled in the target university as an early childhood or middle grades education major, which meant they had completed two years of basic courses and were in the first or second year of their undergraduate/graduate degree program
3. Intended to teach after graduation
4. Were in "good" standing with the university and the degree program into which they were enrolled. Good standing meant they maintained the minimum overall GPA required (2.8 GPA), met/exceeded the standards for professional behavior, and were working towards graduation
5. Received services at some point in their K-12 education, preferably prior to/during their 12th grade year.

Initially, there was a sixth criterion, listed below:

6. Must be registered with the university's disability resource center as having a literacy-based learning disability

However, due to difficulties in recruitment and lack of response to solicitations, the sixth criteria was deemed to be too stringent and was thus revised in the recruitment flyer combining #5 and #6 to read, "Had an IEP at some point in K-12 or are registered with the on-campus disability resource center." Details about recruiting are addressed in Chapter 4.

Interviews were the main source of data, along with notes taken during and after interview sessions and visual artifacts the participants shared. Although researcher perception and participation are both integral to the qualitative process, it was imperative that data was collected with sensitivity for the participants' ideas and so their "voice" could be heard.

Honoring Bakhtin's ideas of dialogic communication and utterances, the teacher candidates and I were co-participants during the semi-structured interviews. I asked opening questions and based on the participant's response, I then probed for more details to encourage in-depth responses. We explored their purposeful ideas about their future careers and I offered information to move the interviews forward, as needed. Finally, intermittently throughout the interviews, I summarized participants' responses to ensure I understood their language and intentions to check for my own understanding. (See Appendix A for an example of the researcher's oral summary of a participant's shared life experience.)

Informed by a pilot study, the goals for this study were to explore participants' academic and life experiences; to understand what kind of academic, emotional, physical, and personal support best helped participants find success in the classroom; and to learn how they envisioned themselves engaging in literacy instruction all through the lenses of their learning disabilities.

Methods

Educators with learning disabilities, who have successfully navigated academic difficulties, are better equipped to support struggling students and to share their stories so people

without first-hand disability experience can learn from them (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Glazzard & Dale, 2013; The Council for Exceptional Children, 2016; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). They are experts in working through literacy-based learning disabilities, but have not been seen as knowledgeable and experiential resources. The primary purpose of this interpretive qualitative interview study (Roulston et al., 2003) was to understand how teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities came to the teaching profession and how they negotiated their own disabilities as they engaged in literacy instruction with PreK-8th grade students. I chose a qualitative research design that purposefully used semi-structured, focused interviews to provide some structure to our conversations, to allow participants "freedom to express their views in their own terms" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006), and to build on the idea that meaning was constructed through language (Polkinghorne, 1990) used to dialogue in social contexts. The research questions used to guide this study were:

1. What are these PreK-8th grade education majors' experiences in their own K-12 education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities?
2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to these education majors' development as literacy learners?
3. Based on these education majors' own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students?

Site and Participants

The setting of my study was in and around the university. The teacher candidate participants consisted of five undergraduate students and one graduate student, for a total of six teacher candidates. Because this research study was designed to recruit teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities and to honor their voices about their academic and life

experiences, these six teacher candidates were ideal participants. Each one was unique in her experiences, but they were all similar in their ideas about their learning disabilities and moving forward with their teaching careers. I interviewed each teacher candidate where she felt the most comfortable, such as in a quiet part of a coffee house, a local library, or in an empty conference room.

Participant Recruitment. Recruitment began September, 2015 and ended February, 2016. With the support and assistance of the on-campus disability resource center, Phase 1 of recruitment began. The recruitment email (see Appendix B) and revised recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) were emailed to all education majors enrolled with the university's disability resource center for services in the 2015-2016 academic year. In addition, permission to recruit in person in department education literacy methods classes was given and I visited fourteen undergraduate classes over a period of two weeks to explain the purpose behind my study.

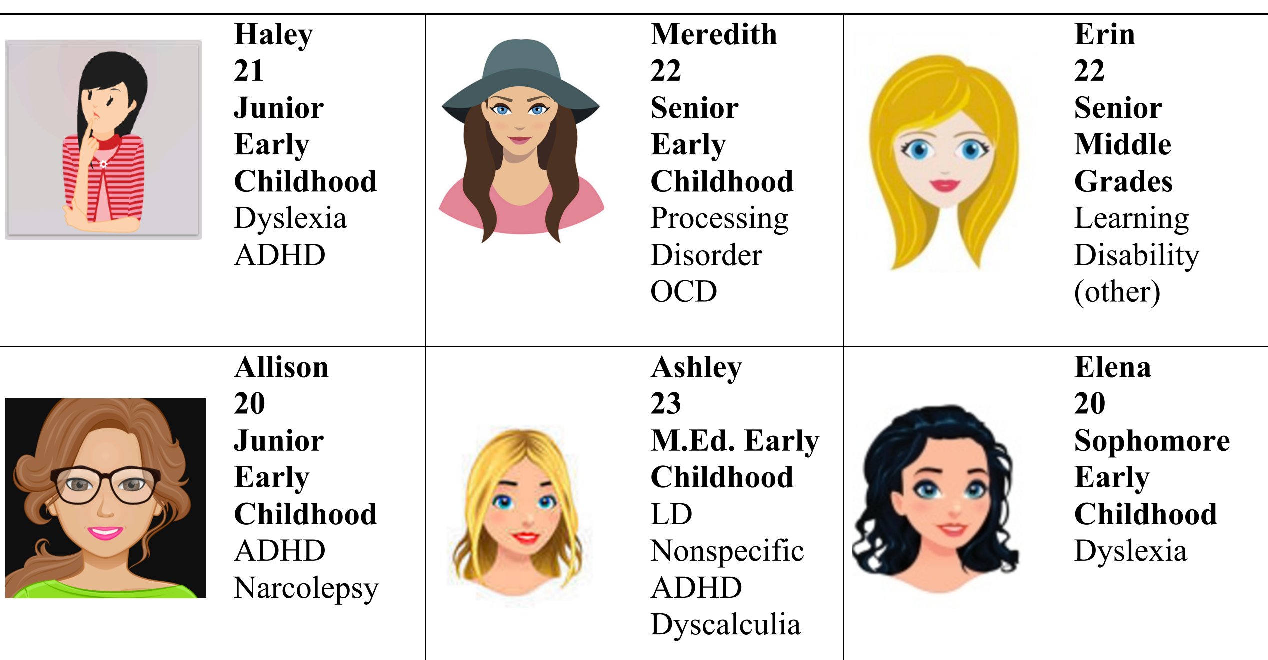
Initial recruitment efforts yielded three early childhood/elementary undergraduate participants. A fourth participant, who was a middle grades education undergraduate and not part of initial recruitment, knew about the study and volunteered to participate. Secondary recruitment involved research study committee members and methods instructors forwarding the recruitment email and flyer to students in their classes, yielding one early childhood master's student and an additional undergraduate early childhood education student as participants. In total, six white, female teacher candidates, who self-identified as middle class, agreed to participant in this dissertation study. The white, female participants were similar in demographics to typical US professional educators in racial and gender make-up (Deruy, 2013). In the US, 82% of teachers identify as White (US Department of Education, 2016b) and approximately 76% identify as Female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b). Putting

this all together, the six teacher candidates' racial and gender characteristics reflect the current professional educator population.

Participant Constructed Narratives. After gathering information from my participants about their academic and life experiences, why they wanted to teach, and how they grappled with their learning disabilities as they engaged in literacy instruction, I wrote constructed narratives of each one. A glimpse into their personal life worlds is shared below, with their constructed narratives included in Findings. Also included is Table 2 with participant demographics (DePino, 2017; Draw, 2016; Druzhinina, 2017; Flaticon, 2017; Gurung, 2016).

Table 2

Participant Demographics



Haley **21** **Junior** **Early Childhood** Dyslexia ADHD	**Meredith** **22** **Senior** **Early Childhood** Processing Disorder OCD	**Erin** **22** **Senior** **Middle Grades** Learning Disability (other)
Allison **20** **Junior** **Early Childhood** ADHD Narcolepsy	**Ashley** **23** **M.Ed. Early Childhood** LD Nonspecific ADHD Dyscalculia	**Elena** **20** **Sophomore** **Early Childhood** Dyslexia

The researcher-chosen female avatars represent the spirit of the teacher candidates rather than their specific physical attributes. They were strong, successful women, ready to take on the world of education and challenge stereotypes of teachers and teacher candidates with learning disabilities.

As previously mentioned, I considered myself a co-participant in this dissertation research project and my life experiences influenced my role as a co-constructor of the interviews. My participants and I worked together to co-construct meaning of their shared stories. I began with simple questions, probing for more information as needed, often sharing my own experiences to make them feel more comfortable speaking with me and to redirect interviews so the purpose of the study and research questions were all addressed and answered.

Although I did not struggle to learn to read, I did teach students who struggled with reading at the middle grades level. I was not responsible for my students' initial forays in learning to read, but rather supported them as they increased their reading knowledge and skills. I was academically and peripherally familiar with struggling readers, but was without personal experiences in struggling to learn.

I drafted research questions based on interactions with my participants in my pilot study, on experience with interviewing, and on goals for this project. I used semi-structured interview strategies because I wanted our time together to be "viewed as a conversation – a discourse between speakers" (Riessman, 2008, p.24). I asked questions designed to "open up topics and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they [found] meaningful" (p.25). I shared personal experiences with the teacher candidates as a way to make personal connections and lead into interview topics. For instance, when I spoke with Allison and she shared story after story about projects she completed for various middle grades and high school English classes, she wrapped up one part of our discussion with a surprising revelation. Allison spoke about her love of music, her ADHD, and how her learning disability made her a better musician (Table 3).

Table 3

Interview Excerpt Illustrating Co-Construction of Interview Between Researcher and Allison

Speaker	**Questions and Responses**
Participant 4: Allison	To me, it shows what sparked my interest at that age, maybe. Where I found my little niche in the school, kind of thing. They were supposed to show my journey through the learning of music, I guess, and how music helped me feel at home.
Karen	**Okay, that brings up a question, of course. Why didn't you feel at home, except with music?**
Allison	I don't think that they're… I think… especially with ADHD, it was really hard to feel like everything was engaged. Like, there was always a part of my brain that wasn't engaged because it was thinking of everything else that I could be doing or, like, what I didn't do or… I mean there's all these things that were just moving, but with music, it fully engaged me and I had to focus. Like, this part of my brain was keeping tempo, this part of my brain was looking to know what was going to happen next, this part of my brain was deciding what fingerings I had to use to play that note, this part of my brain was saying what… what kind of air pressure and warmth and direction the air had to go, so it was… like, it fully used every part of my body to where I could relax. So, I really enjoyed it.
Karen	**I've never heard it put quite that way, but I could see how that would be an all-encompassing…**
Allison	And, like, I think even having ADHD makes you a… I would even venture to

	say a better listener at music and a better partaker of music because you are used to focusing on so many things at once, even that when you listen to music, you can hear all the different parts. And then you can… because you… you're always jumping from this to that to that and making all these different connections you, like, see how the music comes together… together better. You're like, "Oh, that's why that happened and this happened and this happened."

This excerpt began with a probe into an offered comment and ended with an entirely new way to think about Allison's learning disability. What appeared to be a difficulty in paying attention became a positive reflection on using another literacy – music – to engage the many facets of her attention span and capacity to focus on learning.

Data Collection

Data collection began in October 2015 and continued through March 2016. Six participants were interviewed in three sessions on different days. One participant, Meredith, had to leave our second session early, so we continued interview two the following week.

Interviews. In order to "understand the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p.9) in "all its complexity" (Riessman, 2008, p.24), I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. These focused interviews were audio-recorded. I fully transcribed 18 interviews in total from the digital recordings. The average interview time was approximately 99 minutes, with the shortest being just over 71 minutes (1:11.45) and the longest being just over 156 minutes (2:36.25 combined total). All together, interviews lasted almost 30 hours in length (29:41.06). We met in campus

conference rooms, an empty classroom, an empty campus office, a local library, or the university library. Detailed interview information is included in Table 4, below.

Table 4

Participant pseudonyms, recruitment tools, interview times, and places

Pseudonym, Recruitment Tool	**Interview 1 Date, Place, and Total Time**	**Interview 2 Date, Place, and Total Time**	**Interview 3 Date, Place, and Total Time**	**Total Interview Time Spent with Participant**
Haley Class Visit	10/20/15 Conference Room 1:21:30	12/08/15 Conference Room 1:37:15	01/22/16 Conference Room 2:01:37	5:00:22
Meredith Class Visit	10/20/15 Campus Library 1:32:28	12/07/15 Campus Library 1:36:01 01/27/16 Conference Room 1:00:24	02/02/16 Local Library 1:29:55	5:38:48
Erin Volunteered	10/29/15 Conference Room 1:23:33	11/19/15 Conference Room 1:44:54	01/06/16 Local Library 1:29:21	4:37:48
Allison Class Visit	11/03/15 Conference Room 1:42:09	11/20/15 Empty Classroom 1:40:14	01/15/16 Conference Room 1:59:16	5:21:39
Ashley DRC e-blast	11/19/15 Conference Room 1:17:16	12/08/15 Empty Office on Campus 1:11:45	01/22/16 Conference Room 1:35:10	4:04:11
Elena Professor e-blast	02/03/16 Conference Room 1:56:18	02/2416 Conference Room 1:21:47	03/30/16 Conference Room 1:40:13	4:58:18
Totals	9:13:14	10:12:20	10:15:32	29:41:06

I began each interview session with small talk to help each interviewee feel more at ease. I let them know I wanted to understand how teacher candidates with learning disabilities affecting their literacy negotiated academia, what sociocultural aspects of education were crucial to their own learning, and how they envisioned themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students. I explained that while I took notes during our interview, I would be audio recording our sessions so I could remember details later. After small talk and transitioning to the purpose of the first interview, I asked them to create a timeline of their literacy-based experiences. I asked open-ended questions cued from their created timeline, such as, "What do you remember about your earliest experiences with school?" from which the rest of the interview unfolded. We used the timeline as a guide and I probed for understandings, as needed. Together, we co-constructed their narratives in ways that made sense to us (Ferri et al., 2005, 2001). The timeline script and semi-structured interview questions used for each of the focused interviews can be found in Appendix D.

In addition, I gave each participant my cell phone number and asked that they text, message, or call me with information they wanted to share about their own educational experiences or any thoughts about working with their placement students between interviews. Since each teacher candidate had a learning disability affecting their literacy and I wanted each one to feel as comfortable as possible sharing real-time data, I encouraged them to contact me in the way that worked best for them – textual, visually, or orally.

At the initial interview, I explained how my research could help other researchers and classroom teachers understand how pre-service teachers with literacy-based learning disabilities came to the teaching profession and how they navigated their own learning disabilities as they taught elementary or middle grades students. The first interview focused on the participants'

literacy-based experiences *before* college. The focus of the second interview was on their literacy-based experiences *during* college. For the third interview, we continued focusing on their literacy-based experiences *during* college and talked about post-teaching placement reflections. The timing and focus of the third interview was crucial in the trio since part of the purpose of the study was to understand how they worked through and with their learning disabilities as they engaged in literacy instruction with students. Five of the teacher candidates were interviewed near the beginning of the fall 2015 semester to gather initial literacy experiences, a few weeks prior to the end of the semester to talk about their learning during that time, and near the beginning of the spring 2016 semester to focus on their work with students during their previous semester's field placement. Separating our interviews in this way gave us the time and 'space' to reflect on each time period in their lives and to talk about what they discovered in their work with children about themselves and their visions for their future careers.

The first and second interview was conducted during the fall semester while they were taking classes and in field placement – a time where they are placed in public school classrooms to gain supervised experience working with children. The third interview occurred near the beginning of the spring semester, which meant the participants were taking different classes and one was in a different field placement. Haley, Meredith, and Erin, remained with their fall field placements for their student teaching semesters. Ashley was in a new field placement. Allison changed her major between semesters to educational psychology and was not in field placement. Her plan was to graduate with her bachelor's degree in Educational Psychology and then to get her MAT in Early Childhood Education.

Because Elena did not enter the study until a few weeks into the spring 2016 semester, her interviews were scheduled a bit differently. We met the day after she contacted via email for

the initial interview. We met about three weeks later for the second interview, but purposely scheduled the third interview after their cohort had been in field placement for a few weeks so she could speak to working with students and the ways that she saw herself engaging with them in literacy learning and teaching.

Visual Data. In order to better understand my participants' "journey" with their learning disability and academia and to acknowledge that alternative or oral communications may be wanted or needed, I asked for visual data in the form of participants' personal photographs, visual depictions of their educational journey, and personal timelines focused on their academic experiences, collected during the interview process. In thinking about how the chosen images might function in an analysis, I called on Prior's (2003) ideas that, "A document might function as the carrier of a message, an object to be translated, an impediment to understanding, or yet, as a prop to interaction" (p.21). As the images were to become part of the analysis and therefore, part of the study-at-large, it was important to indicate how they supported further understanding of each participant's journey with learning disabilities and how this information added to the interpretation of the study.

During the first interview, I introduced the idea of visual data. I asked each participant to create a timeline with significant events detailed about their educational experiences (see script for creating timeline in Appendix D). We "traveled" through their timeline during our interview as I asked questions about the items they shared on it. For the second and third interviews, I requested the each participant have pictures or other visual images with them that they agreed to share with me and talk about for this study. I also asked the participants to send pictures to me they felt chronicled their specific journey through educational environments looking through the lens of their learning disability. Finally, to access real-time happenings of living with and

working through learning disabilities that affected their literacy, I asked the participants to send any visual artifacts to me via text or email (or some other form they prefer) that helped "tell" their literacy story. All of the above visual data would have contributed to a fuller, deeper, more detailed picture of the participants' experiences of living with learning disabilities in education. Unfortunately, even with repeated requests and reminders, not all participants shared with me visual data in the form of images of their personal literacy journeys. Each of them texted me at some point in our work together, but not all of them felt comfortable sharing or even owned artifacts of their personal literacy journeys.

Research Journal. I kept a research journal as a running record of my thoughts and ideas throughout the study to be in dialogue with myself and my data as it was collected. Bakhtin (1986) explained, "Sooner or later what is heard and actively understood will find its response in the subsequent speech or behavior of the listener" (p.69). The social world of our interactions influenced my participants' use of language as they shared their literacy experiences with me and their language influenced my language in what questions and probes for information I used, as well as how I phrased/rephrased my summaries of their academic and life experiences. I wrote pre- and post-interview entries about our experiences. Please see Appendix E for detailed data source information. I used my handwritten research journal for details about our interactions during the specific interview sessions in the write-up portion of the research process.

Longitudinal Data Collection

Approximately five months (July, 2016) following the conclusion of all interview data collection and then again six months after that (February, 2017), I communicated through text message with each participant. In July, I inquired as to how the spring semester, field placement, and first part of the summer had gone for them. For the three participants who graduated, Haley,

Meredith, and Erin, I inquired about graduation and future job prospects. Haley had gotten engaged and was planning her wedding for Spring 2017. She decided to wait to find a full-time teaching position because soon after the wedding, she and her husband were moving across the country for his job. Meredith had applied for and been accepted to a program placing certified teachers in other countries for the purpose of teaching English. She would be teaching 1st grade and was set to begin her job three months after our text conversation. Erin had gotten married at the end of the Spring 2016 semester and had taken a position at a camp she had grown up attending and eventually counseling. She was in charge of curriculum for the summer campers. Erin was very much interested in working at this camp year-round and had been promised a position as assistant director for the following year. The camp hosted groups during the academic year, which allowed her to work with students of all ages.

For Allison and Ashley, both of whom had time, courses, and field placements still to come, I was interested in how they navigated academia and encouraged them to share any real-time news with me that could add to this research study. Ashley was taking summer courses and looking forward to her new field placement class in the fall. Allison shared she would be graduating with her Educational Psychology undergraduate in May 2017 and would then begin the master's program in Early Childhood in fall 2017. In February 2017, I inquired about lingering detail questions and how their fall semesters had gone. Because we had shared so much time together, I encouraged each of them separately to contact me anytime they wanted to talk about their journeys through academia and into their chosen career paths.

Process of Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis roots can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1997/1895), where he shared the importance humans place on narrative, stating, "It should have for its subject a single action,

whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it" (p.47). It is the same through the ages, people tell stories of their lives to connect with others around them in their social world.

Although narrative began long ago, narrative analysis did not receive recognition until Labov and Waletzky developed methods to make sense of their participants' life stories from a survey of the Lower East Side in the study of African American Vernacular English in South Harlem (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Labov (1997) stated about their work:

> The elicitation of narratives of personal experience proved to be the most effective. We were therefore driven to understand as much as we could about the structure of these narratives and how they were introduced into the every-day conversation that our interviews simulated. (p.395)

Labov and Waletzky (1967) believed narratives were a way of speaking about a past event and the way the speaker constructed the story informed how it was analyzed. They wrote, "Narrative construction follows the order of events in time," (p.37). Therefore, participants may share bits of their "stories" in random sequences and through analysis, these bits are used to construct the events in time order. According to Riessman (1993) and Kim (2016), the limitations of Labov and Waletzky's methods are that they omit the tell-listener relationship; focusing on only the core elements of the narrative may omit important details; it is difficult to analysis a personal experience; culture and language variations will influence analysis; and this method is designed for longer monologues, not conversations in interviews.

In the narrative research field, it is pragmatic to cite Labov and Waletzky (1967) since they created modern narrative analysis. Many scholars, such as Polkinghorne (1988, 1990), Gee (2000, 2012), Clandinin (2013), and Clandinin and Connelley (2004) have used the methods they

developed, if in modified forms, to interpret meaning from participants' life worlds. Because there are a plethora of narrative analysis methods available, it can be difficult to narrow them down into practical application. For this dissertation, I selected Polkinghorne's (1995) approach to narrative analysis and share both my reasoning and process in the following section.

Polkinghorne's Approach to Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis methods were used to analyze collected data. Polkinghorne (1995) differed in his distinctions between *analysis of the narrative* and *narrative analysis.* Analysis of the narrative focuses on paradigmatic cognition which "produces cognitive networks of concepts that allow people to construct experiences as familiar by emphasizing the common elements that appear over and over" (p.10). In effect, analysis of the narrative involved taking apart participants' shared experiences and reconfiguring the experiences into like elements, or patterns (K. deMarrais, personal communication, March 27, 2017). Narrative analysis is based on narrative cognition and is about the "configuration of the data into a coherent whole" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.15). In other words, narrative analysis is taking the patterns found during analysis of the narrative and constructing a holistic look at the participant's experiences as well as across participants (K. deMarrais, personal communication, March 27, 2017).

In speaking about narrative analysis, Polkinghorne (2007) wrote, "The general purpose of an interpretative analysis of storied texts is to deepen the reader's understanding of the meaning conveyed in a story" (p.483) and for the researcher to be ever conscious that although the "participant remains the author of the description. The function of the researcher is more like a supportive editor whose assistance leads the author to produce a fuller and deeper account" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p.143). To that end, I analyzed the transcribed interview texts, the real-time textual and visual submissions, the "found" and "produced" visual data, as well as my own

research journal entries to more fully portray my participants' lived experiences. I collected and analyzed my participants' individual storied life experiences within the contexts of academia, career choices, and how they learned to work through and with their disabilities as they engaged in literacy teaching with elementary and middle grades students. Then, echoing Bakhtin's ideas about heteroglossia – multiple and differing voices within a specific context -- I analyzed these individual narratives across participants to create "stories" of what it was to be a student with learning disabilities, a teacher candidate with learning disabilities at this time in this place, and how they felt their experiences positioned them as future literacy teachers. In the following section, the results of a literature review of narrative analysis methods are included.

Polkinghorne's methods resonated for several reasons. First, his strategy of narrative smoothing or, "subjective interpretation; can be used to mask our subjective interpretations as explanation, and to present a 'good' story… not necessarily a 'faithful' account" (Spence, 1982; as cited in Kim, 2016, p.192) was already familiar. It was important to adhere to participants' voices without changing the meaning to suit analysis. Therefore, in transcribing interviews, everything is typed as it is said – complete with words used as fillers. The second time through, the utterances are "smoothed" into more coherent sentences, taking care to retain participant's meanings. The transcribed and smoothed copies are retained for references as needed. An example of application of the narrative smoothing strategy is shown in Table 5:

Table 5

Example of Narrative Smoothing: Haley, Third Interview

Original text as spoken	Yeah, I… I usually use the computer because it has Spellcheck and like autocorrect and stuff, and when I'm handwriting stuff, I just spell everything wrong, and I like mix up my letters and stuff. But, I mean, lesson plans haven't been hard for me to

	do, just like filling out the boxes and… if I get it so that I can like see all of it, and like if it's really zoomed in, it's actually harder for me to like figure out where it is, but if I can like see all of it, then it's easier for me.
Smoothed version	I do them on the computer. I usually use the computer because it has Spellcheck and autocorrect and stuff, and when I'm handwriting stuff, I just spell everything wrong. I mix up my letters and stuff. But, lesson plans haven't been hard for me to do, just like filling out the boxes. If I get it so that I can see all of it, and if it's really zoomed in, it's actually harder for me to figure out where it is. But, if I can see all of it, then it's easier for me.

Second, the way Polkinghorne described the purposes of his narrative analysis methods seemed logical and appealed to the need to make sense of participant's life stories. In his well-known methods book, Polkinghorne (1988) detailed his purpose for using this kind of analysis:

1. Functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units
2. Provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions
3. Is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful (p.11)

And finally, Polkinghorne's narrative analysis methods relied on the researcher to connect pieces of stories across conversations to make meaning from the life experience as a whole. For example, Erin, spoke about using strategies she learned in tutoring to cope with her learning disability and then sharing those strategies with students in her placement who were struggling to read and make sense of a text. She did not speak about these events concisely in one well-ordered paragraph in one interview. She referenced these events in all three interviews,

and she shared a picture showing her students in her placement using a strategy she was taught when she was in middle grades. Using Polkinghorne's methods of analysis, I combined these events into a data analysis paragraph (Table 6) to make meaning of her stories.

Table 6

Data Analysis Paragraph: Erin, Third Interview

Combined information from 3 interviews	Erin worked with the students in her small groups to help them make connections to their readings – a practice she feels strongly about. When she saw them struggling with reading activities or when taking the weekly lexile tests, Erin shared strategies she learned from tutoring to help them feel more confident and make progress in their assignments.

There are limitations, or "inherent problems in the study of meaning" (p.6) with Polkinhorne's (1988) methods of narrative analysis, just as there are with any method. The limitations are: difficult to make meaning from natural conversations since they are an activity, not a thing; researchers can only access each participant's perspective, not a multi-voiced account; language is contextualized and difficult to order; analyzing language is a never-ending endeavor; and it is difficult to portray on paper all of the facets that contributed to the meaning-making of an event. In the following sections, analysis of the data is detailed.

Analysis of Narrative

As shared earlier, interviews, the analysis of those interviews, images, objects, social media communications, and teaching observations (for one participant) were the basis of this qualitative interview study. Polkinghorne (1995) argued narrative analysis "seeks to locate

common themes… among stories collected as data" (p.13). The holistic, but not necessarily linear, steps included in this method are listed below (Table 7):

Table 7

Steps for Polkinghorne's Narrative Analysis Method (1995, pp.15-18)

Steps	Details
1	Synthesize data into a coherent whole – not separated into parts
2	Arrange the data elements chronologically
3	Identify which elements contribute to the outcome
4	Look for connections of cause and influence among events a. Story develops through recursive movement from data to emerging plot b. Follow principles of hermeneutic circles – moving back and forth from parts to whole c. Emerging plot indicates which data to include or eliminate
5	Identify action elements caused by combinations of events
6	Write the story

Round One Data Analysis. After interviewing, transcribing, and narrative smoothing, I printed out the transcripts and manually highlighted important information throughout the interview. I deemed the information important if it addressed my purpose for the study, gave background information about the participant, or answered the research questions, which allowed me to identify the important elements contributing to the outcome of the narratives (step 3). I wrote notes in the margins of the transcripts of connections to other pieces of interviews to synthesize the data (step 1) and arrange it chronologically (step 2). I then digitally highlighted what had been manually highlighted on the paper copies and used the "comment" feature of my

word processing program to record my handwritten notes in the enlarged margins of each transcript.

One of my committee members, Dr. deMarrais, suggested using data analysis software for organizing, analyzing, and managing my data, since my method of analysis focused on looking across information gathered for participants to make sense of their life stories (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995, 2005). I made a pdf for each transcript and loaded them into ATLAS.ti 7, one of several different kinds of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CQDAS) available online. I then used the coding features of ATLAS.ti to “code” my comments concerning participants’ words and my ideas about information they shared. I searched for cause and influence (step 4) among events and in context. I transcribed the pre- and post-interview notes from each session to synthesize them (step 1) with the information previously collected. I created memos for the interview notes, which helped to reconstruct the events (step 2) in chronological order and then coded the memos in ATLAS.ti 7 using the code already created. I looked for patterns in the narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) and pieces of the participants’ shared stories as I worked through analyzing their narratives. Please see Table 8 for examples of Round One Data Analysis.

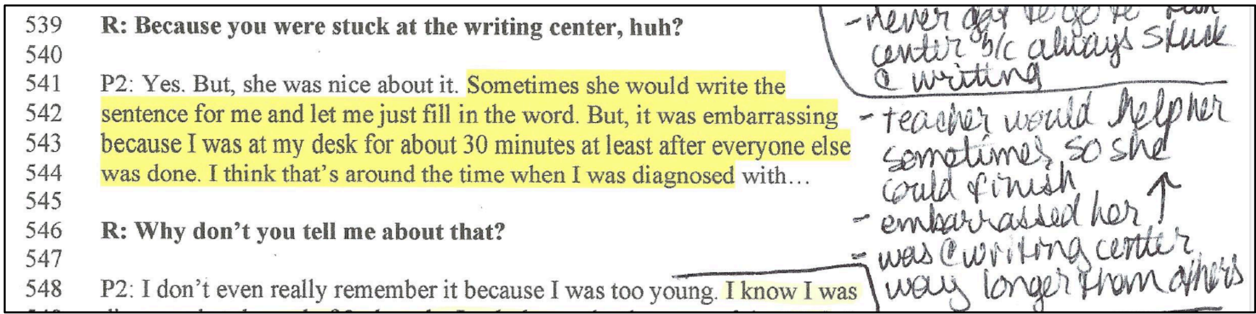
Table 8

Round One Data Analysis Example: Transcribed, Highlighted, and Coded

Transcribed Portion of Interview 1
Q: Because you were stuck at the writing center, huh?   A: Yes. But she was nice about it. Sometimes she would write the sentence for me and let me just fill in the word but like it was like embarrassing because I was at my desk for like 30 minutes at least after everyone else was done. And I think that’s around the time when I was

diagnosed with…

Manually Highlighted Portion of Interview 1 with Researcher Notes


539 **R: Because you were stuck at the writing center, huh?**
540
541 P2: Yes. But, she was nice about it. Sometimes she would write the
542 sentence for me and let me just fill in the word. But, it was embarrassing
543 because I was at my desk for about 30 minutes at least after everyone else
544 was done. I think that's around the time when I was diagnosed with…
545
546 **R: Why don't you tell me about that?**
547
548 P2: I don't even really remember it because I was too young. I know I was

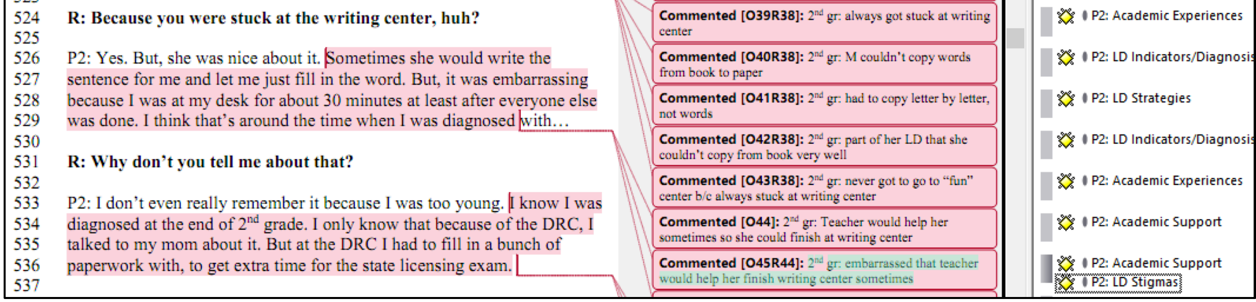
- never got to go to fun center b/c always stuck @ writing
- teacher would help her sometimes, so she could finish ↑
- embarrassed her
- was @ writing center way longer than others

Digitally Highlighted Portion of Interview 1

R: Because you were stuck at the writing center, huh?

P2: Yes. But, she was nice about it. Sometimes she would write the sentence for me and let me just fill in the word. But, it was embarrassing because I was at my desk for about 30 minutes at least after everyone else was done. I think that's around the time when I was diagnosed with…

ATLAS.ti 7: Transcript with Quotations and Codes


524 **R: Because you were stuck at the writing center, huh?**
525
526 P2: Yes. But, she was nice about it. Sometimes she would write the
527 sentence for me and let me just fill in the word. But, it was embarrassing
528 because I was at my desk for about 30 minutes at least after everyone else
529 was done. I think that's around the time when I was diagnosed with…
530
531 **R: Why don't you tell me about that?**
532
533 P2: I don't even really remember it because I was too young. I know I was
534 diagnosed at the end of 2nd grade. I only know that because of the DRC, I
535 talked to my mom about it. But at the DRC I had to fill in a bunch of
536 paperwork with, to get extra time for the state licensing exam.
537

Commented [O39R38]: 2nd gr: always got stuck at writing center
Commented [O40R38]: 2nd gr: M couldn't copy words from book to paper
Commented [O41R38]: 2nd gr: had to copy letter by letter, not words
Commented [O42R38]: 2nd gr: part of her LD that she couldn't copy from book very well
Commented [O43R38]: 2nd gr: never got to go to "fun" center b/c always stuck at writing center
Commented [O44]: 2nd gr: Teacher would help her sometimes so she could finish at writing center
Commented [O45R44]: 2nd gr: embarrassed that teacher would help her finish writing center sometimes

P2: Academic Experiences
P2: LD Indicators/Diagnosis
P2: LD Strategies
P2: LD Indicators/Diagnosis
P2: Academic Experiences
P2: Academic Support
P2: Academic Support
P2: LD Stigmas

Round Two Data Analysis. Looking across the memos, comments, and codes created, I realized I needed to return to the data (step 4: a, b, c) for the next step of fleshing out the codes into code families. In this context for this study, "quotations" were critical elements of the data highlighted by the researcher; "codes" were used to identify and group similar highlighted quotations; and "code families" were synthesis of the codes across all participants' data. As an example, for Participant 2: Meredith, Interview 1, I went through all of the 305 quotations and

assigned approximately 44 individual codes, and then combined them into approximately 12 code families (step 1) based on content to condense the massive amounts of information already collected and coded (step 3). Polkinghorne (2010) believed "narrative inquiries produce a storied description of a practice process carried out in a concrete life space" (p.396), which dictated the data should be managed so that it was true to my participants' stories and the ways they made concrete meanings of their lives.

Returning to code families, I organized them into like topics. For example, the code family, "LD and Support" could be broken down into: (1) Academic Support; (2) Advocacy; (3) DRC Involvement; (4) Family/Friends Influences/Expectations/Advocacy/ Support; (5) LD Accommodations/Support; (6) LD Indicators/Diagnosis; (7) LD Needs; (8) LD Negotiations; (9) LD Openness; (10) LD Stigmas (example included below); (11) Mentors; (12) Practice Skills; (13) Reading Strategies; and (14) Tutoring. Codes were grouped within code families based on similarity of wordings and topics, with some overlap in codes because often more than one idea was expressed. Visual representation of the focus Code Family, Codes, and Quotations are included below (Table 9):

Table 9

Example of Code Family, Code, and Related Quotations

Code Family: LD and Support
Code: P2: LD Stigmas
Quotations: 1. 2nd grade: embarrassed that teacher would help her finish writing center sometimes 2. "Well, if you misspell it, it just looks like you were… your pencil is dancing a little bit. Doesn't really look misspelled."

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3. Embarrassed to ask for extra time
4. But then, more people started using DRC, so it wasn't so awkward
5. Tried to not use DRC accommodations because she wanted independence
6. Wonder: Did she also want to be inconspicuous?
7. Science Education: as a 1st grader, Meredith would have liked Science Ed project because no one was left behind and she wouldn't have been left behind b/c she was taking too long to write
8. Science Education: as a 1st grader, Meredith would have loved that everyone stayed together because as a kid, she always felt left behind in class work

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Then, in accordance with Polkinghorne's (1988) recommendations for analysis of narratives, I constructed a written narrative about each code family separately and included those entries as memos, too, as I identified data elements caused by combinations of events (step 5). For me, writing each participant's constructed narrative was similar to creating the "found" poem in the pilot study. I used the information the participants shared to create a written piece honoring their individual voices in concert with each other. I included an example of this part of the analysis at the end of the paper in Appendix F. As previously mentioned, this technique allowed me to reach across encounters with the participant to make meaning of personal stories and to include other documentation, when possible. Please see Chapter 4 for each participant's written constructed narrative.

Round Three Data Analysis. At this point in analysis of the data, I reread each participant's individual transcripts including researcher comments, quotations, codes, and code families alongside the initial study purpose and research questions to identify critical responses and action elements caused by combinations of events (step 5) and write the story (6). This round

differed from previous ones because I focused on the data as a whole, across participants as I put the patterns of information back together in chronological, coherent form.

Remaining with the example used in Round Two, I looked across participants to see how each one experienced learning disability stigmas to contribute to answering research question 1: What are these undergraduate PreK-8th grade education majors' experiences in their own K-12 education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities? All participants mentioned peer relations, but only two, Haley and Allison, had negative experiences with peers related to their learning disabilities. Haley found her peers in elementary school to be mean-spirited. They made assumptions in high school about her intellect and abilities based on her learning disability diagnosis. Allison, too, faced peers in a negative way. She had to go to the nurse's office at school during lunch to take her medications to stay awake and focused beginning in 3rd grade and continuing through high school. She was embarrassed in front of her peers for having to leave and take the medications while everyone else went to lunch. She felt people stared at her when she returned causing her to stop taking her medications at various points in her life – only to have to go back on them when she could no longer function in school. Please see Table 10 for these excerpts from transcribed interviews.

Table 10

Stigma Examples from Excerpted Transcriptions

Haley: A lot of kids, especially when I was younger, were like, "Why does she get extra time? That's ridiculous. She doesn't actually need it." "It's stupid that you get extra time." My 10th grade English teacher… I had her for two years…she just stood up one day and announced to the class, "Y'all need to stop. Leave Haley alone."
Allison: 3rd grade is when they diagnosed me, so, 2002. And, then, I started medicine… which

has been a long road. It's been four different kinds… different ways to take them, different times to take them… essential oils, food, diets. We've tried a lot. I was on this one (pointing to timeline) from then (3rd grade) until 9th grade. I quit it in 9th grade because I was having severe depression because of the medicine. It's really bad, really bad. I didn't know what it was because my parents were like. "Oh, she's developing, she's in puberty… like angst." I tried Ritalin™ two times a day, going to the clinic every day in the middle of the day taking a pill at lunchtime. I hated that, because then they're like, "Why aren't you eating with us?"

Taken together and in response to the research question, neither Haley nor Allison had positive experiences with peers and both felt the sting of the stigmas about people with learning disabilities. For these two teacher candidates, negative experiences with their peers surrounding their learning disabilities made them especially sensitive to how students in their field placements interacted with each other and with them. Both participants were determined to intercede if they witnessed negative peer interactions or bullying due to perceived stigmas.

Feeling connected to students and their learning needs is an important part of and benefit from teaching. For teacher candidates with learning disabilities, these connections are even more important since they are experts at understanding why and how students struggle. Even when they experience a lack of confidence in their teaching skills and may not want to be open about their learning disabilities and/or difficulties in academics, teacher candidates with learning disabilities may still be able to find success with the necessary support from mentors and peers, collaborations in small groups, and self-efficacy. Teacher candidates with learning disabilities should be heralded as experts in the field of literacy learning and literacy teaching.

CHAPTER 3

"I NEED YOU TO HELP ME LEARN HOW TO LEARN THIS SUBJECT": HOW ONE TEACHER CANDIDATE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY NEGOTIATED ACADEMIA AND PREPARED TO TEACH[2]

[2] Graham, K.K. To be submitted to *The Teacher Educator*.

Abstract

This article is focused on the life stories of one woman's literacy struggles and the social support systems she developed through her undergraduate academic journey. Through her early immersion in literacy, struggles to overcome her reading difficulties, and subsequent academic successes, this middle grades education major's experiences in literacy learning led to her passion for education. A sociocultural theoretical framework was used to explore the ways she negotiated her own learning disability and worked with others to develop successful learning strategies as she prepared to teach future middle grades students. Polkinghorne's narrative analysis methods were used to make meaning of how the participant wanted her stories to be told. Literacy learning strategies in combination with social and emotional support worked together for this teacher candidate to find academic and personal success as she sought to live by example for her current and future students.

Key words: pre-service teachers, learning disability, sociocultural theory, narrative analysis; literacy education

"I Need You to Help Me Learn How to Learn this Subject": How One Teacher Candidate with a Learning Disability Negotiated Academia and Prepared to Teach

In my middle grades writing pedagogy face-to-face course, one teacher candidate expressed frustrations about his field placement class where the 5th graders did not want to engage with the lessons or work hard to understand, coupled with the fact many were reading below-grade level. His offhanded comment about his placement experiences drew his peers in and they offered examples from their placements. Their opinions touched on students' lack of engagement resulting from uninteresting material to assignments requiring minimal work. A peer responded, "It's difficult to sit and watch while our students play around and aren't interested in what they need to learn." She continued, "It's different for them than it was for us. We were all in advanced or gifted classes. We were high-achievers and worked hard. We want to be teachers – we know how to 'do' school." Many of the teacher candidates murmured their consent, myself included.

As our class time drew to a close and they streamed out the door, I cleaned up and gathered my teaching materials. I was already thinking ahead to our next class and how to reintroduce this discussion to encourage more students to enter the conversation. I looked up and saw Erin (all names of people and places are pseudonyms) had not left, but appeared to be watching and waiting. I asked if she needed to speak with me. She nodded and began with, "I don't want to disappoint you, but I don't consider myself a reader." As my heart flooded with teacher-guilt that I had in some way been insensitive to her needs as a learner, I searched my memory for paperwork I should have had or previous discussions about her learning needs that I had potentially forgotten. I came up empty, but assured her I was not disappointed and asked what I could do to support her. Erin said she was uncomfortable with the turn our last discussion

had taken when her peer declared unequivocally that all teacher candidates were high-achievers and in advanced or gifted classes, so they could not understand why their students were not like them. “I wanted to say, like… ‘Actually, no. That’s why I’m here, because I’m not looking at my students that are lower-level learners… like, ‘Oh, they just don't want to’ or ‘they have something wrong with them.’ They may have missed something and it's our job to still find that connection. Like, ‘Mmm, no. That might be right for you, but it's not for me.’”

As Erin continued, I discovered she had a learning disability and had undergone tutoring in middle grades to bring her literacy skills – reading, writing, and speaking – up to grade level. She had fought the label “bad reader” since she was young and routinely grappled with feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence in her literacy skills because of her learning disability. In fact, Erin said she felt most connected to her 7th grade placement students who struggled to learn because she knew what it was to be left behind her peers and to *not* understand.

The experiences Erin shared highlighted what the field of teacher education has only begun to explore. As more students with learning disabilities graduate high school, they are making the decision to pursue a college degree. This means students who excel possess academic skills to achieve their goals, and many students who have had academic accommodations and support are excelling and using strategies to accomplish or surpass goals unreached in previous generations. Despite tightening educational regulations, college students with learning disabilities are having an impact on the “face” of universities and in teacher education programs. More college students with learning disabilities are pursuing careers in education than in previous generations, with the idea they can connect with and support students who struggle to learn, much as they had been supported.

Background to the Study

As government agencies aggressively institute more practices and policies targeting increased literacy skills and competencies, all students are required to progress in the acquisition of knowledge and escalate their academic skills at an ever-rising pace (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Legislation, including *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), *Race to the Top*, and state standards such as *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS) for learning requirements (Hallgren, James-Burdumy, & Perez-Johnson, 2014; US Department of Education, 2001, 2016a), inherently include the unrealistic expectations that students, regardless of ability or circumstances, will master literacy skills at linear developmental levels and in sequence. As young and adolescent learners progress through the American education system, expectations of systematic increases in literacy learning are especially troublesome for students with learning disabilities.

According to a recent report on students with learning disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), the numbers of students in US PreK-12 public schools receiving special education services rose from 4.7 million in 1990-1991 to 6.5 million in 2013-2014, the latest academic year for which there is official data. These numbers indicate the need for special education services, as well as teachers' understandings and support of these needed services, is on the rise in our nation's classrooms (Lillie, 2010; Shifrer, 2013). As a result, educational accommodations are needed for more students and for longer timeframes than in previous generations (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Students with learning disabilities are finding success in their PreK-12th grade years through hard work, but especially with academic and emotional support from their educational environments. Success at this level directly influences the numbers of students graduating from high school and entering higher education. The total numbers of enrolled students with formally identified learning disabilities graduating from public

high schools in the United States has increased significantly from almost 44% of those identified in 1992 to about 65% of those identified in 2014 (Maki et al., 2015). The percentage of students graduating increased and students dropping out decreased in this same time period. While the number of students with formally identified learning disabilities has increased, the big change is the increasing numbers of students with formally identified learning disabilities graduating from high school (Snyder & Dillow, 2015).

More students are coming into higher education with varying skill levels, differentiated learning needs, and fear of failure due to increased expectations of achievement in this era of high-stakes accountability (Wootton, 2002). Thus, there is a growing need to know more about the ways students with differentiated learning needs require academic and social support and how they are realistically supported as they prepare for future higher education experiences.

There has been limited understanding of teacher candidates with learning disabilities and their experiences in academia beyond study of the novelty of their existence in post-secondary education programs (Baldwin, 2007; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Gilbert, 1998; Glazzard & Dale, 2013; Riddell & Weedon, 2013; Wertheim et al., 1998). As education majors who have successfully navigated academic difficulties look to their future careers as teachers, they are better equipped to support struggling students and to share their stories so people without first-hand disability experience can learn from them (Flavian, 2015). They are experts in working through literacy-based learning disabilities, but have not been seen as knowledgeable and experiential resources.

The information presented in this article is part of a larger interview study, grounded in sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), that involved six teacher candidates, all of whom have identified learning disabilities. Evolving from a chance after-class encounter, the larger

study was undertaken with the idea that I and other teacher educators may understand how to better academically and socially support students with learning disabilities in the pursuit of their academic and career goals. Employing strategies from Polkinghorne (1988, 1995, 2005), I used narrative analysis to interpret meaning from my participants' interviews that reflected their literacy journey. In this article, I share the literary journey of one of the participants, a middle grades education major, as she negotiated her disability, engaged in literacy instruction with 5th and 7th grade students, and discussed the sociocultural aspects important to her literacy development. This article was guided by the following research questions:

1. What were this middle grades education major's experiences in her own K-12 education in negotiating her literacy-based learning disabilities?
2. What sociocultural aspects were critical to her development as a literacy learner?
3. Based on her own dialogic meaning making, how did she envision herself as a literacy teacher for PreK-8th grade students?

Literature Review

Students with learning disabilities have average to above-average intelligence with difficulties in "reading, mathematics, spelling, written expression, and oral language" (Scott, 1997, p.88). Gilbert (1998) stated, "Individuals with a learning disability are of at least average intelligence but experience difficulty in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language," (p.323). In addition, they often struggle with "organization, time management, and/or attention" (Scott, 1997, p.88). To be eligible for special needs services, students must struggle using language that causes communication difficulties in understanding various language forms.

Learning disabilities are typically prominent and noticed in elementary school, but by the time students reach secondary school, they have often learned strategies to help them find success (Flavian, 2015). When education majors with learning disabilities are admitted into teacher-education programs, they are eligible to receive services as long as the modifications do not invalidate the rigor of the program of study (Baldwin, 2007). However, many programs are "not prepared to adequately meet the diverse needs of teacher candidates with disabilities" (Bargerhuff et al., 2009, p.32). Brulle (2006) stated all teacher candidates, regardless of an learning disability, must "demonstrate the capabilities necessary to handle a classroom on his or her own" (p.3). This review of the research illustrates what we know about the intersectional topics of undergraduate education majors, or teacher candidates, with learning disabilities and the support they had to negotiate through those disabilities with the goal of academic success.

Reality of Accommodations

For teacher candidates, learning all they need to know before graduation in tandem with application of their theoretical and methodological pedagogies can be a daunting task. Often the "principal problem of a disability is not the sensory or neurological impairment itself, but its social implications" (Gindis, 2003, p.202). They are aware of how information about their learning disability could encourage assumptions about abilities and reinforce stigmas causing them to "overdo" to "counteract stereotypes and prove to others that they are capable and successful" (Ferri, Keefe, & Gregg, 2001, p.30). Teacher candidates with learning disabilities need support in the forms of positive acceptance into the classroom and practicum contexts, and opportunities to express and discuss their learning needs with their peers, professors, and mentor teachers. Explicit teaching in college classrooms for both content and methods and modeling of organizing strategies from their cooperating and mentor teachers (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012;

Nistler & McMurry, 1993; Wertheim et al., 1998) undergird their feelings of competence when they are in field placement and working with young learners.

Successful teacher candidates with learning disabilities need written and verbal support from their professors, school administrators, non-disabled colleagues, and mentors in securing and maintaining instructor positions (Obiakor, Karr, Algozzine, & Utley, 1995). Examples of helpful accommodations in the university classroom include: assistance on preparation and presentation of assignments, having a note-taker, recording class lectures, extended time on and less distracting locations for exams, and laptops with educational software to plan and execute written assignments (Baldwin, 2007; Glazzard & Dale, 2013). Griffiths (2012) suggested a few strategies for teacher candidates with learning disabilities to better prepare them for working in field placements with young learners: visualization and mental rehearsals of lessons, prepared scripts for lessons, and visual prompts on display. Gilbert (1998) and Brulle (2006) argued a person should not be prevented or excluded from an educational career based on having an LD, as long as they could perform essential functions of the position. Each person should be assessed individually.

Wrapped up in all of the suggested accommodations and strategies is the underlying necessity for teacher candidates with learning disabilities to self-advocate (Couzens et al., 2015; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012). Because they have always viewed learning through the lens of their learning disability, they are their own best advocates. When they become the teachers-of-record for their own classrooms, they will have had advocacy experience and be better equipped to advocate for students' needs.

Teacher Candidates with Learning Disabilities

In a recent empirical study, Baldwin (2007) explored available accommodations administrators in one American university for education majors with learning disabilities believed to be in place. Baldwin recommended administrators develop accommodation training for faculty, streamline the process of student self-identification, and closely monitor students with learning disabilities to "council them out" (p.138) as needed to maintain a rigorous teacher-education program. Griffin, Jones & Kilgore (2007) spoke with teachers educators about how the inclusion of teacher candidates with learning disabilities had influenced their preparation and teaching. Recommendations were that support would benefit the teacher candidates with learning disabilities and those without because everyone would be exposed to differentiation strategies they could use in future classrooms.

Several studies focused on a single teacher candidate with learning disabilities. Researchers found students reluctant to disclose their disabilities for fear of peer exclusion, faculty indifference, or program dismissal as repercussion (Gilbert, 1998; Nistler & McMurry, 1993; Riddell & Weedon, 2013; Wakefield, 2007). A case study from an Australian university focused on efforts to assist teacher candidates struggling with "hidden" disabilities (Couzens et al., 2015). All of these articles ended with pleas for learning disability disclosure to peers, professors, and mentors to avoid miscommunications (Couzens et al., 2015; Gilbert, 1998; Riddell & Weedon, 2013), pleas for students to speak about their literacy understandings (Nistler & McMurry, 1993), the unanswered inquiry into how many promising future educators are held back from their career due to difficulties with testing (Wakefield, 2007), and for adult students with learning disabilities to be encouraged to work with the university to improve services (Couzens et al., 2015) – a common recommendation throughout the literature reviewed.

One narrative (Flavian, 2015), explored how teacher candidates and classroom teachers vary in their expectations for students with learning disabilities. Classroom teachers endorse inclusion classes for students with learning needs saying that with support, they can "contribute to society in many domains" (para.9), but when these same students want to become teachers, they are often discouraged from pursuing their goals. On the other hand, teacher candidates with learning disabilities inherently understand people learn differently and are typically adept at recognizing learning struggles from personal experiences.

Glazzard and Dale's (2013) study focused on two teacher candidates in the UK with learning disabilities. Both felt they internalized the positive academic and social support they received from professors who focused on their practical skills and progress made over their academic abilities and comparative skills. They believed they were able to support their own students who might struggle to learn, with empathy and inclusive teaching strategies, as they were supported. Bargerhuff, Cole & Teeters (2009) argued even with learning support coming from the K-12 academic experiences, many students are not "fully equipped to meet the challenges" (p.32) of higher education, much less as future educators. Like Couzens et al. (2015) and Baldwin (2007), they recommend teacher educators research and better prepare themselves to support teacher candidates both current and future.

Csoli and Gallagher (2012) and Griffiths (2012), in separate studies, investigated teacher training programs and experiences in field placements in Canada and the UK. Teacher candidates in both studies were surprised when previously relied on accommodations were not available in classroom placements. But, the participants felt their experiences with learning disabilities positioned them to understand and support their future students for academic success. Csoli and Gallagher (2012) suggested faculty receive training on appropriate and accommodations for

students with learning disabilities, students disclose their learning disability to the university, to their professors, and to their mentors, and that more should be done to simplify the process of self-identifying and obtaining services.

Theoretical Perspective

Researchers agree students learn best when instructional choices center on learning processes embedded in social contexts (Brulle, 2006; Lattuca, 2002). In order to focus on the sociocultural intricacies of teacher education in light of coping with learning disabilities, I used an interpretive qualitative methodology to “bring meaning and order” (Wertz et al., 2011, p.65) to my participant’s life experiences in literacy learning and preparing to teach young learners.

Sociocultural theories derive from the “socio-historical school of psychology” (Lattuca, 2002, p.714) established by Vygotsky and his colleagues, Luria and Leont’ev, who became known as members of the “Vygotsky Circle” (Redkina, 2013). Aligning with Marxist philosophy, their foundational belief was that a person could only be understood within the social context of his/her existence or culture (Lattuca, 2002; Veresov, 2005). Envisioned by Vygotsky, sociocultural theory holds that people are social beings living in a social world being shaped by contexts, situations, circumstances, and experiences. Also, he believed children learn in cooperation with their peers in their social environments with scaffolding from more knowledgeable others. Vygotsky (1978) argued his theoretical frameworks focused on biological processes and sociocultural higher mental functions, and the ways in which these ideas are used together to describe cognitive development in children.

Applying Vygotsky’s (1978) theoretical tenets, students with learning disabilities may have found themselves in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where they learned with the help of knowledgeable others. Some students may feel socially marginalized (Gindis, 2003),

causing them to hide their learning disability to achieve social acceptance, which calls their pursuit of a career in education into question. One of the most illuminating ways I explored and understood my participant's life experiences was through language and how it was part of her social and cultural contexts. These situations aligned with Vygotskian theories and presented the best possible avenue into understanding my participant's lifeworld.

The purpose for adopting a sociocultural perspective for this study was to understand the intricacies of teacher education in light of coping with academic struggles. This article focuses on how the participant made academic meaning in cooperation with her peers and with support from her mentors. This theoretical perspective was a tool used to make meaning of the participant's experiences in academia through her language and cultural practices.

Methods

One-on-one interviews are a powerful way to explore a participant's life experiences. Through research into interviewing strategies (Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003), the ways interviews can be used in educational contexts, and how teacher candidates with learning disabilities can become part of their own success story through telling their personal narratives were identified.

I chose a qualitative research design using semi-structured, focused interviews (deMarrais, 2004; Polkinghorne, 2005; Roulston et al., 2003) to provide some structure to the conversations, so Erin had "freedom to express [her] views in [her] own terms" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006), and to build on the idea that meaning is constructed through narratives, or the language of stories, (Polkinghorne, 2005) in social contexts. Because "data are produced from social interactions and are therefore constructions or interpretations" (Freeman et al., 2007, p.27), it was important to not only collect information from the participants, but to construct this

information through sociocultural and dialogic lens using narrative analysis into data for interpretation. The three interviews were designed to solicit detailed personal information about experiences with her learning disability and literacy. I was not simply seeking recall of information, but rather what meaning my participant made with her experiences she shared.

Participant: Erin

At the time of this study, Erin was a 22-year-old white, middle class female undergraduate student. Her mom is credited with seeking out and transporting her to a tutoring center to acquire strategies for learning, for coping with her learning disability, and practice in reading to raise her skills from 3rd grade to 8th grade, putting her on-level with her peers. Erin was a student in three literacy-based middle grades university methods courses I taught. During out first semester together, Fall 2014, Erin confided in me one day after class about her learning disability and how it had influenced her level of confidence and her education as a whole. Erin explained, "I need you to help me learn how to learn." Later, when she heard I was recruiting teacher candidates with learning disabilities for my study, she volunteered to participate.

Quick with a smile and socially assured, Erin brought the brightness of the day with her to class. She was friendly and open – traits recognized and appreciated by her fellow teacher candidates. When in-class assignments included small group work, Erin was first to gather peers in proximity and get to work. She loved being a part of a larger whole as they collaborated to make meaning. It was not unusual to hear her laughing and telling endearing stories about her students before class or during breaks. The other teacher candidates understood her passion for teaching and her desire to help young learners discover the wonders of social studies, reading, and writing.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews and analysis of the data were the basis of this study. The participant's words, my responses, and discussions as we were in dialogue together were the analytic focus. I collected data in October and November 2015, and then again in January 2016, interviewing Erin three times and fully transcribing our interviews from digital recordings. At Erin's request, we met in a campus conference room for the first two interviews and at a local branch library for the third one, as these locations were convenient for both parties. The initial interview focused on her literacy learning experiences from preschool through high school and into college prior to entering the education program. The second interview explored Erin's literacy learning experiences during her education program classes, which integrated her work in field-placement classrooms with middle grades students. The third and final interview for this data collection period concentrated on looking back at her field-placements, her work with young learners, and her visions of herself as a lead teacher in an educational setting.

I used Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis methods to make meaning of how Erin wanted her stories to be told. The holistic, but not necessarily linear, steps are included, here.

1. Synthesize data into a coherent whole – not separated into parts
2. Arrange the data elements chronologically
3. Identify which elements contribute to the outcome
4. Look for connections of cause and influence among events
    a. Story develops through recursive movements from data to emerging plot
    b. Follow principles of hermeneutic circles – moving back and forth from parts to whole
    c. Emerging plot indicates which data to include or eliminate

5. Identify action elements caused by combinations of events
6. Write the story (pp.15-18)

After interviewing, transcribing, and narrative smoothing – or eliminating unnecessary words that did not affect overall meaning, such as repeated "ums" or "you knows," I analyzed the data, carefully coding important passages, deemed so if they addressed my purpose for the study, gave me background information about my participant, or helped me answered my research questions, which allowed me to identify the important elements that contributed to the outcome of the narratives (step 3). I wrote notes in the margins of the transcripts of connections to other pieces of the interview to synthesize the data (step 1) and arrange it chronologically (step 2). I then digitally highlighted what had been manually highlighted on the paper copies.

To assist with organizing, analyzing, and managing my data to make sense of Erin's life stories related to her own literacy learning and her literacy teaching with students (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995, 2005), I made a pdf for each transcript and loaded them into ATLAS.ti 7, one of several different kinds of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CQDAS) programs available online. I transcribed the pre- and post-interview notes from each session to synthesize them (step 1) with the information previously collected. I created memos for the interview notes, which helped to reconstruct the events (step 2) in chronological order. Finally, I used the coding features of ATLAS.ti 7 to record the thoughts I had written in the margins of each transcript, in my observations, and my pre- and post-interview notes from each session, as I searched for cause and influence (step 4) among events and in context.

In the context of this study, codes were used to identify critical elements of the data and "code families" were synthesis of the data. I went through all of the codes assigned, and combined them into code families (step 1) based on content to condense the massive amounts of

information already collected and coded (step 3). Polkinghorne (2010) believed “narrative inquiries produce a storied description of a practice process carried out in a concrete life space” (p.396), which dictated that the data should be managed so that it was true to my participant’s stories and the ways she made concrete meanings of her literacy learning and subsequent literacy teaching. I ended with 12 code families and 1 family of quotes from the transcripts and memos.

Returning to code families, I broke them into like topics. Then, as Polkinghorne (1988) recommended for narrative analysis, I wrote about each code family separately and included those entries as memos as I identified data elements caused by combinations of events (step 5). This technique allows me to reach across encounters with the participant to make meaning of personal literacy learning and literacy teaching stories and other documentation.

Findings

The findings came together through narratives loosely corresponding to each interview’s foci. While the interview foci and narratives shared are aligned, data from all three interviews are included across narratives. For example, Erin spoke about being mentored in Interviews 2 and 3, but chronologically, the information fit with the focus of Interview 1: *Literacy-Based Learning Experiences P-12 and College Classes before Education Major Core Courses*. Each narrative focused on language the participant used to negotiate with and through her learning disability, academic experiences and support, learning disability strategies for learning, and career goals.

The first narrative centers on Erin’s early academic experiences and support she received from teachers in elementary school. The second narrative centers on middle grades literacy learning, Erin’s learning disability fully realized, and tutors who helped her build her literacy confidence and cope with her learning disability using strategies to tackle “holes” in her reading skills. The third narrative focuses on high school and college literacy learning, how Erin

understood her learning disability, strategies used to negotiate literacy learning through her learning disability, mentors in field placements, and teaching ideas gained through understandings and strategies for learning. The final narrative speaks to Erin taking her hard-won educator skills into the future as she works through the lens of her learning disability.

Early Academic Experiences and Support for Reading

Throughout her tenure in academia, Erin had many learning experiences and varying levels of support – all influenced and informed by her learning disability. She viewed her learning in three phases: early literacy, tutoring, and everything since tutoring. Her family supported her early literacy and engaged her in learning about the world through experiences and reading. Erin remembered sitting with her grandparents and "reading" her favorite book and her mom and sister reading to her. She shared, "My sister would read the actual book, and when it was my turn, I would just talk about the pictures. I didn't care that I didn't know the words." It was only when she could no longer "fake" reading by using illustrations or having someone tell her the words that she realized she did not like to read.

Erin mostly read picture books in elementary school because she was good at predicting the story based on the illustrations. She learned to make sense out of books by using context and repetition to "read" picture books. Erin was at the top of her class for number of books read in Kindergarten and 1st grade because of the strategies she used when reading picture books with her grandmother. However, by the time she reached 3rd grade, her friends were reading chapter books as Erin read and re-read books meant for early learners. She later realized she was not confident in her reading skills, and was not sure why she could not read and understand the same kinds of books her friends at school and church enjoyed. As they were later to discover with her diagnosis, her reading skills effectively ended with what she had learned through 3rd grade. At

this point in her literacy journey, her learning disability diagnosis had not yet been identified, although she was aware of not choosing to pleasure read due to difficulties with on-level texts.

Middle Grades - Learning Disability and Strategies for Literacy Learning

Prior to diagnosis, her teachers acknowledged her poor standardized test scores, but felt she had a "bad day" when she tested. After numerous parent-teacher conferences, Erin's mom, unconvinced she was receiving the help she needed and suspected problems were not adequately addressed in the public school classroom, found a tutoring center and her odyssey through learning disability testing, diagnosis, and intensive work to improve her reading skills began. She was diagnosed with a learning disability in 6th grade, attending tutoring several times a week. Erin felt she lacked confidence in her literacy skills the most during middle grades. She was never one to volunteer to read aloud or to quickly respond to questions based on information from written texts.

After a few weeks in tutoring, Erin was excited to see her reading speed and comprehension increase due to the hard work she was putting in at tutoring and practicing at home. Her tutors began with rudimentary phonics skills – the skills she did not retain from her early literacy experiences. Erin learned "letter-sound correspondence" (WETA Public Broadcasting, 2017, para.1), or how written letters matched to letter sounds. She progressed from learning to decode words to reading full sentences with minimal decoding necessary due in large part to literacy strategies taught in tutoring. Two strategies she learned then and has continued to use throughout her academic journey were "tracker fingers" and "reading while chewing gum." In tracker finger, Erin learned to point first to letters, then later to words, and finally tracking whole lines of text as she read. This strategy allowed her to follow along as she was reading and to track her progress as she went. In reading while chewing gum, Erin learned to occupy her

mouth by pretending to chew gum while silently reading so she did not mouth the words as she went. Forming each word as she read slowed down her progress and did not allow for increased fluency. There was still a lot of learning ahead of her, but Erin could see tutoring was helping her make sense of language.

Erin did not receive accommodations in public school classes even after her diagnosis and in the time of tutoring in 6th-8th grades. During tutoring and her work with two mentors, the "holes" in Erin's learning were filled, increasing her reading skills from 3rd grade level when she was in 6th grade, to on-level when she was in 8th grade. When she had officially "graduated" from tutoring, she felt more confident about independent work. Erin learned to apply strategies she was given in tutoring to her academic work and found new levels of success, but still felt the label of "bad" reader. One strategy she loved was creating multimodal projects, combining many skills into one finished product – allowing Erin's passion for the topic to shine in her creativity, while still accomplishing the assigned tasks. Another strategy Erin discovered was "teaching" what she learned to others. Sometimes these 'others' were pretend students and sometimes they were family members. In fact, Erin used her dresser as a podium and "taught" her "students" lessons she planned based on material learned in her middle grades classes. The serendipitous intersection of struggling to read and tutoring strategies forged the new idea that she better understood new knowledge when she taught it.

During this time, Erin independently read *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989), her first completed chapter book. Memories of reading this young adult classic and the prominence it held in her reading development propelled Erin's determination to teach Social Studies and English Language Arts in her future classrooms. Her vision of teaching Social Studies and English Language Arts were:

> It would kind of be fun to do English, and I love the idea of integrating Social Studies and English together. A dream would be to teach *Number the Stars* to my history class, but do writing in my English class... because you know, that's my favorite book.

Erin began to focus on learning as whole, instead of simply completing assignments for grades or practicing her strategies whenever possible. Other literacy milestones came in 8th grade. For the first time in her academic life, Erin was reading the same books as her peers – both in school assignments and out of school interests. "Finally, I can contribute," she felt, in conversations around literature that had previously been closed to her due to her low reading skills and her distaste for reading, in general. It was during this microcosm of middle school that Erin discovered two very important ideas for her future: she learned best when she taught and she wanted to teach Social Studies.

High School, College, and Application of Literacy Strategies

By the time she reached high school, Erin confidently approached reading assignments, armed with strategies she learned in tutoring and applied in middle grades, as well as a newly discovered strategy: making connections through writing. Erin unlocked this secret to understanding literacy connections sometime in early high school. Her note-taking skills were average, but she had a good memory for details. Erin found the act of writing post-discussion notes increased her understandings of in-class topics.

By the time she reached 11th grade, Erin excelled in her classes and was placed into positions of leadership in small groups and in the larger whole class grouping. She began volunteering to answer questions and read aloud. Because she read at a slower pace but with inflection and emotion, Erin believed her peers could relate to the text, since that was how she felt when someone read aloud to her.

During her senior year, Erin was accepted into a mentoring program for struggling middle grades students. She shadowed a middle grades teacher and mentored small groups of students. Erin read with students and worked on comprehension questions she created. Her own literacy learning progress enabled her to create, write, and feel confident when she read aloud because of the interventions in middle grades and literacy strategies she learned and practiced.

It was in college, though, that Erin truly found her "voice." She began her undergraduate studies at a small southern college before transferring to the flagship university she now attended. In her classes, Erin reaffirmed strategies for success and coping with her ever-present learning disability. Small class sizes, working with others, staying abreast of her reading and assignments, and reading techniques for comprehension and retention of information such as reading aloud and writing down topic connections are examples of strategies that work well.

Erin spoke favorably about her passion for collaborations. In the first semester of their education program, students are placed into a cohort for their core classes. They are paired with a teacher candidate peer classmate in their first field placement, interning in the same middle grades classroom two days a week. Erin and her partner, Hannah, were able to collaborate on lesson planning and work independently with small groups – providing the teacher candidates needed support for learning, both as students and as teachers. The cohort model and peer partnering supported Erin's learning and allowed her to find success because she was confident in listening, learning, and sharing her ideas with her peers.

There were some instances in which unsuccessful academic experiences caused Erin to question her abilities, only to then reaffirm her strategies for success. When she felt apprehensive she would not be able to keep up and her peers and professor would discover she was a "bad" reader, a label Erin has fought since elementary school, she told herself she had the strategies to

be successful and then put those strategies into play. She wanted to prove to her peers, her professor, but most of all, herself, that she *could* keep up with the class requirements and be successful. She was determined to succeed in this academic environment.

In order to best retain information, Erin needed connections to the texts – either through writing or visualizing as she read – which helped her personalize the information and better retain it. She found she must practice the reading strategies, such as blending sounds and making letter-sound connections, her tutors gave her or she loses some of her skills. While working with her placement students, Erin shared reading strategies she had been taught, such as using 'tracker fingers' and 'reading while chewing gum' and was able to see how she could support her struggling students and practice the strategies herself. Another retention strategy was to work in small groups. Erin found others "get" stuff she does not from the assignments and vice versa, since they all "learn differently." Finally, Erin discovered she engaged more readily with interesting texts and assignments if her curiosity was piqued. If she could not see a direct purpose for it, she had difficulties being motivated to engage – and she believed her students, especially ones with learning disabilities or struggles, would feel the same.

Erin had little trouble in her courses or field placements. She felt confidence in and relied on her learned strategies to support her acquisition of knowledge. She preferred working in small groups and in a variety of modes for learning, and carried these preferences over into her field placements, working with students whose skills were below grade-level and had difficulties with reading. Erin believed she did her best work in small groups because they all worked together to accomplish a common goal – relying on each other's strengths to compensate for individual weaknesses. "I'm a big advocate for belonging to a community, and belonging to a group of

people," she shared. Her instinct to work with and rely on her group members supported successful learning for her and her peers, which she then modeled for her own students.

Working with the students in her placement caused memories of her own learning disability struggles to resurface. Erin encouraged students to make personal connections to their texts, to work in small groups, and helped pique their interests in the material, since these were strategies she learned in tutoring and still used in college classes. Despite her learning disability and struggles with literacy, Erin learned strategies for success. She turned struggles into examples for her students and loved seeing them make progress toward their goals in reading.

Education majors schedule, study, and sit for Georgia Assessment for the Certification of Educators (GACE) exams late in the 3rd or 4th semester in the program before graduation. In the education programs, students are usually assessed through projects/portfolios instead of taking tests. As a result, Erin had not taken standardized tests since high school end-of-course and college entrance exams. For the GACE, she took several practice exams, met with cohort members to bounce ideas off each other and study together, using various modes to help prepare for the licensing exams. Going against even her own expectations, Erin felt more confident about the ELA exam because she believed her ELA methods courses had better prepared her for it.

In getting ready for and taking the licensing exams, Erin saw her learning disability struggles come out. She had never taken these kinds of tests on a computer, could not write on the computer screen, and felt anxious. Going into the exams, Erin was confident in her skills and knowledge for passing the ELA exam, but feared she would fail the Social Studies one. About a month after the ELA GACE, she sat for the Social Studies GACE. She was not as confident in the information she needed to know for this test and went into it with apprehension. She received a passing score for both exams the first time, with no need to take either one again.

The final requirement, edTPA, was a relatively new one for this program. The students worked with their mentor teachers to prepare a 10-day unit plan, 3 days of which were videoed for submission to their supervisors. There were extensive required written components for the portfolio to successfully complete edTPA. With her mentor teacher, Erin structured her lessons to show her best teaching, innovation, and student learning. This part of the program requirements went well for her leading to her graduation and licensure that spring.

Career Goals

Erin has wanted to be a teacher for as long as she “can remember,” knowing in her heart she has always been destined to teach. She loved everything about education and could not wait to teach and learn with her students. Following graduation, Erin accepted a position as a director of curriculum at a camp she attended as a young girl and had been employed at as a counselor in the summer. In this non-traditional educational setting, Erin was in charge of the curriculum for the summer kids and was second-in-charge of retreats beginning the fall after graduation. She wants to teach in this environment for a few years and then settle into a classroom setting for the second phase of her career. But, once she has children, Erin has her heart set on homeschooling as an approach, once again, to teach in a non-traditional setting. She wants to be able to educate her children in a looser structure than institutional learning allows – being able to reach across content areas and educate the whole child in ways that he/she best learns.

Discussion

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative interview study (deMarrais, 2004; Roulston et al., 2003) was to understand how one middle grades teacher candidate with an identified learning disability negotiated her disability as she engaged in literacy instruction with students. Based on findings detailed in the above sections, narratives about Erin’s literacy learning and sociocultural

aspects of her development wove together learning disabilities and social support in numerous ways. First, Erin worked through her learning disability and found academic success using strategies learned in tutoring. Her tutors supported her academically and emotionally as she struggled with confidence and playing "catch-up" with her literacy skills. Once her literacy skills were on-level with her peers, Erin discovered her passion for collaborations as they allowed her to share details she remembered from their readings while learning from her peers who had deeper insights into the lesson topics. They made meaning together. Erin was the living embodiment of Vygotskian (1978, 1986) theory as she learned to construct knowledge through language and with the support of more knowledgeable others – her tutors.

Erin learned most effectively and felt more confident when she worked with her peers in small groups. They supported each other through strengths and weaknesses when they worked together to make sense of their learning. Erin used the term "bounce ideas off each other" multiple times throughout her stories and across seasons in her life. Collaborating with her peers allowed her to present small details she remembered from texts, images, or speeches while her peers provided details on below-the-surface meanings. Erin related how she understood texts, the meaning that comes through for her is surface meaning, only. She shared the example:

> Something my mom said… she was telling me, "Something they saw in your learning was that you could do a fill in the blank." Like, I could do: His shirt was red. But, if they gave me a paragraph describing, "The fiery reflection…" you know, something describing without saying it was red, I would have never been able to say, "It was red." That's as far as my reading level had gotten me to. In 6th grade when I started to do a lot of inferences, I had never learned how to actually do that. That's why I was having to go back, and then start to build... really form, and recognize what deeper meanings were.

In collaborating with her peers, Erin felt she could contribute to the group while still learning from her peers about inferences and deeper meanings.

Vygotsky (1978) believed humans learn from more knowledgeable others, which was reflected in the ways Erin learned from her peers, and was as a more knowledgeable other for her students with literacy struggles. When she observed students in her field placement having difficulties with assignments due to literacy struggles, she shared strategies learned from her tutors when she was in middle grades. These strategies helped her be successful and eventually feel confidence in her own abilities to make meaning in academic settings. Being able to access texts helped Erin feel confident in her own learning and in the support she provided for her students in their learning. Through it all, Erin owned her life and learning experiences.

Erin learned to negotiate and make meaning of literacy through the lens of her learning disability. She talked through practicing literacy skills, creating academic lessons at home to practice for tests, licensing exam roadblocks, and identity labels. Because she could not escape her learning disability and had not known learning except through her disability, Erin developed ways to make academic meaning. Whether it was refusing to accept herself as a "BAD READER" or figuring out how to retain information, Erin used literacy skills to be academically successful. Cooperating with her peers, Erin worked through assignments in small groups and bounced ideas off her cohort partner in field placement. Mentors were especially important to Erin when they spoke with her about her learning disability and strategies for success, challenging her to write and present, even when she was not sure she could succeed, and learning best teaching strategies for her students and future family. Erin shared learning strategies with her students – allowing them to find answers and respond, helping them make connections to their reading, and forming personal relationships to support their learning.

This research adds to the field of teacher education because of the foci on one teacher candidate's voice about her learning disability struggles and triumphs as she trained to educate the next generation. Past research focused on teachers with learning disabilities, college students with learning disabilities, and supervising teachers' interpretation of student teachers with learning disabilities. My study focused on Erin's stories about her life experiences of literacy learning and teaching and how she wished to share them. Together, we constructed the story of her literacy journey, going beyond detailing first-hand accounts of what support would be of benefit for teacher candidates and the difficulties associated with publically sharing one's learning disability. We explored how one teacher candidate negotiated her literacy-based learning disability and learned to teach students with all levels of need, while better understanding experiences as critical conduits for developing literacy capabilities.

Conclusion and Implications

Teacher candidates with learning disabilities who have struggled in academia, but have become successful in school-based settings are uniquely capable of connecting with students who struggle, due to inherent understandings of what it means to have difficulties in academic settings. Educators who have struggled and found success are better equipped to support others who struggle. For teacher candidates with learning disabilities, feelings of connectedness with their current and future struggling students are a benefit teaching. Even when teacher candidates are not confident in opening up about their learning disabilities due to feelings of inadequacy or a lack of confidence in overcoming educational obstacles, given support and a nurturing environment, they may find professional and personal successes. When teacher candidates have learned to successfully negotiate through their learning disabilities and feel confident in sharing their struggles and their support with their peers and students, all parties benefit.

It is not atypical for assumptions to be made about perceived inadequacies in people with learning disabilities. When that person with a learning disability is found to be a teacher candidate who may someday teach young learners, negative assumptions are common. The value in exploring Erin's life experiences comes from knowing about her inscrutable optimism and how she turned her challenges into triumphs with hard work and persistence. Her stories illustrated her passion for working with students, her work ethic, and intelligence. Erin was not held back by someone else's idea of the limits of her achievement.

Teacher candidates with learning disabilities, who eventually become classroom teachers, are positioned to identify students with learning struggles. When they have struggled to learn and found academic success, they are more likely to recognize others who struggle. Learning strategies to counteract learning difficulties can benefit all students, but especially those students with special needs. Teacher candidates who have first-hand experience with learning disabilities are able to offer ideas for learning strategies in support of their students who most need them.

For Erin, opening up about her academic struggles as she learned strategies for literacy success provided her opportunities to socially and emotionally support her students in her field placement. She found strength in her life stories and ways she could help to shape the next generation of learners. Moreover, because she wants to homeschool the children she will eventually have in an environment promoting whole-child education in ways they best learn, the influence of her life experiences will be ever-present. For her, the most important part of her story is the one she will play with her future students and her own children.

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CHAPTER 4

TEACHER CANDIDATES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES MAKE MEANING OF THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH LITERACY LEARNING AND TEACHING[3]

[3] Graham, K.K. To be submitted to *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*

Abstract

This paper focuses on six education major participants with identified learning disabilities and their early literacy learning experiences, the sociocultural aspects important to their learning, and how they envision themselves engaging in literacy teaching with young learners. Dual theoretical frameworks, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1997) and Bakhtin's dialogism (1981), informed the researcher as she examined the participants' experiences with their learning disabilities, they ways their academic struggles influenced and were influenced by the language they used, and their cultural practices within their educational communities. Polkinghorne's (1990, 1995, 2010) narrative analysis methods were used to make meaning of the participants' life stories through their "voices" as they wanted their stories to be told. Themes of confidence, advocacy, and resilience were echoed again and again by these teacher candidates.

Key words: teacher candidates; learning disabilities; literacy learning; literacy teaching; sociocultural theory; narrative analysis

Teacher Candidates with Learning Disabilities Make Meaning of their Experiences in Literacy Learning and Teaching

The number of students receiving disability services in US public schools has risen from 4.7 million in 1990-1991 to 6.5 million in 2013-2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016c). Of the 6.5 million students receiving special education services, 35%, have specific learning disabilities (para.1). This number may be underestimated because not all learning disabilities are diagnosed or require accommodations (O'Shea & Meyer, 2016). Even taking lower than actual numbers into account, the indications from these figures are that the need for services for students with identified learning disabilities is on the rise in our nation's schools, as is the need for support and understanding from teachers, administrators, and other personnel.

Legislation aggressively aimed towards increasing literacy skills, such as *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), *Race to the Top*, and ever-changing state guidelines such as the *Common Core State Standards* (CCSS), are all requirements for classroom learning (GIM-CCSS, 2017). Collectively inherent in this legislation are expectations that students should master literacy skills at a common pace, in the required sequence, and in a linear fashion. If a clearly defined linear path for literacy learning is the expectation, then making and interpreting literacy concepts would under-realize the complexities of the culture of literacy. More students are requiring educational accommodations for extended timeframes due to learning disabilities than ever before (US Department of Education, 2015). High-stakes accountability for this generation of students with learning needs has led to fear of failure, increased anxiety, academic skill level variance, and differentiated learning needs (Abreu-Ellis, Ellis, & Hayes, 2009). As a result, there is a growing need to know more about how students with learning disabilities can be successfully supported in their quest for academic excellence and for their future experiences in higher education.

A learning disability is a formally identified learning challenge in one or more of the following areas: reading, spelling, written language, oral language, math, speaking, thinking, or writing (Baldwin, 2007; McCormick & Zutell, 2011) and often refers to a "group of difficulties such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and autism" (O'Dwyer & Thorpe, 2013, p.90). Included for the purposes of this study were students with learning disabilities and/or high incidence disabilities that impact learning, such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Nealy, 2017, personal communication). Students with learning disabilities face ever-growing literacy difficulties in our global society (Bellman, Burgstahler, & Ladner, 2014), which may hinder entrance into higher education and/or the career field of their choice. For high school graduates pursuing higher education, barriers to success often lie in social contexts (O'Dwyer & Thorpe, 2013).

Although there has been research into children and adults with learning disabilities and the existence of teacher candidates with learning disabilities in higher education (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012), their personal stories, or "voices," have been largely absent. They have learned to navigate academia through and with their learning disabilities, but have not been seen as experts. Through a qualitative interpretive interview study, my aim is to understand the educational experiences, paths to academic success, and negotiation of literacy instruction with young learners for teacher candidates with learning disabilities who have chosen literacy-focused careers in education. Sociocultural and dialogic theoretical frameworks, long established as theories applicable to education (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1997), are lenses used to understand learning in social contexts.

The following sections begin with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks used in this study: sociocultural theory and dialogism. I discuss how Vygotskian and Bakhtinian theories

influenced and informed the research design, collection of data, interaction with participants, and data analysis. There is a short review of the literature in the field concentrating on research into teacher candidates with learning disabilities, followed by a description of the methods used for this study. Data were analyzed through Polkinghorne's (1995, 2005) narrative analysis methods to honor each participant's life stories individually and in the collective. Working across participants, results are presented through three themes: confidence, advocacy, and resilience. The article ends with a discussion of the findings, limitations, and implications for this work.

Theoretical Framework

Established by Vygotsky and his colleagues, Luria and Leont'ev, sociocultural theory came from psychology and the "socio-historical school" (Lattuca, 2002, p.714). Their fundamental tenets stated, "Man is not only a product of his environment, he is also an active agent in creating that environment" (Luria, 1979, p.23). In the socio-historic view, understanding a person could only happen when the whole life is considered: circumstances, social context of that person's existence, and culture (Lattuca, 2002). Vygotsky (1978) proposed "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in [their] environment and in cooperation with [their] peers" (p.90). Envisioned by Vygotsky, sociocultural theory suggested people were social beings, living in a social world, shaped by contexts, situations, circumstances, and experiences.

Sociocultural Theory: Vygotsky

Vygotskian theories supported the ideas that learning was most successful in social contexts when students cooperated with their peers and learned from more knowledgeable others (Rezaee, 2011). Vygotsky (1997) argued, "Education is realized through the student's own experience, which is wholly determined by the environment," (p.50). To understand individual

thinking, one needed to understand the social and cultural-historical contexts in which it was used. Researchers cannot look at individual thinking as though it is separate from activities in which people engage and the institutions of which they are a part. The foundation of Vygotskian theories focused on sociocultural experiences and the biology of mental functions, and how these ideas together explain developmental cognition in young learners.

Based on research focused on teacher candidates with learning disabilities through a Vygotskian lens (1978, 1981, 1997), students may have experienced the zone of proximal development (ZPD), learned from more knowledgeable others, and co-constructed knowledge. Marginalization, especially in social contexts, often resulted from sharing information about their learning disabilities (Gindis, 2003). Teacher candidates may hide their learning disability to find peer acceptance (Prystowsky, 2008), calling a career in the literacy-focused realm of education into question. It was the sharing of one's learning disability and learning to teach through and with that learning disability, highlighted by participants' education experiences from a sociocultural standpoint that fit with a Vygotskian framework. Exploration and understanding about the participants' educational experiences came through the language we used to co-construct multi-faceted interview sessions to make meaning of their life stories.

Dialogic Theory: Bakhtin

Russian language theorist, Bakhtin (1981) believed all communications are part of all other communications: language is always in a perpetual state of response; it is dialogic. He argued, "Language essentially needs only a speaker – one speaker – and an object for his speech. When the listener perceives and understands the meaning of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward," (p.67-68). When people encounter language, they formulate a response based on the situation or past experiences and communicate with others, themselves,

or texts. When dialogue, understanding, and response all come together, *heteroglossia* exists (Bakhtin, 1981), forming "multi-layered" and differing "voices" (Holcombe, 2015) within a specific context. Meanings made in dialogic contexts differ when heteroglot elements change.

Bakhtin's theory of *dialogism* (1981) suggested all bits of language – or *utterances* – were a part of the whole and expected to produce a response. The constant interactions between all parts affect the others. He explained:

> A dialogue of languages is a dialogue of social forces perceived… as a dialogue of different times, epochs and days… that is forever dying, living, being born; co-existence and becoming are… fused into an indissoluble concrete unity that is contradictory, multi-speeched and heterogeneous. (p.365)

Dialogue in a language-sense meant interactions occur among people, between people and texts, interpersonally, within context of time – past → present → future, or even multiple manifestations of all listed circumstances. It was within dialogue that meaning was made and understood by participants in the dialogue. All utterances are influenced by past utterances and affect future utterances. He wrote, "The utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well," (Bakhtin, 1981, p.272). Utterances are multi-layered in meaning and are influenced by past experiences and usages, as well as by anticipated future responses. Language was the mode of communication – whether it was the language used between the participants and the researcher, the language used to describe and explain their life stories, or the written language from their constructed timelines. It was for these reasons Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language and literacy better helped me understand and analyze these teacher candidate participant's life experiences and the ways in which they wrote and spoke about them.

Sociocultural Theory and Dialogism: Complementary Frameworks

In order to delve into sociocultural intricacies of teacher education through the lens of learning disabilities and academic struggles, complementary theoretical perspectives were adopted. Through Vygotskian sociocultural theory, this study focused on how the participants individually and in cooperation with their peers and support from their mentors made meaning in academia. Through Bakhtinian dialogism, the study focused on the ways the participants dialogued with themselves, their support networks, and with the researcher to make co-constructed meaning using language of their past, present, and anticipated future academic experiences. Complementary theoretical perspectives allowed me to understand my participants' experiences with their learning disabilities and the ways in which their academic struggles influenced and were influenced by the language they used and their cultural practices within their educational communities.

Literacy learning and teacher candidates with learning disabilities are the foci of my research interests. Specifically, how do teacher candidates with learning disabilities affecting their literacy learning and teaching cope with their difficulties and move with and through them to succeed in academia? What kinds of support do they need, receive, and use in educational environments? How do they envision themselves as literacy teachers?

Literature Review

This review of relevant research speaks to the intersection of teacher candidates with learning disabilities and their negotiations of literacy learning and teaching. Research has shown learning disabilities are usually noticed, identified, and supported during elementary school, and by the time students come to secondary school, many have developed strategies for success (Nordell, 2009). More students with "invisible" disabilities are graduating from high school and

entering higher education than ever before (Abreu-Ellis et al., 2009; Connor, 2012). However, for many students, the strategies they used in high school are not as successful in fast-paced, lecture contexts of higher education (Proctor et al., 2006). These strategies and accommodations are often most ineffective in “monster” university courses.

According to legal mandates (US Department of Justice, 2014), college students with learning disabilities are eligible for teacher-education programs as the “presence of a disability does not necessarily result in an inability to perform the job as long as appropriate accommodations are made” (Brulle, 2006, p.3). Education majors with learning disabilities are given the same opportunities and protections as other students – they must successfully complete prerequisite courses for their program, be able to meet the minimum standards for admission, and be able to complete the program at the required level of rigor (Baldwin, 2007). All student teachers must be given the opportunity to show they are capable of effective classroom teaching. But, “Accommodations do not… alter expectations for the experience, expectations that are a common thread for all participants” (Akins et al., 2001, p.4). Teacher candidates with learning disabilities may receive reasonable accommodation to demonstrate their teaching and leading abilities, but they must also adhere to the same rigorous program expectations as other teacher candidate.

When education undergraduates begin their “major” classes, they must focus on content and methods of instruction (Gravett et al., 2011). Teacher candidates must take and pass a state licensing exam to attain teaching certification (Wakefield, 2007), which is often difficult for students who have learning disabilities and need accommodation. All too often, accommodations for testing are not covered by legislation, are not offered by the testing facility, or are not available at the time of testing (Griffin et al., 2007; Sparks & Lovett, 2014).

Although needed accommodation vary, according to Akins, Chance, and Page (2001), as well as Papalia-Berardi, Hughes, and Papalia (2002), university students with learning disabilities most frequently need and benefit from accommodations of tools, human resources, and additional time. For a more extensive listing of accommodations frequently needed, please see the mentioned sources. However, once education majors enter into field placement, accommodations previously offered in university courses and contexts are no longer available, or not available to the same extent (Baldwin, 2007). For example, once teacher candidates are in the position of instructional leader of a typical class with 20+ students, many of the previous academic supports such as extra time or text readers are not reasonable expectations.

Another facet of academic support for learning disabilities is the willingness and ability of the faculty to provide accommodations. In the last 20 years, research into faculty opinions about accommodations has shown consistently positive attitudes towards university students with learning disabilities, with increased understandings of the potential benefits of alternative assessments and program requirements (Sniatecki, Perry, & Snell, 2015). With understanding comes flexibility in course and program requirements (O'Dwyer & Thorpe, 2013). Teacher candidates and teacher education programs benefit when all parties work together with common goals for success and student-focused learning.

Academic accommodations can mean the difference for students with learning disabilities between success and failure in higher education. For teacher candidates with learning disabilities, accommodations are often not feasible in the classroom environment. They must learn strategies to cope with their learning struggles and design instruction that meets the state requirements as well as their students' literacy learning needs (Papalia-Berardi et al., 2002). The purpose of this interpretive qualitative interview study was to understand how teacher candidates with identified

learning disabilities came to the teaching profession and negotiated their own disabilities as they engaged in literacy instruction with PreK-8th grade students. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are these PreK-8th grade education majors' experiences in their own K-12 education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities?
2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to these education majors' development as literacy learners?
3. Based on these education majors' own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students?

Although college students with learning disabilities have been widely explored and researched since the mid-1990s, there have been few studies focused on teacher candidates with learning disabilities. There has been research into legislation affecting college students, and specifically, teacher candidates with learning disabilities (Akins et al., 2001; Baldwin, 2007; Harrison & Lemke, 2000; Wakefield, 2007). Several studies explored typical types of accommodations and faculty opinions about them, including student teacher mentors (Brulle, 2006; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Leyser et al., 2011; Sniatecki et al., 2015). There were two that delved deeply into ways students cope with and overcome their learning disabilities (Nistler & McMurry, 1993; Riddell & Weedon, 2013). And finally, several articles detailed the life experiences of teacher candidates and their learning disabilities (Gilbert, 1998; Glazzard & Dale, 2013; Griffiths, 2012; Harrison & Lemke, 1999). However, none of these published studies positioned teacher candidates with learning disabilities as experts in navigating their academic difficulties through the lens of their learning disability as they negotiate literacy instruction with young learners.

Method

The research design for this qualitative dissertation study used semi-structured, focused interviews (deMarrais, 2004; Roulston, 2010; Roulston et al., 2003). The initial interview explored their early literacy experiences through beginning college years with the use of participant-created timelines of experiences in literacy learning. Picking up chronologically from the end of the first interview, the second one focused on the participants' time in their undergraduate or graduate degree programs. The third and final interview sought stories about their work with young learners and training to become teachers. The interview questions and probes were designed to build on Polkinghorne's (1990) idea that narrative meaning is found through the language of stories in social contexts and as a way to understand their shared stories through sociocultural and dialogism theoretical frameworks. I chose this approach to promote understanding of how teacher candidates with learning disabilities interpreted their experiences in literacy learning as well as their vision of their future in literacy teaching.

Participants

Participants were six female college students with identified learning disabilities at a southern flagship public university. Four participants had registered with the campus disability resource center, but only one had used her accommodations in the previous 12 months. With the support of the resource center, registered students were first sent a recruitment email and flyer with the pertinent information highlighted. Faculty members forwarded the recruitment information to their graduate assistants and students. I spoke to several on-campus literacy-focused university classes and handed out the recruitment materials. One participant was a former student and volunteered to be interviewed. The recruitment process began in September and continued through February, for a total of six months to secure six participants with

identified learning disabilities affecting their literacy learning and literacy teaching. Participants had to meet the following criteria to be included:

1. Have a learning disability and/or high incidence disabilities that impact learning
2. Enrolled in the target university as an early childhood or middle grades education major, which meant they had completed two years of basic courses and were in the first or second year of their undergraduate/graduate degree program
3. Intended to teach after graduation
4. Were in “good” standing with the university and the degree program into which they were enrolled. Good standing meant they maintained the minimum overall GPA required (2.8 GPA), met/exceeded the standards for professional behavior, and were working towards graduation
5. Had an IEP at some point in K-12 or are registered with the on-campus disability resource center.

Interviews were scheduled at a time and place where the participants felt comfortable.

In accordance with Polkinghorne’s (1990, 1995) narrative analysis methods, I wrote constructed narratives for each participant based on our co-constructed interviews sessions. The constructed narratives came from information the participants each shared about their in-school and out-of-school life experiences, how they came to the teaching profession, and the ways they worked through and with their learning disabilities as they engaged in literacy instruction with young learners. A glimpse into each participant’s personal life world is shared below.

Participant 1: Haley. Haley was a 21-year-old, middle class, white female senior in the Early Childhood Education program. She has an older sister who attended the same university. She grew up with her Dad, Mom, and sister. Haley attended the same university for all of her

post-secondary education with an eye towards working with young learners in urban districts. For five years in middle and high school, Haley spent her summers volunteering at a camp for emergent bilinguals, ages 3-10. Although she had taken Spanish language classes in school, Haley did not consider herself fluent in Spanish until she learned to communicate with the preschool children in summer camp. It was at this camp she really began to understand how important language was to the campers and to herself in her own education. Volunteering at the summer camp and a mission trip to Honduras helped Haley know she wanted to teach young children who truly needed understanding, dual language fluent educators.

When she entered 1st grade, it was apparent to her teacher Haley could not read. Although she had been in school for preschool and kindergarten, she had not grasped the concepts needed to learn to read. Haley's 1st grade teacher consulted with a preschool teacher in the same school and arranged for Haley to sit in on the preschoolers' phonics lessons each day. Even though it was difficult for her to be the only "older" student with 3-4 year-olds, Haley credited this first intervention as her foundation for understanding how letters functioned in words, which led to learning to read. In 2nd grade, Haley was in a special education class for reading and math. Because her skills were not on-level, her teachers recommended a more focused environment with fewer students so she could concentrate on learning and applying skills she had missed.

Haley remembered individual teachers providing accommodations for her through 8th grade based on what could best support her in class and going with a small group of peers to see a reading specialist during the school day for more concentrated support. But in 9th grade, it was finally recommended she undergo testing when she could no longer keep up with the work and needed an official diagnosis to receive much needed focused accommodations. Testing revealed

she was severely dyslexic, had additional difficulties processing auditory communications, and had Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

After receiving accommodations, Haley excelled in school – winning the end-of-the-year English award in 11th grade and Outstanding Senior in 12th grade. She entered college, knowing she wanted to teach because of her experience with young students in summer camp. Her vision for her future has not changed. If anything, it sharpened because she understood how important personal connections with students and meeting them at the point of their needs were for student success.

Participant 2: Meredith. Meredith was a 22-year-old, middle class, white female senior, majoring in Early Childhood Education. She has an older brother. She grew up living with her Dad, Mom, and brother. She attended the state flagship university and planned to teach abroad in southeastern Asia because she wanted to travel and have unusual teaching experiences while she was still young. She eventually wants to return to teach in the district where she grew up. Meredith did not always know she wanted to teach, but loved school and applied to the College of Education to see if she wanted to be a teacher. It turned out the education classes were her favorite and she felt teaching allowed educators to be creative in curriculum design without doing things the same way year after year. In fact, Meredith cannot now imagine any other career except one in education and working with students who truly need her and the understanding she brings when students struggle to learn.

Early in her literacy learning, there were signs Meredith struggled with letters, sounds, and putting them together. Her family immersed her in literacy at home – read alouds, playing word games like hangman, and flash cards with beginning sight words and high-frequency words in kindergarten and 1st grade. By 2nd grade, Meredith understood she worked much slower than

her peers and labeled herself the "slowest writer" in her grade. Her teacher recommended testing due to her learning difficulties and by the end of 2nd grade, Meredith was diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and a processing disorder. With diagnoses came accommodations and much longed-for academic successes.

Meredith remembered working hard in school and having academic and personal support from her teachers. Her hard work paid off and she scored in the top percentile of college entrance exams. She wanted to go to college, but until she saw her SAT scores, she had not believed it would be possible due to her learning disabilities and struggles to succeed. Meredith loved her education classes and it was in college that she connected how important literacy was for kids' development to her own family's early literacy practices. It was at this time she understood how necessary personal connections to students were for student success. Meredith believed when teachers and peers support students, academic success is imminently more possible.

Participant 3: Erin. Erin was a 22-year-old, middle class, white female middle grades undergraduate student. Her mom was her advocate in finding a tutoring center to test her for learning disabilities. In tutoring, Erin acquired strategies for learning, strategies for coping with her learning disability, and practice in reading to raise her skills from 3rd grade to 8th grade, putting her on-level with her peers at that time. Prior to beginning data collection, Erin was a student in several literacy-based middle grades methods courses in which the researcher was the instructor of record. Her privately shared learning struggles and how they influenced her overall education were the catalyst for this study. Later, when she heard recruitment had begun for teacher candidates with learning disabilities for this study, she volunteered to participate. In addition, during her student teaching semester, the researcher was an invited to informally observe and give feedback on her teaching two separate semesters.

Erin had two older siblings, a brother and a sister, both of whom were enrolled in gifted classes in K-12. She came from an intact family unit in which her parents and extended family were involved in her learning by reading aloud, motivating her to practice reading, encouraging her to work to her full potential without excuses for poor performance. Just before graduation in the spring, Erin and her fiancé got married. In addition to finishing up her classes, completing the requirements for student teaching, passing the licensing exam for middle grades teachers in her state, she planned a wedding. Erin had a leadership/teaching position at a camp lined up for the summer and while she was unsure what the future held for her in terms of a teaching position, she was confident that she would find a perfect position to use her teaching skills.

Participant 4: Allison. Allison was a 20-year-old, white, female middle class junior in the Early Childhood Education program. She grew up with her Dad, Mom, and two brothers who were several years older than her. When Allison was young, the family lived on a military base. Her father was a civilian contractor and her mother was a teacher. During 3rd grade, Allison's father was diagnosed with severe narcolepsy and had to medically retire from his job – leaving her educator mom to support the family of five. The family's existence now depended on her mom's salary, so they moved to a different state into a higher-paying district. The new town and new school caused a variety of changes in all of their lives, but especially in Allison's. In her new, larger, and more urban school, Allison was academically ahead of her peers because the district she left had smaller classes with a lower teacher to student ratio, allowing more individualized attention for all students and quicker learning of required material.

In the new school, Allison's 3rd grade teacher suggested she be tested for the Gifted & Talented program based on her higher learning level compared to her peers. She was a fit for the G&T program, but was also diagnosed with ADHD. These diagnoses coupled with her

pediatrician's detection of narcolepsy symptoms similar to her father's began their rollercoaster ride of trying to find appropriate and effective medications to help control her symptoms. The doctor, Allison, and her family spent the next eight years trying medicine after medicine and tweaking dosages until they found the combination most likely to help her control her symptoms while maintaining her academic and personal successes.

Allison felt supported by her teachers and professors – both academically and personally, which allowed encouraged confidence in her own abilities and academic successes. She passed her college entrance exams easily and was awarded with early admission to the state flagship university. Excelling in math and science were commonplace for her and led to initial aspirations of a biochemistry major and going to medical school to be a doctor, similar to her middle brother who does medical research at a nearby hospital. When she registered for classes her first couple semesters in college, she eagerly signed up for literature-focused elective courses since she loved to read. However, the deeper she progressed into her pre-med courses, the more Allison realized she liked science and math courses, but she loved reading and working with children. She applied to the Early Childhood program, was accepted, and changed her major. Following her first field placement, she discovered she wanted to work with at-risk children because she could better understand why they struggled to learn to read and could help them become more confident in using language to learn – orally, textually, and visually.

Participant 5: Ashley. Ashley was a 23-year-old, white, female middle class first year master student in the Early Childhood Education program. She grew up with a sister who was two years younger, her mom, and her dad. Her family moved often, living in 8 different states in her 23 years. Ashley has always wanted to work in education, but was not definitive on which field. She toyed with working for an educational non-profit organization, going into educational

leadership, or working in early childhood education. Her first semester in college was spent at a small regional college with a renowned learning disability support program. Ashley felt academically and emotionally supported, but was not having the kind of college "experience" she had always dreamed of – the kind she would have in a much larger university setting.

Transferring from her small college to a larger university after the first semester led to better social experiences, but left her learning disabilities unsupported. As was typical, Ashley worked hard in her basic and pre-requisite courses. She met the requirements and applied to the early childhood program, but was not accepted. Instead, Ashley and other students working towards a degree in education were the first cohort in a newly developed "Education Studies" program at this larger university. Graduating with a General Education degree positioned her to apply to the master's programs at the state's flagship university. Backed with her non-certification undergraduate education degree, time spent in practicums, and a newly-discovered passion for working with young learners, Ashley was accepted into the Early Childhood MAT program for students who wanted to teach but were not already certified. Once again, her cohort was the first in a newly-developed program, a fact that had her both excited for the future and a bit unsure of how to meet program requirements.

Ashley was diagnosed in 5th grade with a Learning Disability-non-specific and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder-inattentive, only. In addition, Ashley believed she had "math dyslexia" due to an inability to understand math processes and visual/spatial issues since she could not "see" drawn 3-D shapes, which led to extreme confusion in geometry. Since her diagnosis, Ashley has had tutors to support her acquisition of knowledge in the way she best learned – lots of time spent understanding concepts and practicing with another person. In fact, she wanted to support her future students with methods similar to what worked for her. Ashley

passionately believed learning did not have to be as difficult for struggling students as it had been for her. She proposed teachers/professors needed to understand how their students best learned and to avoid hurried, vague instructions, opting for clearly stated directions backed with visual representations of expectations for learning.

Participant 6: Elena. Elena was a 20-year-old, white, female middle class sophomore allowed early admittance into the Early Childhood Education program. She was in her first semester in her major at the beginning of data collection. She was the oldest of four children and grew up living with her mom and dad in two southeastern states. Elena applied for and was awarded early admittance into her chosen university. She did not always know she wanted to be a teacher, but she loved working with children when she was a camp counselor. During her senior year of high school when all her friends were talking about choosing a major, Elena realized her passion for working with kids could be focused into education – and specifically, in early childhood education. Elena believed working with young learners would bring her great joy as she helped them learn to be citizens in their community.

When Elena was in 2nd grade, her classroom teacher recommended she be tested for learning disabilities and she was diagnosed with dyslexia. For 3rd grade, Elena transferred to a school specifically focused on learning to cope with and overcome dyslexia. She spent 2.5 years in this school among peers who were also learning to work through and with dyslexia. Although she does not remember struggling to read even before her diagnosis, Elena does recognize that her reading skills increased when she began receiving support specifically targeted towards her learning disability.

One of the indicators of her learning disability was swapping letters like ‘d’ and ‘b’ and ‘p’ and ‘q’ when she wrote, but even then, Elena was not aware she was struggling to write. She

says she did not know she frequently swapped letters because they “looked” all right to her. She did not swap letters when she read, only when she wrote something down – again, contributing to her struggles without her awareness. Looking back now and rereading what she wrote when she was younger, Elena realized how frequently she swapped letters and how difficult it was to read for her intended meaning.

Once Elena ‘graduated’ from the school for students with dyslexia, her family moved out of state and she began attending her neighborhood public school. She never received services or accommodations for dyslexia while attending public schools, but contends her learning disability had not been a problem. Except for slow reading skills and having to play catch-up with her math skills due to being in a school focused solely on reading for 2.5 years, she was on-level with her peers.

Participants Overall. Of the six participants, four were undergraduate early childhood majors, one was a graduate early childhood major, and one was an undergraduate middle grades education major. All six female participants identified as white, and came from self-identified middle class backgrounds similar to a majority of the US education workforce (Deruy, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b; US Department of Education, 2016b). They ranged in age from 20-23 and grew up in suburban school districts. Four graduated from public high schools and two from smaller, private schools. Each had received initial diagnosis of their learning disabilities in K-12 and received some kind of focused accommodations to cope with their learning disabilities and to teach them strategies for academic success.

Although the participants all had identified learning disabilities and/or high incidence disabilities that impacted learning such as ADHD and many had similar experiences, there was not *one* common learning disability. Erin and Elena had one identified learning disability. Haley,

Meredith, and Allison had two, and Ashley had three. Through the time each individual participant and I spent together, talking about experiences in literacy learning and literacy teaching, each of them grew more comfortable and talkative as we forged a meandering path through their life stories.

Interviews

The interview procedure followed a semi-structured, narrative inquiry approach (Polkinghorne, 2010). The first interview focused on timeline creation through literacy-based learning experiences from PreK-12th grade and college prior to entering their education major. Participants were given a blank piece of paper and a writing instrument and asked to respond to the following:

> Today, I thought we would start off with you drawing a timeline about your experiences in education. I want you to draw a timeline, and this point (point to left side), is before you went school and the end point (point to right side) is when you got accepted into the education program. Place points on the line when you recall something that happened related to your literacy learning and write a few words to describe each point.

As they began, the researcher requested they include incidences that were difficult for them, as well as times they were successful. During the first interview with each participant, the research restated the purpose of the study, encourage the participants to ask questions, assured their participant was voluntary and all of their information was confidential.

This protocol was designed to encourage the participants to speak about experiences in chronological order, progressing along the timeline from earliest literacy experiences through the present time in literacy learning and literacy teaching. In all but one initial interview, the timeline portion went according to design. However, for one participant, chronology was not the best way

to talk about her personal history. She began with one situation in the middle of the timeframe on which we focused, which led to an earlier experience, which led to a later one, and eventually back to the point in the timeline where she began. The experiences seemed to follow no discernible pattern, but the one that made sense to her as she spoke.

The first interview centered on the participants' early literacy experiences, through their time in PreK-12th grade, and on to their beginning college courses prior to being accepted into their education degree programs. After completing their individual chronological timelines, the researcher requested they begin at the first point and talk about each one, telling stories of triumphs and disappointments as they went. The researcher probed for deeper responses by asking about their in- and out-of-school early literacy learning experiences, how they learned to read and write, how they were successful or unsuccessful in school, how they found out they had learning disabilities, their awareness of stigma linked to their learning disabilities, how they were mentored, and learning in college.

The second interview focused on their literacy-based learning experiences in their education programs in college. The questions asked concerned their college learning experiences, working with students academically and socially, navigating their learning disabilities in their field placements, what things students/parents might need to know when dealing with similar learning contexts with learning disabilities, and ideal communities and resources needed to support students with learning needs.

The third interview concentrated on field placement and literacy learning/teaching overall reflections. The questions the researcher asked covered support for their learning needs, challenges and triumphs of working with students in literacy contexts, communicating their learning needs, why they wanted to be a teacher, and envisioning themselves as educator in the

future. Some of the questions and probes focused on similar topics addressed in earlier interviews, but in different time periods or from different points of view for this final one.

At the conclusion of data collection, 18 interviews were conducted, each averaging approximately 99 minutes, over a six-month timeframe. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full by the researcher. All personal information was kept confidential and pseudonyms were used for all people and places. In addition to transcribed interviews, data consisted of research notes, social media communications, and invited teaching observations for one participant, Erin.

Data Analysis

Polkinghorne (2010) argued, "Narrative inquiries produce a storied description of a practice process carried out in a concrete life space" and offer "readers a vicarious experience of how a practice was conducted in a concrete situation" (p.396). Participants' responses were not typically linear in structure, but much like the participant who jumped from topic to topic in ways that made meaning for her as the timeline she created was discussed, each participant responded to questions with situational contexts, not necessarily chronological happenings.

To honor participants' voices and appreciate their expertise, the researcher considered responses in sum, not simply as a specific response to an asked question. The narratives were co-constructed as the researcher asked questions, the participants responded to the questions, and the researcher probed for greater understandings and to direct the conversation in light of the design of the study, so the data must be considered as all-encompassing responses to the purpose of the questions and the study overall. Informed by Polkinghorne's (1995) holistic, non-linear steps to data analysis, the process for analysis of the data was:

1. Synthesize data into a coherent whole – not separated into parts

2. Arrange the data elements chronologically
3. Identify which elements contribute to the outcome
4. Look for connections of cause and influence among events
    a. Story develops through recursive movements from data to emerging plot
    b. Follow principles of hermeneutic circles – moving back and forth from parts to whole
    c. Emerging plot indicates which data to include or eliminate
5. Identify action elements caused by combinations of events
6. Write the story (pp.15-18)

Through three rounds of data analysis using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CQDAS) software in Atlas.ti 7, one of several online software programs available, each participant's stories were individually and collectively explored. Following individual analysis, the data were considered holistically in light of the purpose of the study and the research questions. Participant biographical profiles were created that highlighted each person's literacy learning and literacy teaching experiences to honor their individual 'voices.' Their profiles then became part of the analysis and write-up. Finally, each person's experiences were compared to the others to find common themes across participants and the story was written.

Validity

In qualitative researcher, there is "no one marker of validity" (Freeman et al., 2007, p.29). Instead, validity depends on the type, purpose of, and epistemological framework used in the research, where epistemology is the "nature of human knowledge and understanding" (Hirschheim, Klein, & Lyytinen, 1995, p.20) and ontology is a "branch of philosophy concerned with articulating the nature and structure of the world" (Wand & Weber, 1993, p.220). Purpose,

epistemology, and ontology determine measures of validity. The goal is to show the findings are sound and the reader can trust the research conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Polkinghorne (2007) explained, “Validity judgments do not yield simple acceptance or non-acceptance responses. Instead, they are about the likelihood or probability that the claim is so” (p.477). It was important for this study to accurately portray the participants’ life experiences in ways that allowed readers to understand these experiences and find validity in the written expressions.

In order to ensure validity in this research study, transcripts for each interview were sent to the corresponding participant for member checking. Two participants asked that certain sensitive data were redacted. Approval was then given to use the remaining shared data, joining with the other four participants’ approval. Biographic profiles were sent to each participant and subsequently approved. In addition, there were teaching observations for one participant. Finally, for each “knowledge claim,” made in the write-up of this research study, evidence in the data was secured and verified before committing to the concept.

Findings

The findings for this article came together through co-constructed narratives and other textual data leading to three cross-case themes supporting participants’ stories of their experiences with literacy learning, the sociocultural aspects critical to literacy learning, and dialogic meaning-making of themselves as literacy teachers. The three themes were labeled: (1) confidence, (2) advocacy, and (3) resilience. In the next sections, themes are identified, discussed, and examples of each are shared.

Theme 1: Confidence

The theme, “confidence” (or the lack, thereof) addressed participants’ feelings of assurance – stretching from their earliest memories of immersion in literacy, to the present day as

education majors, training to become certified teachers and working with students in literacy-focused contexts. All participants gave evidence of having confidence during their literacy learning experiences, with some also including experiences of having little to no confidence.

In the *bricolage* included below, all six participants' voices were included to honor their words and their collective experiences with (or without) confidence. The term 'bricolage' is derived from the French verb, *bricoler*, meaning "to putter about" and related to the French name for a "jack-of-all-trades,' a *bricoleur* ("Bricolage," 2017). A bricolage "recognizes the dialectical nature of this discipline and… calls for synergistic interaction" (Kincheloe, 2001, p.683), as "bricoleurs study the subjective meanings that human beings make" (p.688). Alvermann (2010) used the bricolage concept as a way to "weave" concepts together through the use of different fonts to show how they are "entangled," instead of reliance on a summary of the participants' word-for-word reflections on their experiences. To look across participants at their experiences with confidence, I constructed this bricolage to demonstrate the breadth of knowledge each of them bring to this concept, as well as similarities of thoughts across participants.

When I transferred to the Learning School, the neighborhood boys would call me 'stupid'… If people hear me read out loud, they think that I'm not very smart because I don't sound very good when I read out loud… **Some teachers assume that I'm stupid because I'm dyslexic. They just don't expect as much out of me, almost…** *If I had to guess, I was probably the only one that had a learning disability. These were all very gifted and talented students. They were not by any means at my academic level…* The really smart kids got pulled out and went to do whatever the really smart kids did. I don't know what they did… **You'd think teachers of all people should understand it is totally okay to have a disability. A lot of the smartest people have disabilities. You just have to learn to work around them. You kind of have to accept it**

and learn what works for you… *I think that was a lot of my success. People who really noticed that I learn differently and made me feel like, 'Don't worry. You can make it.'…* You know that you're smart, and you're beautiful and you're strong. Those are my three things… ***Teachers, of all people, should get that.***

Two participants lacked confidence. Meredith shared, in middle grades, "I didn't know how to spell things. That's when I was like, 'Wow, I do have a learning disability.'" She was diagnosed with a processing disorder and OCD in 2nd grade, but had difficulties with spelling and writing. Four participants reflected positively on literacy learning and confidence that came with being successful in their classes. Erin gained confidence as she learned to construct writing under her teacher's guidance. Haley, Ashley, Erin, and Elena, did not allow their learning disability to interfere with their success, which reinforced feelings of confidence, while Allison and Meredith struggled to come to terms with their diagnoses, resulting in their lack of confidence in literacy learning. Even though they became successful students following diagnosis, accommodations, and learned strategies, they still felt a lack of confidence in their academic skills when circumstances triggered feelings of being overwhelmed or 'less than'. For both Allison and Meredith, when feeling overwhelmed and lacking confidence, it was important to remember what strategies helped them become successful and allowed them to find literacy success.

Sociocultural aspects, such as peer learning, mentor scaffolding, learning success with instructor support, and working with their field placement students to ensure they felt confident, were critical to the participants' literacy learning and influence on their confidence. Haley, Erin, and Elena felt confident in talking with peers and co-constructing knowledge since talking was easier than writing. Meredith was more confident in grading student papers after her mentor teacher worked with her in learning how to assess students. Ashley's confidence in herself grew

with the separation from her family when she left to attend college. She felt she could be successful with the right level of support and continued diligence to how she learned best. Each of the participants had confidence in literacy learning with the help of their peers and mentors, a definitive nod to Vygotskian (1978, 1997) theories of learning from and with more knowledgeable others as they constructed meaning together.

The effects of confidence on dialogic meaning-making and visions of themselves as literacy teachers could be seen through Bakhtin's theory of dialogism (1981) which supported the concept that utterances were part of the whole of the conversation and were expected to produce responses. Looking through the lens of dialogism, two of the six participants spoke about confidence, allowing for language about their past to influence current expectations and future potential life experiences. Allison believed her past experiences were balanced by educational opportunities and she wanted to pass those positive experiences on to future students:

> I think that despite social status or economic status or any of the things that I have or don't have or have been exposed to… familiar relations, coming from a broken home or things like that…having a learning disability… education has leveled the playing field for me, and it's given me opportunities. I want to be that life coach… that kind of self-confidence coach, and I think that education is the best way to do that.

No matter what personal demographics or negative situations she had come through, Allison did not see them as stumbling blocks to her future aspirations because education empowered her to strive for and reach her goals. Her past, present, and future were realized in the dialogic voices pushing her to succeed in spite of, or perhaps, because of her learning disabilities.

For Erin, the voices she heard about her past were a bit different. In a current situation of sitting for her state licensing exams, she spoke about the difficulties she had with standardized tests in her past, and how the feelings of frustration came back to her. Erin said:

> It was very interesting to see the kind of things that I used to struggle with on the CRCT come back. But, I got those scores back, and… that was a really big confidence booster, because I wasn't used to getting that for like English… ever. As far as a test goes… professional level is above even average, and I was over that.

Erin described struggling to combat past failures, only to find herself in the unique position of excellence in testing. Because she passed both parts of the licensing exam, she was granted a teaching license, enabling her to help shape the next generation of young learners.

The language used to describe their past influenced how they spoke about the present, which in turn, came together to inform their ideas about how they wanted to connect with their future students. The heteroglossia of their real-time utterances about their past experiences and present expectations informed their dialogic responses around future academic and career goals. Although the potential for a deficit mindset would be understandable, these participants used the circumstances of past failures/struggles to fuel their drive to succeed, despite their learning disabilities.

Theme 2: Advocacy

This theme involved how participants practiced self-advocacy or benefitted from someone's advocacy on their behalf. Strategic components came out during our interviews and in our work together, with much of the advocacy experiences coming together in college. In this bricolage, all six participants' voices are included.

I think the best resource you can have is someone who cares about you and actually wants you to do well and be successful… You have to learn to advocate for yourself… **I said, "I need you to be able to help me learn how to learn this subject."** *I've never been afraid to ask for help…* I literally have to be a leader in my own brain. So, in a group, it makes me an integral part… **I'm better at working with students who learn in different ways because I understand how I learned, and I understand how important it is to learn in the way that's best for you.**

Though their baseline experiences differ, they are all similar in their intent – fighting for the right to learn, teach, and be taught in ways that positively inform their academic meaning-making. As an example, one of the things Ashley shared about advocacy was, "I feel like I know how to help myself and I can communicate that to others." Self-advocacy was the usual practice for her because she understood her own learning needs and felt she could advocate for them.

Haley talked about her mom leading by example as she advocated for Haley until she was old enough to self-advocate. For Erin, teachers taught her to self-advocate to ensure her learning needs were met. Erin said, "I needed to know how I could get to where I needed to be with my reading. My teacher was a really big advocate for me." All participants shared a common experience – someone advocated for them until they could self-advocate – but in differing timeframes. Meredith, Allison, and Elena learned to self-advocate in elementary school from watching their moms advocate on their behalf. After tutoring in 8th grade, Erin felt emotionally and academically strong enough to petition for support using tools modeled by her tutors. After her learning disabilities were identified in 9th grade, Haley finally felt she had evidence for accommodations and the confidence to self-advocate. Ashley's self-advocacy happened in college.

Advocacy factored into sociocultural aspects critical to literacy learning. Ashley had the advocacy of her parents to rely on when she lived at home. However, when she moved away for college, she had to learn to speak for herself and her learning needs. She is the embodiment of a sociocultural pedagogy espoused by Lucy Calkins (2001), "…by giving our students practice in talking with others, we give them frames for thinking on their own" (p.226). When Ashley spoke about her learning disability accommodations, the language she used was informed by past experiences and present learning strategies. She shared:

> I had to become my own advocate and I had to talk to my professors. I needed to come in before class and just meet with them because I didn't feel comfortable asking questions in front of a lecture or things like that. I just figured out my own study strategies.

Ashley used her past negative experiences of drawing attention to herself through public inquiry to determine how and when she practiced self-advocacy. Her dialogic meaning-making came through in the ways she spoke of using her past experiences to influence the present contexts and how she reacted to them, always with an eye to future learning needs. When Ashley's mom modeled advocacy, she gained life-long skills of being able to speak and think for herself.

Meredith's mom encouraged her to understand her learning disabilities and to advocate for her learning needs in productive ways. For example, in elementary school, Meredith's mom modeled how to ask for a testing accommodation. The following day, Meredith drew on that demonstration and requested she be allowed to talk out her responses to a test. She shared, "One of the Special Ed teachers or reading teachers… pulled me into a room by myself and gave me the test so that I could say it out loud. I still had to write it, too, but I could talk it over." Practicing how to self-advocate with her mom gave Meredith the skills to ask for and receive a needed accommodation.

Meredith had a very different experience than Ashley with learning support on campus. Meredith felt the campus disability resource center met her needs and enabled her to better self-advocate since she felt they understood her. Meredith said:

> The [campus disability resource center] has been such help. It's been awesome and I'm really thankful to have had that. And, that's helped a lot with being comfortable realizing what I need… learning what works best for me and making those accommodations for myself… advocating for myself. I can see exactly where I kind of was as a kid. And then even now, which things work best for me.

Meredith described remembering how she learned when she was young, which influenced her self-advocacy. She had resources available to her and people concerned with her learning needs. As a teacher candidate with learning disabilities, she dialogically made meaning by using her past experiences to shape her present circumstances and they ways she spoke about them.

Allison spoke about her mother, but in the sense that her mother helped her realize the ways in which she fought for others. She said, "My mom said that I flock the underdog, always. I sit next to the quiet kid. I flock to the underrepresented, underdog. And I make myself their advocate, whether or not they want it." It was important to Allison that she gave voice to those who could not speak up, either out of fear or lack of understanding. She envisioned herself as empowering the powerless, but still working to have their opinions and needs recognized.

The ways participants understood advocacy informed how they acquired knowledge, collaborated with mentors and others in authority. For some, apprenticeship into self-advocacy helped them feel more control over their literacy learning. For others, specifically Ashley and Meredith, past experiences fused with present circumstances in a heteroglot of conversations to fuel their projections about their future learning and teaching.

Theme 3: Resilience

The theme of "resilience" reflects how all six participants were able to bounce back, often going against societal expectations, in their literacy learning and teaching, influencing how each person interacted with others, what they thought of themselves, and how they expected to engage with their future students. They defied expectations of mainstream society that had a deficit mindset concerning people with learning disabilities. All six participants' voices are included in the bricolage below.

I'm really open about having dyslexia. I don't really see it as a disability, and I always forget that other people do… Language is hard for me… **I feel like in the adult world, I'm not going to get extra time on anything, and I don't think I'll need anything for teaching…** *I just don't see the point in telling people. I don't see the need for it…* I don't want [people] to think that I can't do stuff or that I'm using my dyslexia as an excuse… **I want to tell professors, "This doesn't have to be that complicated. You can simplify this down and tell us things in the most basic terms so we don't have to struggle"…** *It really helps that I have ADHD because I'm almost more on their level, attention-wise sometimes…* I'm bouncing around in circles right now… **It's okay to not be like everyone else…** *I think I have a unique perspective…*

Elena did not understand when she was young, but she grew to understand others expected her to be academically unsuccessful due to her learning disability. She said, "Even though I am dyslexic and that's supposed to be a negative thing, it was never known as a negative thing for me. It was always just a part of me." She had never known life without dyslexia, so she could not reconcile society's negative expectations of her abilities with her own drive to succeed.

Erin waxed poetically about going against societal expectations of someone with a learning disability who hides it from the world and opening herself up to scrutiny by sharing her learning struggles, centered around her resilience. She shared:

> If I had at one point struggled with something and I overcame it, then I want someone to know because that can be something that can relate to them, as well. I think it's a cool story that I was a reluctant reader and was able to overcome it, and I want to teach English. You know? That's weird, but I like that about me.

Erin was compelled to share her stories of struggling to learn to read and write because she felt her academic success might positively influence others to believe they, too, could learn through and with their learning disabilities. Although she still ‘hears’ a negative voice in her head when she has literacy struggles, she is able to access the positive ways she has learned to combat her difficulties – a trait she hopes to instill in her students.

Students with learning disabilities must meet the same requirements as their non-disabled peers to be admitted to university. They must have the minimum GPA and test scores, and letters of recommendation. When Haley visited college during high school, the undergraduate counselor said he would be “surprised” if she got in with her “level of accommodations and what her IEP looked like.” Haley was not dissuaded her from applying to the college she wanted to attend. When she was accepted, the counselor called her with the news, but, he could not refrain from telling her, “You’re one of the very few students who’ve been accepted with this level of a disability.” His negative expectations served to make Haley even more determined to succeed.

Haley spoke to societal expectations and her literacy experiences in high school, saying, “I got the English award because I actually am very good at writing papers, I think… and she thought so, too. Which surprised everyone, I guess, because I’m dyslexic and they also assume

you’re not good at writing.” Haley thought her peers and people, in general, did not believe someone with dyslexia could be academically successful in literacy learning, which made her winning the award a more fulfilling experience.

Allison talked about encouraging students with learning disabilities the “system has sometimes neglected,” to believe in themselves and to work with them to build on their existing knowledge towards constructing new learning. Similarly, so that students with learning struggles felt comfortable talking to and working with her, Elena said, “I would be like, ‘Hey, look, me, too. We have something in common. What can we do together to help each other out?’” She believed this kind of connection with students, especially students with learning disabilities, would be symbiotic and allow her to support them in ways that helped them learn best. Both of these participants desired personal connections with students who needed them the most even though conventional expectations considered them to be “troublesome” or “struggling” students.

Erin felt the encumbrance of expectations for herself, and her students. For a course Erin was taking her senior year in university, the expectation from the professor, her peers, and the college were that as a senior, she could read, understand, and write about the assigned novels with aplomb. Unfortunately, she had not understood the piece and could not speak about it with any authority. When she was called on, her response was not what the professor was looking for and she remembered his remark as, “Erin is wrong. Who can answer?” She was embarrassed and immediately heard the voice in her head saying, “BAD READER,” a negative term she carried with her and pulled out when she failed in a literacy-related task. However, two very important things happened as a result of this “failure.” For the first situation, she dialogued with herself and relying on past experiences and learning strategies, saying, “Okay. It’s not that I’m the one in the class who doesn’t know anything. I just didn’t know an answer.” Erin was able to talk herself out

of the “BAD READER” stance and into a place of inquiry, vowing to work even harder than before. For the second situation, Erin decided, “I never want my students to feel that way. I want them to come in feeling like, ‘I can do this.’” Erin was able to take a negative personal situation where she did not live up to literacy learning expectations and turn it around for herself while realizing she wanted to teach her students differently than she had been taught.

Meredith remembered the pain of being the “slowest writer” in her 2nd grade class. Her teacher helped her finish assignments or gave her extra time, but Meredith felt she was not achieving what everyone else thought she should. Despite her painful early literacy experiences, she has shown resilience in the ways she dialogues with herself and strives always to “learn in the best way” for herself. As Bakhtin (1981) theorized, Meredith was in dialogue with the expectations of her peers within the context of time – past and present – and with herself as she made new meanings for everyone participating in the dialogue about a person with learning disabilities earning her success against the odds and past expectations.

Due to societal expectations coupled with her learning disability, Haley was relieved to have her learning disability identified. She said, “That was a big thing for me, to realize that just because something takes me longer to do doesn’t mean I’m any less smart than the next person. She felt pressured by deficit mindsets in social contexts to work quickly or be considered “less than.” However, when she received her diagnosis and accompanying learning accommodations, the heteroglossia of societal expectations, her then current academic environment, and subsequent accommodations ushered in the realization of her own intelligence despite her learning disability. Her resilience sprang from coping with her difficulties and belief in the system and herself.

Discussion

Focusing on a small participant sample of teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities, the goal for this study was to explore the educational experiences, paths to academic success, and negotiation of literacy instruction for teacher candidates with learning disabilities who have chosen literacy-focused careers in education. The findings illuminate the roles participants' confidence [or the lack, thereof], advocacy, and resilience played in their literacy learning and literacy teaching while finding strength in small group collaborations, peer/mentor support, and self-efficacy.

Teacher candidates flourish in small learning groups, or cohorts (Flavian, 2015), especially when using oral language to make meanings (Trainin & Swanson, 2005). The participants all spoke to the importance of working together, learning together, and constructing meaning with their peers – all tenets of sociocultural learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Despite societal expectations with potential deficit mindsets that may not have benefitted their academic endeavors or left them feeling supported, the participants defied the odds, were resilient, and found academic and personal success. They felt more confident in their literacy learning when they had the opportunity to make academic meaning with a small group for the good of all.

How participants understood confidence, advocacy, and resilience influenced how they learned, worked with others, and made meaning of teaching literacy through dialogue with themselves, their past experiences, and expectations about the future. There were preferences in how they best learned borne out in advocacy for themselves, their peers, and students (Olney & Brockelman, 2010). Each participant promoted the idea of better, more effective learning in small groups where they made meaning together, lending credence to the cohort model in teacher education (Flavian, 2015) which supports the establishment of peer learning communities.

The participants believed they created a more leveled academic “playing field” when they engaged in collaborations they initiated as they supported and learned from each other. Whether a confidence “boost” or a lack thereof, each of the participants identified confidence as a critical factor in their literacy development (O’Shea & Meyer, 2016). They understood if they worked together, they learned together – a win/win for everyone. They knew it was important to play to their strengths if they wanted to be successful (Papalia-Berardi et al., 2002). Society expected teacher candidates with learning disabilities to struggle with teacher training (Gilbert, 1998), and some may; however, these teacher candidates were extraordinarily resilient and each had a “positive self-concept” (Glazzard & Dale, 2013, p.35). They knew how to advocate for themselves, while finding a “healthy” empowerment in their educational training.

Each member contributed something valuable to group discussions as they constructed meaning together (Gredler, 2011). The expectations from today’s quick-to-judge society would have people believe teacher candidates who had trouble learning to read, write, think, and even sometimes speak, could not benefit their peers in a group discussion and could not be knowledgeable enough to engage in literacy instruction with young learners (Riddell & Weedon, 2013). But, the more these teacher candidates learned in their field placements and educational courses, the more confident they became that they *could*, in fact, teach. And, even when they were not fully aware of the concept, when they spoke in group discussions and contributed to meaning-making at a corporate level, they were practicing self-advocacy. When they spoke up for their own learning or in support of their students, they were advocating for their community.

Finally, the importance of confidence and the realization they were valuable to a group resulted in self-efficacy. Each participant expressed feelings of inadequacy at some point – feelings that were influenced by societal expectations for teacher candidates with learning

disabilities. Whether it had been in the early literacy stages of development, before identification of their learning disabilities, through their academic experiences, or even into their field placements, each one had experienced periods of time in which they felt "less than." But, with the support of key mentors, families, peers, and professors, they noticed feeling more confident. As they spoke out for their learning needs and those of their peers and students, they felt more confident. With the rise in confidence came the realization of the inherent value of their experiences and ways of learning. The value in their experiences lies in the place they feel most vulnerable – their negotiation of academia through the lens of their learning disabilities. Haley, Meredith, Erin, Allison, Ashley, and Elena were able to have their learning disabilities identified, learn strategies to cope with their literacy-learning difficulties, find academic success, and move forward towards their goals of a career in education.

Conclusions

As more students enter university education programs and train to teach young learners, there will be a growing need to understand how they learn and what kinds of support benefit all teacher candidates. When those teacher candidates have learning disabilities, it becomes necessary to also listen to their "voices" as they tell their stories of negotiating academia through and with their ever-present learning struggles. They are the experts in the field of what kinds of support – personal, academic, social, and emotional – best meet their learning needs.

The purpose of this paper was to explore teacher candidates with learning disabilities' literacy learning and literacy teaching experiences. Analysis of the collected data led to construction of three cross-case themes focused on confidence, advocacy, and resilience. The researcher and each participant co-constructed the interviews as a way to understand how their personal, social, and academic experiences were reflected in their work with young learners.

Intertwined with their tales of literacy learning and teaching were their stories of struggling to learn, testing for diagnoses, working with support, and achieving their goals. While these participants pushed themselves to meet their goals, they did not succeed in a vacuum. Each of them came from a white, middle class background, which enabled them to have a high level of learning support and advocacy, coming from their parents on their behalf or advocating for themselves. They were in positions of privilege simply due to their race and social class.

Implications

As stated at the beginning of the article, more students with learning disabilities are entering universities, and subsequently education programs, than ever before. It is important that teacher educators and mentors are equipped with knowledge about provided appropriate learning accommodations for teacher candidates with learning disabilities so they are able to realize their best academic performances. When they receive adequate support, they are able to function at their highest level and focus on learning to teach.

In thinking through the participants' life experiences and encounters with academia, it is plausible to consider learning disabilities as another form of diversity. As they expressed in their interviews, their disabilities were just other facets of their identities. Learning disabilities did not define their lives; rather, learning disabilities were one characteristic among many descriptors in their lives. They viewed learning disabilities as strengths in that they were better able to relate to their students who struggled and felt they had different, not inferior, sets of skills.

Limitations and Further Research Directions

Looking at the findings of this study, some limitations must be included. Because of the small sample size and lack of diversity, findings are not transferable and cannot be generalized beyond this study. However, the focus on the "voice" of more and different participants could be

explored with the idea to move beyond their learning disability and to see teacher candidate participants as experts in the field of confidence building, advocacy, and resilience. The small sample size worked well for this study, as it was limited in scope and time.

The original concept for this study included personal images from each participant. Then, through visual analysis, using the images to support or dispel the information they shared, to acknowledge people may wish to communicate in different ways, and recognizing people with learning disabilities involving communication may not wish to *only* share their thinking through oral communication. However, with one exception, the participants were lackluster in their enthusiasm for sharing images. Whatever the reason, supporting images from each participant were not collected. The ones that were shared were unsuitable for the study.

While the focus of this study was on teacher candidates with learning disabilities, it could be expanded or refocused on teacher candidates with physical disabilities, as well as graduate students who are in-service teacher with learning disabilities. Both of the expansions would remain true to the goals of the study in exploring the life stories through participants' voices in their own learning and well as their teaching.

A longitudinal look at teacher candidates with learning disabilities from their teacher training years through the first five and then ten years following graduation would be a viable option for adding to the field of knowledge. Questions to be explored could be: (1) What kinds of teaching positions have they held? (2) What stigmas have they encountered and challenged? (3) What difficulties have they faced in teaching through the ever-present lens of their learning disabilities? (4) Are they still teaching? If not, why not? All of the above-mentioned studies would lend support to the literature in the field and to the research for this study as ways to honor teacher with learning disabilities as experts in their base of knowledge.

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CHAPTER 5

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS METHODS IN QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDIES: A LOOK AT POLKINGHORNE'S METHODS[4]

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present narrative analysis methods used in a qualitative study of six teacher candidates with formally identified learning disabilities. The detailed data analysis process honors Donald Polkinghorne's (1988, 1995, 2005) recursive analysis strategies while demonstrating the reasons behind using this method. The article explores Polkinghorne's method of analysis of narratives as well as narrative analysis, applied to individual and collective data in the life stories of this teacher candidates with learning disabilities in and with literacy learning and literacy teaching. A brief history of narrative data analysis methods, beginning with Labov and Waletzky's (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) six component narrative analysis method and ending with Polkinghorne's (1988, 1995, 2005) analysis methods is shared to illustrate why the chosen method was the best for the study's design, purpose, and research questions. Examples from the research study in which Polkinghorne's methods were used are included to highlight analysis. Through reflection on the data analysis methods used, the researcher offers a process honoring Polkinghorne's recursive analysis strategies while allowing flexibility in structure.

Key words: *narrative analysis methods; Polkinghorne; qualitative interview study; analysis of narrative*

Narrative Analysis Methods for Qualitative Interview Studies:

A Look at Polkinghorne's Methods

Stretching back to approximately 335 B.C., Aristotle (1997/ 1895), argued, "It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it" (p.47). Although he was speaking about the importance humans place on narrative – or one's life story – at the time of his writing, the same could be said through time immemorial. Humans share stories to talk about their experiences and it is through stories that learning about a person happens (Bruner, 1966). The purpose of this article is three-fold: to present the narrative analysis methods used for an interpretive qualitative interview study focused on six teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities, offer a process of analysis that honors the focus methods' recursive analysis strategies, and demonstrate why this method was chosen and used. Data from the qualitative interview study is used to illustrate the process and product of this approach to narrative analysis. Contribution to the literature in the field centers on practical application of Polkinghorne's (1995, 2005) narrative data analysis method with significant quantities of collected data across several participants.

Background of the Study

The larger study with which Polkinghorne's (1988, 1995, 2005) narrative analysis methods were used explored how teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities came to the teaching profession and how they negotiated their own disabilities as they engaged in literacy instruction with PreK-8th grade students. By speaking with teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities, the researcher hoped to understand the kinds of academic, social, and personal support that were most useful and how the teacher candidates' learning disabilities

influenced and informed the ways they engaged with literacy teaching. The next section focuses on relevant literature in the field of narrative analysis methods in qualitative research studies, exploring the strengths and weaknesses of practical application to interview data.

Methodological Literature Review

Although the recognition of narrative as indicative of life stories began centuries ago, modern narrative analysis was distinguished as a way to analyze life stories when Labov and Waletzky's (1967) developed research methods to make meaning of the data they collected from a survey from South Harlem's Lower East Side in the study of African American Vernacular English. They wanted to not just share the participants' words, but to relate their life stories told through conversations. Labov (1997) wrote, "Elicitation of narratives of personal experience proved to be the most effective. We were… driven to understand as much as we could about the structure of these narratives and how they were introduced into the every-day conversation" (p.395). Labov and Waletzky understood that participants' narratives were the way they spoke about past events. In addition, how they constructed focus events influenced how the narrative was analyzed, since construction of the narrative followed the "order of events in time" (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p.37). As participants' stories are shared randomly in bits over periods of time, the pieces are used to time order the events and construct analysis of the narrative.

The early narrative framework developed by Labov and Waletzky (1967), "defined narrative as a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of the events referred to," and "narrative construction follows the order of events in time," (p. 37). Reissman (1993) wrote, "Labov's framework [was used] to see how simple narratives are organized, [and was] an essential first step to interpreting them," (p.59). Kim (2016) argued that the Labov and Waletzky method

“emphasizes recapturing the action and meaning of personal experience” (p.201). The six components are listed in Table 11.

Table 11

Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) Six Components of Narrative Analysis (pp.32-39)

Component		Description
A:	Abstract	*What was this about?*
O:	Orientation	*Who? When? What? Where?*
CA:	Complicating Action	*Then what happened?*
E:	Evaluation	*So what?*
R:	Result/Resolution	*What finally happened?*
C:	Coda*	*Returns the verbal perspective to the present moment.*

*Note: Not all narratives will have a coda, especially if the focus narrative is excerpted

Reissman, a researcher who has used a variety of narrative analysis methods, wrote about Labovian analysis, “With these structures, a teller constructs a story from a primary experience and interprets the significance of events in clauses and embedded evaluation” (1993, p.19). It is possible to have more than one of several structural elements in Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) framework. Their analysis method supported identification structures in shared narrative that contribute to participants’ descriptions of life experience. This kind of analysis illuminates the ways interactions and experiences influence personal stories.

Unfortunately, what is not evident using this method are interactions between participants and interviewers. In a co-constructed interview, as was the case for the target study, analysis is incomplete when interactions between both parties are not considered. Because Labov and Waletzky (1967) created modern narrative analysis, it is incumbent on researchers using

narrative methods, even in cases where the method has been modified, to cite them. In fact, most scholars in field (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Gee, 2000, 2012, Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Riessman, 2008) who have followed in Labov and Waletzky's narrative analysis footsteps, have used their methods to interpret meaning from participant life stories. Methodologists James Gee (1991), Elliot Mishler (1995), and Donald Polkinghorne (1995) have all developed slightly different narrative analysis methods, making it imperative to choose one that fully allows the data to be heard through the researcher's interpretations.

Along with the previously mentioned Labov and Waletzky (1967) narrative analysis method, alternative methods are briefly presented. Using Labov and Waletzky's (1967) methods as a foundation and taking Labov's (1997) further work into consideration, Gee (1991, 2012) modified their narrative analysis work and focused on a structure more similar to poetry stanzas than storied narratives, culling out words from the narrative that "obscured" poetic structures (Fleischmann & Miller, 2013; Riessman, 1993). Instead of using a six step structure (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), Gee relied on a system of "lines" and "stanzas" to analyze narratives.

Polkinghorne (1988, 1995) sampled a variety of methods as the foundation in building his own method of narrative analysis. Polkinghorne based his narrative analysis method on "three basic suppositions about the human experience that I assume to be valid," (1988, p.15-16). These assumptions were:

1. Human experience is enveloped in a personal and cultural realm of nonmaterial meanings and thoughts
2. Human experience is a construction fashioned out of the interaction between a person's organizing cognitive schemes and the impact of the environment on his or he sense of apparatus

3. Human experience is not organized according to the same model we have constructed for the material realm

People use stories to construct experiences and in turn, are constructed by the language used to describe these experiences (Kim, 2016). Meanings attached to shared stories change with context and audience and how they interpret experiences depends on "recollections, perceptions, and expectations" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.16). Interpretations are ever-evolving and new meanings can be assigned depending on constructed situations and circumstances.

Taking his cues from Polkinghorne, Mishler (1995) developed a more comprehensive and detailed "typology." He believed the method of analysis depended on the kind of narrative being analyzed and the research problems addressed since it was a "problem-centered area of inquiry" (p.89). Mishler divided narratives into three typologies according to categories:

1. Reference and temporal order: The "telling" and the "told"
2. Textual coherence and structure: Narrative strategies
3. Narrative functions: Contexts and consequences

In the first category, *reference and temporal order*, Mishler matched how events were shared in the data to time (or temporal) order. In the second category, *textual coherence and structure*, Mishler looked to the structure of language and how "unity" and "coherence" were shown in the data through linguistic strategies (Kim, 2016) in the narratives. Because this category in the typology focused on linguistic strategies, it was better suited to oral narratives. In the third category, *narrative functions*, Mishler used theoretical lenses to analyze group narratives for meaning at a societal level.

Each of the above-mentioned methods of narrative analysis is suited to specific kinds of data. Labov and Waletzky's (1967) six components functioned well with detailed participant

soliloquies without researcher input. Gee's (1991, 2012) methods incorporated phrases from participant narratives separated into lines and stanzas, giving the target narrative a poetic structure. His methods are well-suited to written narratives without researcher participation. Polkinghorne (1988, 1995) believed people used stories to construct experiences and the meaning of a narrative was dependent on context. His analysis works well for co-constructed interviews. And finally, Mishler's (1995) typology was dependent on the research problem and the kind of narrative. His three categories, or typologies, were suited for written data, individual spoken narrative, or group constructed stories.

The method of analysis is wholly dependent on the kind of narrative collected and the method of collection. Each one is well-suited to specific purposes and research designs. In the following section, the kind of narrative analysis method chosen for this study is discussed, along with reasons for choosing it and how it was applied.

Narrative Data Analysis Methods

Conversations and semi-structured interviews are usually the most common forms of data for research studies involving participants and using qualitative methods (deMarrais, 2004; Roulston, 2010; Roulston et al., 2003). In addition, researchers can use pictures, observations, diaries, and research journals as part of data collection (Trochim, 2006). But, the goal in narrative research from collecting data remains to encourage participants to share their stories orally, or through the alternative forms of data listed.

Polkinghorne: Making Sense of Participants' Life Stories

Polkinghorne (1995) believed two modes of analysis existed in narrative methods. Both modes were necessary to produce a fully-realized analysis of narrative data. The modes were: *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis*. *Analysis of narrative*, or the paradigmatic mode of

analysis, is used to "organize experience as ordered and consistent while attending to its general features and common categories and characteristics" (Kim, 2016, p.196). This mode is used to construct narratives into chronological order and interpret patterns found in the data, or to emphasize the "common elements that appear over and over" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.10). *Narrative analysis*, or the narrative mode of analysis, is "based on narrative cognition that attends to the particular and special characteristics of human action that takes place in a particular setting" (Kim, 2016, p.197). This mode is used to reassemble the parts of stories and patterns found in the data into a written constructed narrative, or the "configuration of the data into a coherent whole" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.15). Polkinghorne named this full process "narrative understanding" which was the "comprehension of a complex of events by seeing the whole in which the parts have participated" (1988, p.22). The goal of data analysis, then, is narrative understanding: a holistic assembly of bits of stories and the patterns they formed in data.

Polkinghorne's strategy of *narrative smoothing*, a term denoting "elements which do not contradict the plot, but which are not pertinent to its development, do not become part of the research result, the storied narrative" (1995, p.16) was helpful in the overall work of analysis to enhance the readability of the narrative while maintaining an honest reflection of the participants' voices. The process followed for this study was to transcribe in the 'raw' – meaning every utterance and each sound was recorded in the initial transcription. Then, while undergoing a second listen to the recorded narrative, the transcript was carefully 'smoothed' into more coherent sentence while still retaining participants' meanings. An example of application of the narrative smoothing strategy is shown in Table 12, below.

Table 12

Example of Narrative Smoothing: Excerpt from Elena, First Interview

Rough Transcript (with pseudonyms)
Q: Okay. All right. So did you have trouble learning to read?
A: I didn't think that I did, but I don't… I really don't know. Like I don't ever really remember like struggling in school, but I think I also just like wasn't really paying attention to struggling in school. Like I wasn't like worried about my reading. Like I… reading aloud… I remember that was horrible. Like we would do like popcorn reading or whatever, and like I… like I think it like actually like really scared me because now when I have to read aloud in class I just like immediately start sweating. Like it was awful for me because like I wanted to know like exactly when I was going to be reading so I could like practice it in my head before I had to read out loud because it was so hard. And I was so slow, and like words that would like take… they would take me forever. And I felt like everyone else was like really good at just like… like reading. So I never really noticed like in my head, I guess. It was more like when I had to read out loud it was just like horrible.
Narrative Smoothing (filling in the holes)
R: Okay. All right. So, did you have trouble learning to read?
P6: I didn't think that I did, but I really don't know. I don't ever really remember struggling in school, but I think I also wasn't really paying attention to struggling in school. I wasn't worried about my reading. Reading aloud… I remember that was horrible. We would do popcorn reading or whatever, and I think it actually really scared me because now when I have to read aloud in class, I immediately start sweating. It was awful for me because I wanted to know exactly when I was going to be reading so I could practice it in my head before I had to read out loud because it

was so hard. I was so slow, and words would take me forever. I felt everyone else was really good at reading. I never really noticed in my head, I guess. It was more when I had to read out loud. It was horrible.

The smoothed transcripts more closely resembled written texts in structure, making the participants' life stories more easily broken into parts during analysis of the narrative, and then reassembled in narrative analysis. Polkinghorne described making sense of participants' life stories using his narrative analysis methods. In his often cited book, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, Polkinghorne (1988) explained his purpose for narrative analysis methods:

1. Functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units
2. Provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions
3. Is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful (p.11)

Therefore, it is important to explore shared details within the narratives for understanding, while taking a big-picture approach to determine overall meaning of a person's experiences.

A researcher's construction of written narratives after connecting pieces of stories across interviews is an important step in the process. According to Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, and St. Pierre (2007), the information and collected data are "always already interpretations made by participants as they answer questions or by researchers as they write up their observations" (p.27). For example, Haley spoke in all her interviews about feelings of frustration with instructors who did not understand what dyslexia was or what kinds of accommodations best supported her learning. She did not believe she should be grouped with students with special education labels since she did not view her needs as severe or outside the

norm. Haley did not mind speaking about her dyslexia and helping others understand, but felt professors and instructors at the university level should have more insight than it appeared that they did. She did not, however, speak about these events concisely in one well-ordered paragraph in one interview. Haley referenced the lack of authoritative insight into learning disabilities in all three interviews, in response to various lines of inquiry. Using Polkinghorne's (1995) methods of analysis of narratives, these events were combined into a data analysis paragraph as part of a larger constructed narrative (Table 13) to make meaning of her stories.

Table 13

Data Analysis Paragraph: Excerpts from Haley, All Interviews

Excerpts from Transcripts
First Interview: I've had a lot of professors that have no idea what they are. They have no idea what dyslexia even is. Having to explain that to my professors every year, gets frustrating.
Second Interview: Our teacher grouped together me having dyslexia and other… dyslexia and ADHD and stuff like that as the same thing as kids who have Autism or Downs and or like other mental issues. I've never liked when I've been grouped together as a "special ed" kid because I don't see myself as that. I think "special ed" is kids with Autism or kids with things going on like that. It's not a bad thing to be special ed. I've just never liked being labeled as that, because I've never seen dyslexia as being a "special ed" thing.
Second Interview: But, I still felt like she didn't know as much as I expected her to know about what to do with a student who is dyslexic. She'd just say things in class sometimes about dyslexia and they would be completely wrong.
Third Interview: I think I've become a lot more outgoing and confident about talking to people more because it's easier for me to talk to someone about something than it might be for me to

write it down or obviously read something to someone. I definitely became more outgoing in that regards because when I couldn't do stuff when I was little, I would go talk to people. That definitely helps my personality as a 'social butterfly,' as my family calls me. I think that's probably it. Those are the positives that I see from my dyslexia and my journey with my dyslexia.

Researcher Construction Paragraph

Haley became frustrated when she had to explain to instructors what dyslexia was, what the accommodations were, and why she needed them. She does not feel dyslexia is a special need similar to more severe disabilities such as being on the autism spectrum or Downs Syndrome. Even though she has had and needs literacy accommodations, she does not feel she should be labeled "special ed" like other students with more pronounced and more obvious needs. Some professors at university have seemed unfamiliar with kinds of accommodations and procedures to implement them – such as asking for having a discrete note taker for large lecture classes. And even in courses where the instructor has encountered student with learning disabilities needing accommodations, may seem unfamiliar with the intricacies of dyslexia and how to best support this kind of learning need. In fact, in an introduction to special education course, Haley believed the professor said things in class about dyslexia that were incorrect and went against her personal experiences. Due to her literacy difficulties, Haley has always found it easier to speak with someone than to write or read about topics, meaning, small group discussions are beneficial when reading or writing independently would be more challenging. So, she identifies herself as been more social and confident when she speaks about issues than when she must write or read about them. And, Haley views it as a strength that she can speak about her learning disability, her accommodation needs, and how she best learns to anyone who asks.

In an article in the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* (1990), Polkinghorne described the researchers role in qualitative research, especially in interviewing and analysis as language is the medium of expression. He wrote, “Language is doubly complicated for qualitative research in that the realm it investigates is infused with language and the statements we give about that realm are themselves linguistic. Qualitative researchers are themselves members of the realm they study” (p.21). The take-away from Polkinghorne’s ideas was researchers are co-constructors of the interview and of the written product of those interviews and interactions (Riessman, 1993). Polkinghorne’s analysis methods were used to make meaning of all of the possible ways the participants wanted their stories to be told. Following analysis of these narratives, constructed narratives were written about participant experiences and patterns in the data across the constructed narratives were identified. Using the identified patterns, the parts were put back together in an overall description of their shared life stories with narrative analysis.

Polkinghorne’s Methods: Affordances and Limitations

Polkinghorne’s (1995) analysis methods offer affordances to qualitative researchers using narrative methods. The holistic experiential approach encourages researchers to co-construct meaning with the participants as they are “uniting the events of their lives into unfolding themes,” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.163) sharing language in interviews. Researchers are given a ‘place’ within the analysis, not simply silent observers. In addition, Polkinghorne’s differentiation between analysis of narratives and narrative analysis supports a multi-interview design. Participants share bits of their experiences as they co-construct the interviews with the researcher. Over the course of a several in-depth interviews, participants may return to specific critical incidences or insights and thus parcel out information throughout the sharing of

experiences. Analysis of the narrative mode supports taking apart participant stories and reassembling them chronologically, while looking for patterns in the data. Then, his narrative analysis mode supports construction of a holistic narrative in which the pieces are brought back together across interviews, and eventually, across participants.

According to Polkinghorne (1988), there are five limitations to his methods:

(1) difficult to make meaning from natural conversations since they are an activity, not a thing

(2) researchers can only access each participant's perspective, not a multi-voiced account

(3) language is contextualized and difficult to order

(4) analyzing language is a never-ending endeavor

(5) difficult to portray on paper all of the facets that contributed to the meaning-making of an event (pp.6-8)

Despite these drawbacks or limitations, Polkinghorne's focus on making meaning through co-constructed language across encounters opened up analysis of the data in ways that allowed greater depth of understanding for both the participants and the researcher. The researcher described the "setting, characters, unfolding plot, and stitch[ed] the story together," so as to make "interpretation of the events clear" (Riessman, 1993, p.10). The focus was on understanding of experiences the participant wanted to share.

Narrative Analysis Framework

Polkinghorne (1995) explained narrative analysis "seeks to locate common themes… among stories collected as data" (p.13). The holistic, but not necessarily linear, steps included in this method are listed below:

1. Synthesize data into a coherent whole – not separated into parts

2. Arrange the data elements chronologically
3. Identify which elements contribute to the outcome
4. Look for connections of cause and influence among events
    a. Story develops through recursive movements from data to emerging plot
    b. Follow principles of hermeneutic circles – moving back and forth from parts to whole
    c. Emerging plot indicates which data to include or eliminate
5. Identify action elements caused by combinations of events
6. Write the story (pp.15-18)

Analyzing the Data

Polkinghorne's (1995) method is not necessarily linear, but is recursive – returning again and again to the data to understand participants' life stories. Using Polkinghorne's data analysis method, the researcher must first embark on information synthesis (step 1), striving to bring all the pieces of stories into a "coherent whole." It is important to then arrange events in the order in which they occurred (step 2). Chronology is key in this method. Moving along, it is necessary to identify the story elements contributing to the outcome of the narratives (step 3). The researcher must search for cause and influence (step 4) among events and in context, which may then lead back to synthesis, chronologic ordering, and identification of key elements.

Many times, these first steps are repeated, as connections between cause and influence among events are sought (step 4), as the researcher moves among the collected data, research notes, and the emerging plot towards (step 4: a, b, and c) the next step of identifying data elements caused by combinations of events (step 5). Polkinghorne (2010) believed "narrative inquiries produce a storied description of a practice process carried out in a concrete life space"

(p.396), highlighting the need to manage the data to honor participants' stories and how they made meanings in their lives. After identifying critical responses and action elements caused by combinations of events (step 5), the story is written (6).

At this point in the data analysis, the analysis modes switch. The researcher is no longer taking narratives apart and reassembling them, they are using the pieces and patterns to create a holistic look at the participant's shared stories. Polkinghorne's (1988) narrative data analysis methods were used to find narrative meaning – a combination of narrative analysis and interpretation. Then, following the construction of the individual written narrative, the researcher looks across participants to identify commonalities in order to "help the reader understand why and how things happened in he way the did, and why and how participants acted in the way they did" (Kim, 2016, p.197).

But, as sometimes happens with multi-participant studies, patterns in the data across participants were difficult to analyze due to the sheer volume of collected materials. The semi-structured interview research design in which participants were free to speak extemporaneously as well as follow researcher prompts results in varied orders of responses. And finally, because the participant and researcher meet on multiple occasions under the multi-interview design, participants may mention the same key topic several times across interviews, only talking about a portion at a time. This meandering journey through their life experiences and seemingly haphazard recollection of events makes analysis across participants more challenging.

Summary

While narrative methods have long been a part of analyzing shared life stories, it has only been since the mid-twentieth century that narrative analysis methods have been used as a part of research in qualitative studies. Using Labov and Waletzky's (1967) methods as a foundation on

which to build and modify future methods has been a frequent strategy among researchers using narrative inquiry and analysis methods. Labov and Waletzky's (1967) methods were best used for long soliloquies or long passages of oral conversations, but those methods do not indicate how an interviewer's part of the conversation influences meaning. Polkinghorne's (1988, 1990, 1995) narrative analysis methods allowed for individual as well as cross-participant analysis. His methods took into consideration how parts of stories are interwoven throughout multiple interviews and showed ways to bring those pieces together for the final story.

Moving forward, it is important to this research to continue to consider the ways Polkinghorne used his methods to support thinking both individually and collectively through each participant's shared narratives. It is imperative their voices be honored as their stories are told, so others may learn and be encouraged – just as Erin, Ashley, Allison, Elena, Meredith, and Haley wanted. They have spent their lifetimes learning how to be successful through and with their learning disabilities. My hope is that others may hear their narratives and be encouraged to do the same.

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE BIRTH OF THIS DISSERTATION

When I began my career as a classroom teacher, I was peripherally and academically familiar with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and special needs and their influences on classroom procedures for learning. My first position as a 5th grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher was populated with the typical students for this small school district. I was a beginning teacher with all the baggage that position entails: academic knowledge with not a lot of experience in the field, little peer support because I was new to the district, and unfamiliarity with teaching materials since they differed from my limited experience as an 8th grade ELA student teacher.

As I prepared for my first "meet the teacher" event, I was a bit nervous, but convinced the district would not have hired me unless they were sure I could adequately do the job. The parents and guardians streamed into the classroom, eager to meet the "new" teacher. By the end of the night, I learned that of the 33 boys and girls in my class, 10 of them had been identified as having ADHD in kindergarten or 1st grade – all by the same local doctor – all given Ritalin™ for hyperactivity and/or inability to focus (Cerner Multum, 2017) – and all 10 of these students had been instructed to take the final dose of their prescribed medicine the day *before* 5th grade started. In effect, I would have 10 young learners in my classroom going through their school day for the first time in several years without chemical support.

I had heard of Ritalin™ and knew that it was generally prescribed for young people who had difficulties staying on task or focusing on detailed work. What I did not know were the

potential side-effects of suddenly ceasing to take the medicine. I was not sure how to proceed, so I asked my faculty mentor for advice. She suggested I learn a lot and to do it quickly! That first year of teaching opened my eyes to so many variances of student need: language, learning, and emotional. The resource-impoverished district could not provide the kinds of support students truly needed unless they were unable to function at any level in a general education classroom. Support had to come from the classroom teacher.

After researching the kinds of support my students needed, I sought peer opinions and experiences, only to discover many of my co-faculty members had similar circumstances with their students. We created an informal research group to bounce ideas off each other, air our teaching difficulties and seek solutions, and devise ways to provide the support students needed. We drafted a handbook of sorts that included listings of learning needs coupled with effective instructional and peer-learning supports, in addition to research articles and information about the needs we had encountered in our positions as lead instructors. Throughout my three-year stint as a teacher at this school, the information in the handbook proved useful time and again.

I changed school districts and became an ELA teacher for 6th and 7th grade general education students. Although the new district was more economically diverse, there were still many students with learning, language, and emotional needs not receiving support. For example, one female student had learning needs, exhibited through low attention span, poor memory, learning struggles, social difficulties with peers, and facial features indicative of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) (Gavin, 2016). This student was capable of average work, but had difficulties participating in peer groups and remembering each day’s lessons. She was not at a learning level qualified for the inclusive Special Education class, but was easily frustrated when she could not work at the same level as her peers.

As with the previous school, this campus had many faculty members with experience in supporting student learning needs. After many conversations with various peer-faculty, we informally met to compare ways to support student who had needs falling outside the special education parameters for this district. Members of our group contributed teaching strategies, materials, and research in our quest to find ways to best support student learning. Distribution of the materials for student support was accomplished by an accommodating media specialist and a supportive administration.

My background in teaching students with learning needs has meanderingly led to my dissertation topic. I began my teaching career with an intellectual knowledge of learning disabilities, but it was only through experiences working with peers to develop strategies and with students to support their learning that my interests in *what* supports were effective and *why* or *if* they worked, was piqued.

When I started the doctoral program and was given the opportunity to teach a writing pedagogy class, I had no idea the seeds of my dissertation topic would be planted. I had several students that semester, as well every one that followed through my teaching tenure as a graduate assistant, present official paperwork identifying their special needs accommodations. However, unless they chose to tell me the nature of their learning disability, I was not privy to the label their needs had been given. I was tasked with teaching and providing identified learning disability supports as needed – until one serendipitous fall semester three years into my program.

As I shared in a previous chapter, Erin, one of my middle grades education undergraduates stayed after class to speak to me about her learning disability. She had not given me official paperwork and was not asking for accommodations. Instead, she spoke to me about peer expectations, confidence in her learned skills, self-advocacy, and personal resilience. I left

our conversation humbled by her learning struggles and hard-won academic success, and curious about her 'story.' I wondered why she wanted a career in a literacy-focused profession, how she had found success in academia and in peer interactions, and how she pictured herself engaging in literacy instruction through and with her learning disability with her future students. And thus, a dissertation topic was born.

Revisiting the Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative interview study was to understand how teacher candidates with identified learning disabilities came to the teaching profession and how they negotiated their learning disabilities as they engaged in literacy instruction with PreK-8th grade students. The six participants attended university intending to teach young learners. Each one was academically successful and had at least one identified learning disability and/or high incidence disability. Five participants – Haley, Meredith, Erin, Allison, and Elena – were undergraduates. Ashley was a master's student. Haley, Meredith, Allison, Ashley, and Elena were early childhood majors. Erin was in middle grades education. All six came from self-identified middle class families with at least one sibling and their learning needs had been identified prior to entering university. Each participant individually met with me for three focused interviews where we spoke at length about their literacy learning and literacy teaching.

The following research questions guided this study: (1) What are these PreK-8th grade education majors' experiences in their own K-12 education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities? (2) What sociocultural aspects are critical to these education majors' development as literacy learners? (3) Based on these education majors' own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students? In the following sections, the study findings for each research question are synthesized.

Article 1: Learning How to Learn

Using a sociocultural lens (Vygotsky, 1978), the first article focused on how one teacher candidate with an identified learning disability came to the field of education, the life stories she shared about her literacy struggles, and the social support systems she developed through her academic journey. This article discussed legislation targeted to increase literacy skills and competencies at an ever-rising pace (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Hart Research Associates, 2015) as well as provisions for students with learning disabilities (US Department of Education, 2009, 2013, 2016a; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Connections among literacy legislations, accommodations for learning needs, and rising numbers of students with learning disabilities graduating from high school and entered higher education were made (Connor, 2012; Maki et al., 2015; Snyder & Dillow, 2015) as well as the push for understanding of student learning needs at the university level (Grella, 2014; McCormick & Zutell, 2011; Riddell & Weedon, 2013; Roberts, 2012; Scott, 1997; Wootton, 2002). It was proposed that academically successful education majors are experts at working through learning disabilities affecting their literacy, but have not been viewed as experiential resources. The overall goal for the article was to understand how I and other teacher educators could better understand how to support teacher candidates with learning needs both academically and socially so that they had the best chance realizing their career goals.

The findings from this article came together through Erin's narratives about her literacy learning and social support for the ways she made meaning through and with her learning disability. Erin learned strategies for reading and writing in tutoring session. She struggled with her sense of academic confidence as she worked hard to catch up with her grade level peers and find academic success in her middle grades courses with the support of her after school tutors.

She had the support of more knowledgeable ‘others’ (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) as she used language to construct knowledge. Erin felt she learned most effectively and remembered more when she worked with a small peer group to construct knowledge. She knew different people brought various skills with them as they met in groups to talk ideas out. She was best at remembering details about texts, images, or discussions, but her peers were better at finding ‘hidden’ or deeper meanings in topics of study. Erin reflected Vygotsky’s ideas about learning in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978, 1986) as she contributed to peer discussions the details she understood and learned from them about deeper meanings and connections across topics. She strongly believed group work was her forté, and it was this kind of structure that allowed her to best learn.

In addition to learning from more knowledgeable others. Erin served as a more knowledgeable other for her students, especially for those students who struggled to learn. When she was in field placement and working with students, Erin observed some students having difficulties in reading, writing, speaking, and making meaning from texts. She was able to share some of the literacy strategies she had learned in tutoring, and still practiced from when she was in middle grades. The strategies she modeled – from using a tracker finger to keep the place while reading, to chewing gum while silently reading to prevent mouthing each word – helped the students in her placement find success and feel more confident in their own learning.

The term ‘confidence’ came up several times in the data and is explored in more depth in the second article among all six participants. But for Erin, confidence was pivotal. Even though she did not like to read in her early school years, she felt confident sharing about books they read in class because she used the pictures to understand storylines. As she progressed through elementary school, she felt her confidence waning as reading and writing level requirements

increased. She remembers in 5th grade, while her friends were reading long chapter books, Erin read books from Barbara Park's *Junie B. Jones* series or the *Magic Tree House* series by Mary Pope Osborne. Her coping strategy was to never willingly speak up in literature discussions and to never volunteer information about what or if she read at home.

After her learning disability was diagnosed in 6th grade, what little confidence Erin had held onto by never reading aloud or volunteering to speak about literature crumbled as she began tutoring and realized how far behind her literacy skills actually were and how traumatized she thought she would be if any of her friends discovered her 'secret.' After graduating from tutoring in 8th grade, it took several more years and lots of reading and writing experiences for Erin to feel confident enough to speak up in class and volunteer to read aloud. In college and in her field placements, there was a general level of confidence in her own literacy skills. But, there was a situation in which Erin mispronounced a word in a small group lesson she was teaching. When she discovered her mistake, she felt her confidence drop and the old voices inside her head screaming "BAD READER." However, in addition to literacy strategies, her tutors taught her to strategies to combat negative thoughts. She mentally reminded herself that she had the skills to read and write well, and that when she made mistakes as everyone does, she had the strategies to correct her errors.

Overall, Erin shared her struggles in an effort to open a dialogue with other people about learning disabilities. She believed if people can see how she struggled and overcame her learning disabilities to find academic success, they might be inspired to work hard to cope with difficulties they may have in learning.

Article 2: Literacy Learning and Teaching Through the Lens of Learning Disabilities

The second article focused on six education major participants with identified learning disabilities who chose careers in which literacy is a large focus. My aim was to understand the educational experiences, paths to academic success, and negotiation of literacy instruction with young learners through the lens of their learning disabilities all with sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) frameworks. This article discussed the rising number of students with learning disabilities who are graduating from high school and entering higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a). With the rise in numbers of college students with learning disabilities comes the need for understanding and support from professors, administrators, and other personnel. The findings highlighted the importance of self-efficacy, small group collaborations, and peer and mentor support for teacher candidates with learning disabilities.

Participant Biographic Sketches

Participant 1: Haley. Haley was a 21-year-old senior enrolled in the early childhood program. She had a fiery spirit and wanted to share her story of triumph so others might learn from her experiences. Haley struggled to learn to read and write, but had no difficulties speaking. In fact, she feels she learns best through talking and listening, rather than reading or writing. She was placed in special education classes through most of elementary school, but always felt she was different from her special education classmates who had severe learning or physical disabilities. Haley struggled through elementary school and middle grades with the support of her instructors and an indomitable spirit. Upon teacher recommendation, she was tested in 9th grade and her dyslexia was formally identified. In addition, the tested revealed she had Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and difficulties processing auditory

communications. But, once she had the needed academic accommodations of extra time, use of a calculator, and access to additional notes from a peer, Haley excelled in school. Her struggles made her successes all the sweeter. As an educator, Haley was determined to personally connect with her students and felt she would use her experiences to better support her students.

Participant 2: Meredith. Meredith was a 22-year-old senior majoring in early childhood education. She was thoughtful in sharing her life stories and contemplative about the future. In her early literacy experiences, Meredith had difficulties with letters, sounds, reading, and writing. She worked hard, but could not seem to keep up with her peers. In 2nd grade, Meredith was diagnosed with a processing disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD), and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Once she was able to receive needed learning accommodations, such as extra time on tests, success soon followed. Her vision for teaching included personal connections with students and immersion in literacy learning.

Participant 3: Erin. Erin was a 22-year-old senior in the middle grades program with English/Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies as her areas of specialization, and my former student. Erin progressed ‘normally’ in reading and writing through 3rd grade, although she would have never chosen those activities for fun. Erin noticed her friends reading more difficult chapter books than she did, but was not really concerned since she could read, she simply chose not to. However, but the time she entered 6th grade, Erin was not able to progress in standardized testing scores and her mother had her tested. They discovered she had Learning Disability-Other – an umbrella term for “holes” in her learning, but the diagnosis did not fit into any one category. Erin attended tutoring several times a week through middle school, graduating from tutoring in 8th grade. Erin found success following the strategies for reading and writing she learned in tutoring, but did not have learning accommodations in class. Erin strongly believed her struggles with

literacy gave her insight into how to best support her students, especially ones who had academic difficulties.

Participant 4: Allison. Allison was a 20-year-old junior enrolled in the early childhood program. Allison progressed normally through school, but had difficulties paying attention. When the family relocated and her new 3rd grade teacher recommended she be tested for the Gifted & Talented program, her Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was discovered. She excelled in school, as long as she was interested in the topic of study, or could be creative in assigned assessments. It was later discovered Allison suffered from Narcolepsy, which made it difficult for her to stay awake in class. She underwent various medicine trials in attempts to find something to help her calm the distractions and allow her to focus in class. Unfortunately, the changes in medicines and dosages led to bouts of depression and difficulties in school. Allison felt she only truly engaged when she performed music, an activity that used her whole brain and held her interests. Allison has never felt the frustrations of not knowing how to learn an academic skill, however, she has also not been able to maintain focus on intellectual topics without medical assistance. Allison felt her lack of attention span matched up well with the young children she worked with because they could flit from subject to subject with her.

Participant 5: Ashley. Ashley was a 23-year-old master's student majoring in early childhood education. Her family relocated often in her formative years, making it difficult for any place to feel very familiar. Ashley was not an outstanding student, but did not fail her classes. She was enrolled in general education classes and she worked really hard to learn. By 5th grade, she was tested for learning disabilities and was formally diagnosed with ADHD-inattentive only, Dyscalculia, and learning disability (non-specific). All of these identified learning disabilities meant she could receive much-needed services, such as extra time,

preferential seating, and use of a calculator. Ashley made more academic progress once she received her learning accommodations and felt more confident in her skills. Remembering how she was supported encouraged Ashley to provide the same level of support for her students. Ashley felt if the instructor truly focused on a student's learning needs, together they could find strategies that work and lead to success.

Participant 6: Elena. Elena was a 20-year-old sophomore enrolled in early childhood education. Elena did not remember struggling to learn to read or write, she simply remembered being tested. Her dyslexia was identified, which led her parents to enroll her in a special school for students with dyslexia. Elena attended this school for 2.5 years, and then relocated with her family to attend a local public school. During her time at the dyslexia school, Elena received intensive reading and writing strategies training, which enabled her to proceed through the rest of her K-12 schooling without learning accommodations. She was a self-proclaimed 'slow' reader, but did not feel her dyslexia held her back in any other way. For her, making personal connections with her students allowed her to know how to best support their learning needs. She believed her experiences in learning how to manage her dyslexia could be an inspiration to any student who struggled to learn.

Taken together, these six participants' shared experiences allowed a glimpse into their life worlds (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, Drew, & Nystrom, 2008) through the lens of their learning disabilities as they trained to be teachers who engaged with literacy as they taught young students. Ranging from early recognition and diagnosis in elementary for Meredith and Elena, to accidental identification while looking for gifted exceptionalities for Allison, to middle grades academic difficulties and subsequent diagnoses for Erin and Ashley, all the way to identification in high school for Haley, the participants were all identified as having some kind of learning

disability and/or high incidence disability causing difficulties in literacy learning. Haley, Meredith, Elena, and Erin all struggled in learning to read, putting sounds and letters together to form words, and reading comprehension. Ashley had difficulties with math of all kinds, but especially with visualizing 3D shapes, which would have made higher-level math impossible except for understanding and dedicated tutors. Finally, Allison did not struggle with reading or math – the two most difficult subjects for the other five participants. She struggled with focused attention on any one thing long enough to retain the information she was required to learn.

Findings. Speaking to their experiences in **literacy learning**, the participants stated working together in small peer groups, particularly using oral language, was how they felt they learned best and remembered more. Meredith, Haley, Erin, Ashley, Elena, and Allison spoke about learning with and from their peers as they constructed meaning together. They felt more **confident** in classroom interactions when given opportunities for dialogic learning with their peers. **Resilience** came from struggling to learn, discovering or being taught literacy strategies, **advocating** for their learning needs, and eventual academic success. One by one, they expressed similar viewpoints that their best and most effective learning came when they made meaning together.

The participants agreed they were the most successful when they had the support they needed, either from peers/teachers or academic accommodations. They felt more **confident** in learning situation that tended to be in their **ZPD** as they worked with more knowledgeable others using literacy tools. When they felt more confident in the knowledge they had constructed, **self-advocacy** strategies allowed them to use oral **language** to speak up for what they needed and how they best learned. Then, as each individual found success, they looked back on their challenges and found themselves able to **bounce back** against the odds and societal expectations.

Finally, as they thought about **working with young learners** in their field placements and in the future classrooms, the participants believed their experiences would help them make personal connections with their students – especially students who struggled to learn. Not only could they support their students academically, they believed helping to instill **self-confidence** was not only their goal, but also their duty as teachers with learning disabilities or high incidence disabilities who have found academic success. They could evolve from benefitting from small group learning and more knowledgeable others to being the co-constructor of learning and more knowledgeable other for their students. And, much as they were apprenticed into **self-advocacy** by their mentors, teachers, and parents, these teacher candidates wanted to teach their students the content they needed to know, as well as how to give them the **language** they needed to **advocate** for their learning needs so they, too, could feel strong and capable. Then, by sharing their stories with their students of working through their learning disabilities, they hoped to be the model of **resilience** their struggling students needed.

Although the small sample size resulted in a homogeneous participant pool, the findings are valid. Each participant's 'voice' was heard and ideas about literacy learning and literacy teaching shared. From Meredith's initial statement, "A lot of the smartest people have disabilities…" to Elena's idea about her individuality, "I think I have a unique perspective." From Erin's words that laid the foundation for this study, "I need you to be able to help me learn how to learn this subject," to Allison's beliefs about her success, "I think that was a lot of my success. People who noticed that I learn differently and made me feel like, 'Don't worry. You can make it.'" And then, from Haley's declaration of her academic and literacy teaching skills, "I don't want people to think I can't do stuff," to Ashley's final thoughts, "It's okay not to be like everyone else." Each participant graciously shared her personal life stories with me and I used

them to construct this study. We worked together to create testaments to their confidence, advocacy, and resilience.

Article 3: Narrative Analysis Methods for Qualitative Interview Research

The purpose of the third article was to present the narrative analysis method used with data collected for the dissertation study, based on Polkinghorne's (1988, 1990, 1995) methods and was supported by information from his research, examples from the data, and by outside sources who spoke to the affordances and limitations of this method. The process of data analysis through Polkinghorne's *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis* modes was offered as a way to delve deeply into participants' shared narratives individually and collectively. Polkinghorne's methods were presented in a list, with the understanding they are typically non-linear and recursive, echoing the ways in which participants share their life stories.

Information about the history of narrative analysis methods was shared, beginning with Labov and Waletzky's (1967) six components methods, traveling through researchers who used Labovian methods as a foundation on which to build modified and extended narrative analysis methods, such as Gee (1991, 2012) and Mishler (1995). However, neither of these methods allowed the fullness of analysis needed for a more complete picture of the participants and their life stories because interactions with the interview in the mode of co-constructed narratives were not included in the analysis. Therefore, it was necessary due to the design of the dissertation study, its purpose, and research questions, for the analysis method to be more inclusive, leading to Polkinghorne's (1988, 1990, 1995) narrative data analysis methods.

Polkinghorne's methods were used and a short, constructed narrative was written. In Polkinghorne's (1988, 1990, 1995) narrative analysis methods, more care is taken with interviewer interactions and influences of the social realm. Data analysts remove meaningless

utterances, such as ‘um’ and ‘you know,’ from the narrative in a process called “narrative smoothing,” allowing the raw transcription to read more like a conversation. His methods encouraged analysis of multiple interviews across individual, as well as across multiple participants, and showed how to bring multiple pieces of stories scattered throughout interactions together into cohesive stories.

Implications for Research and Practice

Knowing how to support teacher candidates with learning disabilities affecting their literacy learning and teaching is critical to their success. Personal connections with students and interest in how they best learn supports each student, but especially those students who struggle with learning disabilities. Meredith and Allison shared they learn and retain information best when they participate in peer discussions and when they have access to additional learning materials such as peer or instructor notes. Haley and Elena agreed with the peer discussions best supporting their learning, but understood they felt more confident when they were able to practice lessons before working with young learners. Erin and Ashley, again, agreed with small group discussions as the best way to dissect information and construct new knowledge, but they both shared it was through asking questions and instructors knowing how to ‘reach’ them and teach them how to learn that they truly felt they understood and remembered information.

Each of the participants shared with me the desire to be understood. Meredith told me in her initial interview, “I’m really glad you’re doing this because I’m not embarrassed or worried to talk about anything at all.” She was open and honest and wanted others to understand about her learning disabilities so that teacher candidates that followed and professors who worked with them could connect and work together. In her initial interview, Ashley said, “I’m pretty open. I’m here to help you guys better understand us.” She felt she could help pave the way for teacher

candidates to follow if more people understood how she learned and the ways that knowledge could help support others.

I did not set out to be an advocate of inclusion for teacher candidates with learning disabilities. I began with a simple wondering about *why* they came to teaching, *what* their learning experiences had been, and *how* they believed they would engage in teaching while coping with their learning disabilities. However, in working with these incredible young women through our co-constructed interviews, longitudinal check-ins, and shared life experiences, I have come to better understand the depths of experiences they bring to education as a whole. Their voices have largely gone unheard in this fast-paced global communication world we live in.

While giving a conference presentation, my interest in teacher candidates with learning disabilities was deemed unnecessary by a fellow-researcher who claimed 'they' did not belong in the education field, anyway. For a split second, I felt my research and participants had been dismissed and devalued. The outspoken individual could only think with a deficit mindset, instead of through the lens of potential strengths these teacher candidates with learning disabilities could and did bring to the classroom. That I felt devalued for a moment pales in comparison to how Haley, Erin, Allison, Elena, Ashley, and Meredith so often feel when confronted with difficult literacy tasks – tasks they must power through and use their learned strategies on in order to find success in their chosen careers. Although advocacy was not my intention – it has become my calling.

This study has confirmed previous research that teacher candidates with learning disabilities need support, they learn from and with each other, and challenge stereotypes and stigmas every day. They have come from a place of struggling to learn, through the most difficult of tasks – to learn in spite of themselves, and to find success through hard work and

determination. What this study adds to the field are these teacher candidates' voices, stories, and ideas about engaging with literacy learning and literacy teaching. Their pleas for understanding and personal connections cannot be over-stressed. They have worked hard to find success and want to spend their lives sharing their understandings about advocacy and struggling to learn. As Ashley stated, "Everyone is capable of learning. Some just do it differently than everyone else."

My pedagogy has always been that students learn and retain more when they construct knowledge together. I believe instructors and students learn from each other. Every person brings something unique to the class and it is the instructor's responsibility to reach out, build on students' strengths, and support each person in their learning. It is through understanding how students learn that instructors can best teach.

Moving Forward

Next steps for me in this research are to remain available to my participants for any information they want to share about their literacy and personal lives. I have had contact three separate times since data collection officially wrapped. Haley graduated, became engaged, started a job as a 1st grade teacher, and will be married by the time the semester ends. Meredith graduated, moved to an Asian country, and is teaching English as a Foreign Language to 5 and 6 year olds. She is due to return to the US this summer. Erin graduated, got married, and took a job at a camp where she is in charge of curriculum development as well as instruction. She hopes to work at this camp for a while and then transition to the classroom before having her own children. Her dream is to work for a few years and then homeschool her own children when she has them. Allison changed her major and will graduate next semester with a degree in Psychology. She will then begin graduate school in the MAT program in early childhood education. Ashley will be graduating this spring and is current looking for a position. Elena has

begun her third semester in the program and should be graduating next semester. She is toying with the going immediately to graduate school to earn her master's degree in special education or working for a few years and then going back to school. Each young woman has set goals for herself and is on her way to achieving them.

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Appendix A: Summary of Participant's Shared Life Experience

R: So, thinking through about your academics… just strictly academics, okay? Who and what, besides your mom, who or what was the best resource to help you figure out what needed to be done, help you learn to advocate for yourself, to help you just be a successful student? So, it can be a person, but it can also be tools that you used that were really important. Like, yours may be a plan that was really a good tool and support or something. Like what… I'll quit talking now.

P2: Meredith: Okay. Sorry. I just want a minute to think because I always backtrack. I think, it's definitely staying on top of things, staying organized, writing everything down, and trying to do things before they're due… that kind of thing. What helped me learn to advocate for myself, I learned very early in probably during elementary school when I was first diagnosed with ADD and when I really understood why I was taking medicine. Every teacher and tutor that I had would consistently remind me that anything I needed, I needed to ask for. For example, I needed to be taken into the hall, so I could spell my spelling words while I was writing them. I needed that.

R: So, you mean, say them out loud?

P2: Meredith: Say them… say them… sorry. Say them while you're spelling them. I would still have to write it, like everyone else, but that's something that made me so much more comfortable. I said it once with my tutor, or with my… I don't remember if she was my tutor at the time, or if she was just like the pull-out, like, extra help teacher for reading or whatever, but I said, "Oh, I really just wish that I could spell out my words with my voice while I'm taking the test," and she said, "Okay. We're going to ask if that's possible." She had obviously probably knew it was possible, but we went and talked to Ms. Justice. I wrote her a note that said, "Can we

meet and talk? I want to talk about spelling with you." So, she wrote me back and said, "Would it work for you to meet tomorrow morning right when you come in off the bus. We'll go into my office." I said, "Yes." So, I guess she talked to Ms. Franklin, and said I met with her, and Ms. Franklin said, "Okay. So, tell Ms. Justice what you said to me yesterday. How can we help you best show what you know?" I said, "I really like to talk to say my spelling words out loud while I write them." This was something that I did it with my mom, and my mom knew that it would be good, so I guess they probably talked about it, as well. But, it was me asking my teacher, and that's how I learned the best. And… things like that. My mom really praised me for it. She was like, "That's awesome because you know what works best for you, and you ask for it, and you made the agreement that you needed to." Looking back now, that's considered cultivation, obviously. But, stuff like… if I needed extra time, I always felt comfortable asking the teacher. And, not even just extra time… like questions. If I didn't understand the way a teacher would phrase something, it was always encouraged, "Please ask questions. If you don't feel comfortable asking in front of the whole class, ask me privately, write it down, ask me later. If there's something you're more interested in, and you want to know more about something, I'm glad to give extra time or give you a resource that you can look into." So, I guess really early on, I was kind of taught that having a difference is not a bad thing. It's just part of you. But, you can't just sit there and let other teachers reading out spelling words if you still working on number 4, and she's on number 7, you can't just skip 5 and 6. All right. So, you're going to get a bad grade, and I'm going to get sad if I get a bad grade because I studied so hard, and I know all the words… that kind of thing. So, if there were things that happened, and I came home with two words blank or two blank spaces, my teacher… I'm just using this example because it's such an obvious one, but my teacher would mark it with an 'X'. I don't know if they talked about this or what, but my

mom would say, "Okay, how are you going to like fix this problem?" "I'm going to go talk to Ms. Justice and see if she can let me redo those words."

R: Mm-hmm. It sounds very much like they helped you, 'they' being your parent and your teachers and whatever kind of tutor, helped you to learn to be responsible for what you needed, for your work, nobody's hanging over you doing it for you. But somebody's always there to listen and to guide. Am I saying that right?

P2: Meredith: Yes. Certainly.

R: Yeah. I got it. Good.

P2: Meredith: They guided me in understanding how I learn.

R: That's good. I'm glad that they were so proactive with you in helping you learn how to do it yourself. That's awesome.

P2: Meredith: Thank you. I'm very thankful for that. In college, I realized that, too. I came in. I knew how to study. I got a 4.0… like actual A's… like above a 93 in every class freshman year because I knew how to study, and I'd studied before time, but I feel like no one freshman year really knew how to study because either they didn't have to study in high school because they were already the smartest in their class, which I certainly was not, or their parents forced them to study, so they didn't have their parents there to say, "What test do you have coming up? What can you do like…?" I mean, that was most of my friends freshman year, losing HOPE and that kind of thing just because they couldn't handle the real world on their own.

R: Yeah. I think so. You said that your mom encouraged you, and probably your teachers, too, that if one kind of studying didn't work for you, to try something else, and then to try something else, and maybe this worked before, but this is a different context, and you've got to try something else, right? Yeah?

P2: Meredith: Mm-hmm.

R: So, it sounds like you came in with a lot of skills that perhaps somebody who's always done it one way, and it's always worked because they were really smart, they can remember… and for me, it's more of a memory thing. But, they've never had to push themselves, and they don't listen. They're thrown into this big pool of Southern University students, so I think that your having to cope with it so early in life gave you a better foundation for college. That's my theory.

Appendix B: Recruitment Email

September, 2015

IF YOU ARE AN EDUCATION MAJOR
WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY, PLEASE KEEP READING.

Dear Student,

Hi, I am Karen Graham, a doctoral student. For my dissertation, I am interested in the ways pre-service teachers with identified learning disabilities experience literacy and how those experiences may influence future work with students.

As a pre-service teacher with an identified learning disability, I expect you have developed good literacy-based coping strategies that support your learning. I am looking for participants who fit the following criteria:

1. Enrolled in the Early Childhood or Middle Grades Education Program (in "good" standing with the university and the degree program into which they are enrolled, have maintained the minimum overall GPA required, has met or exceeded the standards for professional behavior)
2. In the second year of your degree program
3. Intend to teach after graduation
4. Must have been formally diagnosed with and received services for a learning disability during their PreK-12th grade academic journey
5. Must be registered with the Disability Resource Center as having a learning disability

If you would like to participate in the study, it will involve three one-hour interviews. The first will look at your literacy learning experiences in your early grades through the beginning of college. The second will look at your literacy learning experiences in college and the third interview will explore your ideas about literacy teaching with your future students. I will also ask that you share any photographs and visual artifacts with me that represent your literacy "journey" through your lifetime. Your participant will not affect any course grades in any way. You may share personal information with me, and feel that there may be a risk

associated with breach of confidentiality. Please know that I will not use your name on any papers that I write in this project.

After the initial interview and for the remainder of the study's duration, you will be invited to share with me via text, email or phone, any real-time data of your literacy experiences that address the research topic, if you choose to do so. As a token of my appreciation, at the end of all the project interviews and submission of all visual data, I would like to thank you with a $25 gift card to Amazon. If you choose not to participate in the full research study, your gift card amount will be pro-rated at $5 a visit based on the number of times you participated.

If you **do not** wish to participate, please do nothing.

If you **do** wish to participate, please respond via email to kgraham@uga.edu and indicate you would be willing to speak with me by September 30, 2015.

If you **no longer** want to receive emails about this study, please contact me at kgraham@uga.edu to have your name removed from the list of possible participants.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me, Karen Graham, at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or email me at kgraham@uga.edu. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to potentially working with you.

Sincerely,

Karen Kleppe Graham
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Language & Literacy Education

Appendix C: Revised Recruitment Flyer

Are You an Education Major With a Learning Disability?

Do you have difficulties that affect reading, writing, or speaking? Do you have coping strategies you could share?

If so, I want to speak with you! Share your experiences in research interviews!

Who? You Can Participate If You:

- Had an IEP at some point in K-12 or are registered with the XXX Disability Resource Center
- Are an Education major working towards initial certification
- Minimum GPA of 2.8
- Intend to teach after graduation
- Have a learning disability

Where & When?

- Interviews will be held near campus You choose the day, time, and place
- There will be 3 interviews
- Each interview will be about 1 hour
- All information is confidential to study researchers
- You will get a $25 Amazon gift card for full participation*

*To be prorated per visit for partial participation

For questions or more information, please contact:
Karen Graham
(XXX) XXX-XXXX
kgraham@uga.edu

Appendix D: Timeline Script and Semi-Structured, Focused Interview Questions

Focused Interview Questions

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative interview study is to understand how pre-service teachers with identified learning disabilities come to the teaching profession and how they negotiate their own disabilities as they engage in literacy instruction with PreK-8th grade students. The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are these undergraduate education majors' experiences in their own formal education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities?
2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to their development as literacy learners?
3. Based on their own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students?

Interview 1: early Fall 2015, Literacy-Based Learning Experiences P-12 and college classes before education major core courses (create timeline)

Script for Introduction to Timeline Creation

1. Hand participant a blank piece of paper and a pencil with an eraser.
2. Say to participant, "Today, I thought we would start off with you drawing a timeline about your experiences in education. I want you to draw a timeline, and this point (point to left side), is before you went school and the end point (point to right side) is when you got accepted into the education program. Place points on the line when you recall something that happened related to your literacy learning and write a few words to describe each point."
3. "On your timeline note when you remember an incident was hard for you. Were there some times you remember being successful? Think of some times that stand out for you

where you were aware of your learning disability or when reading /writing were difficult – you were having trouble. Please also include times when you were successful."

4. Allow time for participant to create timeline and fill in plot points.
5. Begin with initial plot point and ask interview questions, being sure to probe for contextual understandings (people, place, experience) along the way.
6. If not included on their timeline, I will ask what convinced them they wanted to go to college?

Probe questions, if not answered in timeline responses

1. What do you remember about your early learning experiences before school?
   - In school?
   - Outside of school?
2. Tell me about how you learned to read and write.
3. In what ways were you successful/unsuccessful in school? What happened?
4. Tell me about how you found out you had a learning disability?
5. Were there stigmas associated with your learning disability?
   - Tell me about them.
   - How did you learn to cope with these stigmas?
6. How, if all, were you mentored in school/outside of school?
7. What do you remember about your learning experiences in college?

Interview 2: late Fall 2015, Literacy-Based Learning Experiences During Education Major College Years (artifacts)

1. Out of all the artifacts, what one do you want to focus on to begin?

2. What are some things students/parents might need to know if they face similar circumstances?
3. Tell me about working with students in your placement.
4. How, if at all, have you navigated your learning disability in your school placement setting?
5. Who would be involved in an "ideal" community to support children with similar LDs? What are some "must have" resources?

Interview 3: early Winter 2016, Post-Placement OR Literacy-Based Learning Experiences During Education Major College Courses (continued)

1. Out of all the artifacts, what one do you want to focus on to begin?
2. Looking back on your academic experiences, talk with me about how your learning was supported.
3. What is it like to work with students in literacy contexts as you negotiate your own learning disabilities?
    - What are some challenges you have faced?
    - What are some triumphs you have experienced?
4. Tell me about communicating your learning needs.
5. What prompted you to want to be a teacher?
    - Was your learning disability a factor in that decision?
    - Could you tell me more about that?
6. In a letter to yourself in a few years about negotiating learning disabilities, (or a blog to help parents), what would you say?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Appendix E: Data Sources and Analysis Information

Data Source	Information about Data	Analysis	Corresponding Research Questions
Interviews	3 formal interviews with teacher candidates with learning disabilities: • Focus of 1st interview: Literacy-based learning experiences before college • Focus of 2nd interview: Literacy-based learning experiences during college • Focus of 3rd interview: Post-placement (based on data already collected) AND/OR Literacy-based learning experiences during college (continued)	Narrative analysis was used to collect and analyze participants' life experiences within academia, career choices, and how they learned to work through and with their learning disabilities as they engaged in literacy teaching with elementary and middle grades students	1. What are these undergraduate education majors' experiences in their own formal education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities? 2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to these undergraduate education majors' development as literacy learners? 3. Based on these undergraduate education majors' own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students?
Visual Data	With the participants' permission, I will collected: • A timeline of their lifetime literacy-based experiences, created by the participant during the initial interview • Personal photos the participants felt chronicled their specific journey through educational environments looking through the lens of their learning disability	Visual Narrative Analysis was used to explore how the images supported understanding of participants' learning disabilities and how this information added to the interpretation of the study	1. What are these undergraduate education majors' experiences in their own formal education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities? 2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to these undergraduate education majors' development as literacy learners? 3. Based on these undergraduate education majors' own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students?

Data Source	Information about Data	Analysis	Corresponding Research Questions
Real-Time Data	In the forms of texts, pictures, emails, etc. which constituted spontaneous utterances to share literacy-based learning experiences in their personal and/or professional contexts	Narrative analysis was used for textual submissions to understand how participants' real-time experiences with their own learning and/or in field placement with elementary or middle grades students informed and influenced how they saw themselves as future educators Visual Narrative Analysis was used for image submissions to understand how participants' real-time experiences with their own learning and/or in field placement with elementary or middle grades students informed and influenced how they saw themselves as future educators	2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to these undergraduate education majors' development as literacy learners? 3. Based on these undergraduate education majors' own dialogic meaning making, how do they envision themselves as literacy teachers for PreK-8th grade students?

Data Source	Information about Data	Analysis	Corresponding Research Questions
Research Journal Notes	Personal record of my thoughts and ideas through the process of this research study: • <u>Before the interviews</u>: I journaled pre-interview thoughts and ideas • <u>During the interviews</u>: I took brief notes while the participant and I were engaged in the interview process • <u>After the interviews</u>: I made detailed notes about each experience with my participants after leaving the interviews • <u>Ongoing</u>: I recorded ideas about the ways in which participants' narratives worked together and separately as I interviewed, transcribed, analyzed, and wrote up this research study	<u>Narrative Analysis</u> was used to understand my own thought-processes about this research study. Along with my participants', I was a co-constructor of knowledge and my research journal helped me to tell their stories	1. What are these undergraduate education majors' experiences in their own formal education in negotiating their literacy-based learning disabilities? 2. What sociocultural aspects are critical to these undergraduate education majors' development as literacy learners?

Appendix F: Participant Write-Up for Data Analysis

Code Families

1st Field Placement, Block 1: For this semester, Erin is placed in her second choice specialization, English Language Arts (ELA) in 7th grade and is in the classroom two days a week. At first, she loved her placement. She was paired with a member of her cohort who she had known from high school. They were excited to be placed together, but were hesitant about the placement when they arrived and discovered it was a reading class, since neither one claims ELA as one of their strengths. The classroom instructor, called the "mentor teacher," welcomed the interns and immediately assigned them small groups to lead. They both appreciated the mentor teacher's relationship with her students, but felt the structure of the class was too repetitive, causing students to disengage with the lessons. Even though it was a "reading" class, they only spent one day a week actually reading.

Erin was given the "low" skills group to lead. From the beginning, the mentor teacher stated that this group's skills were way behind the other groups and that the struggling students were disinterested in participating in class activities. Erin worked with the students in her small groups to help them make connections to their readings – a practice she feels strongly about. When she saw them struggling with reading activities or when taking the weekly lexile tests, Erin shared strategies she learned from tutoring to help them feel more confident and make progress in their assignments. Erin's partner, Hannah, was given the "advanced" skills group, which she loved. I have to assume, here, that the on-level group worked with the mentor teacher?

Because she worked with the students whose skills were below grade-level and had difficulties with reading, memories of her own learning disability struggles resurfaced. Erin helped students to make personal connections to their texts since this was a strategy she learned

in tutoring in 6th grade and still uses today in college classes. She loved seeing the students make progress toward their goals in reading, but felt herself struggling, at times. For example, in working with her group in the first class on a reading activity, Erin unknowingly mispronounced a word, but correctly identified its meaning in the context. The same thing happened in all class with each small group for that day's assignment, until the last class when a student politely suggested the correct pronunciation. Erin was mortified, in part, because as the teacher, she had given erroneous information to all of her groups that day. She was worried that the students would tell the mentor teacher that she didn't know how to read, which brought her old fears of being a "bad" reader crashing down around her. She wanted to immediately find every student she worked with that day and apologize for her mistake. But, when she shared the story with her mentor teacher and partner, they both assured her that everyone makes mistakes and not to worry. Erin vowed from that point forward to always be better prepared.

Throughout the semester, Erin and her partner frequently spoke about the students and the teaching content, both in and out of school. They bounced ideas off each other and were able to plan lessons and projects for the classes as a whole that engaged the students with their own learning and brought them together as a class and as a grade level, instead of separating them into ability groups. Although the mentor teacher seemed indifferent to the project, the students appreciated seeing their individual work displayed in the hall outside their classroom within the larger context of this grade-level project.

The positives in this first placement were that she could actually see the students' skills improving due to the weekly lexile testing and the mentor teacher worked hard to match students with their skill levels in reading. The negatives were repetitive weekly schedule, not a lot of

actual reading taking place, feelings of detachment from students who felt they were "stuck" in whatever group they were assigned, little if any small group peer work.

A few ideas about teaching emerged for Erin as she progressed through her first field placement. First, she strongly believed every student needed more time to read. Although this was billed as a reading class, only 20% of the week was actually spent reading. Activities took up 60% and testing encompassed the remaining 20%. Second, Erin believed the students needed to be exposed to a variety of literary genres, recommending whole group texts or small groups based on interests through the use of text sets, as possibilities, instead of slowly plodding through one bland non-fiction text per ability group for the semester. Even though the students made progress in their reading skills, according to the weekly tests, they were disengaged and as one student said, they just wanted to read and write what they wanted.

2nd Field Placement, Block 3: For this semester, Erin is in a 5th grade classroom two days a week. This is in her first choice specialization, Social Studies, and is an individual placement. In this school, students of all ability levels are included in the Social Studies classrooms. For her placement class specifically, they have one above-level class, one below-level class, and three general education classes. Within their individual classes, the students are ability-grouped. The mentor teacher encouraged students to work together to find answers, that each student to be responsible for a part of the assignment, and that everyone must write their own answers in their notes. The mentor teacher changed activities based on student needs and perpetuated a sense of community by collectively creating behavioral expectations and supporting each other as they learn together.

Erin felt welcomed into this placement classroom from the first day. She is more confident in her teaching and working with all of the students because of her mentor teacher's

support and attention. They work together to create a comfortable learning environment where students are valued and expected to participate and to succeed. Early in the semester, Erin was asked to attend a parent-teacher conference alongside her mentor teacher and the rest of the teaching team. The student's mother was unsure how to proceed with her child because he was falling behind in his skills and was uninterested in reading for practice or for pleasure. The ELA teacher told the mother not to worry and that the team would work with her son to "get him where he needs to be." Erin silently cringed at this assurance because that is exactly what her teachers would tell her mom before she was diagnosed with a learning disability. Erin wanted to say something, but because she was a student intern, she did not feel comfortable speaking up. Just then, her mentor, the Social Studies teacher, asked what he liked to read. The mom said she did not know. The SS teacher then suggested she talk with him and make recommendations from her extensive classroom library for interesting books so that he could find something he liked and could possibly engage with to keep him on-track with his reading skills. Erin was both excited for the student and dismayed for herself. This is exactly the kind of strategy Erin felt could engage the student and exactly what no one did for her in this same situation.

In this placement, Erin worked with all of the students – not just one ability-level group. She found the first period advanced-level group most baffling. She could not identify with them and their experiences since she struggled to learn through and around her learning disability. She was never a student who read for pleasure in elementary or middle grades, and could not fathom how a young person could be so engrossed in a book that he or she would "sneak" to read instead of listening in class and participating. Erin wanted to support them in their learning, but honestly felt they did not need her – they were quite capable of learning without her assistance – much to her dismay. However, because this group was flexible in their learning and could grasp concepts

easily to move beyond knowledge of facts and into application of ideas easily, they were a great class to try out new lessons and project ideas. The students in this class could creatively embrace concepts while retaining the required facts.

There were three classes of general education level students, or the "forgotten middle," as Erin tagged them. The students in these classes, as a whole, were capable of understanding grand ideas and applying them, but opportunities to think outside the box were not presented since the lessons were mostly geared towards their ability levels. Erin commented, "Differentiation doesn't happen, here," when asked about working with these classes. She did not truly "see" herself in these students, but felt she could teach them and have fun with them at the same time.

Erin enjoyed working with all of her students, but found herself identifying more with the students who struggled to learn in the lowest ability-level class. The lessons she and her mentor teacher taught were stripped of complex ideas and confusing jargon. Required concepts were taught, but this class was slower to grasp them and thus could not move beyond simply learning the facts. Erin found that changes in routines "threw" the students in this class, so organization and simple presentation of ideas were keys to learning. Students in this class had opportunities to work together in small groups, but they were not encouraged to stray too far from repetition of ideas found in their texts.

Erin could not "find" herself in the advanced-level students, which frustrated her. She did not know how to connect with them. The students in the general education-level classes were fun, but she did not feel strong connections with them, either. But, in working with struggling students, she was able to see her own learning disability manifested in her work with them when they had difficulties pronouncing complex vocabulary and reading for meaning. Erin felt

connected and found herself sharing ideas for learning with them that she had been taught in tutoring and she still used in her own college classes.

Academic Experiences/Support: Throughout her tenure in academia, Erin has had many different learning experiences and varying levels of support – all colored by her learning disability. She seemed to view herself and her learning in three different phases: early literacy, tutoring, and everything since tutoring. Her family members – specifically her grandparents, mom, and older sister – supported her early literacy and engaged with her in learning about the world around them both through experiences and through reading.

Erin's early literacy was somewhat of a blur. She remembered sitting with her grandma or grandpa and "reading" her favorite book together. She remembered her mom and her older sister reading to her. She remembered mostly reading picture books in elementary school because she was good at predicting the story based on the illustrations, which helped her to be the top reader in 1st grade in terms of number of books read. The one event that truly stuck with Erin was writing a required paper in 5th for the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program and being asked to read it aloud to her peers and their families at the end of the program celebration. When she wrote it, Erin did not know there was a contest for the best papers – she simply wrote it because it was required. She worked on the paper during the Thanksgiving break and wanted her parents to edit it for her. They declined and when Erin said she did not think it would be good because no one helped her, a favorite aunt told her their admonition to work alone was not an excuse for not doing her best. At this point in her literacy journey, her learning disability diagnosis had not yet been identified. Erin went on to win the competition and to be one of three papers asked to be read aloud.

When her reading difficulties were discovered and her learning disability diagnosed, Erin began attending extensive tutoring sessions several times a week. Two different tutors mentored her from 6th-8th grades, when the "holes" in her learning were filled and her reading skills increased from a 3rd grade level when she was in 6th grade to on-level when she was in 8th grade. Her classroom teachers acknowledged her poor standardized test scores, but felt she was only having a "bad day" when she tested.

After numerous parent-teacher conferences, Erin's mom was not convinced that she was getting the help she needed and suspected there was some problem not being addressed in the public school classroom. Her mom found a tutoring center and Erin's odyssey through learning disability testing, her diagnosis, then intensive work to improve her reading skills began. Erin was angry with her mom for making her go to tutoring and was embarrassed that her friends could find out she was not academically on their level. But, to her surprise, when she told her friends about tutoring, no one made her feel "less than," which served to help her commit to tutoring and practice her newly learned strategies for coping with her learning disability in earnest. After a few weeks, Erin was excited to see her reading speed and comprehension increase due to the hard work she was putting in at tutoring and practicing at home. There was still a lot of learning ahead of her, but Erin could see tutoring was helping.

During her middle grades years, Erin was placed in general education classes. It was during this time that she read *Number the Stars*, a book that remains her all-time favorite, and holds its place as the first chapter book she ever independently read. Near the end of her time in tutoring, Erin began to focus on learning as whole, instead of simply completing assignments for grades or practicing her strategies whenever possible. Other literacy milestones came in 8th grade. For the first time in her academic life, Erin was reading the same books as her peers –

both in school assignments and out of school interests. She finally felt she could participate in conversations around literature that had previously been closed to her due to her low reading skills and her distaste for reading, in general. She was finally reading and comprehending on-level and confident in reading to herself, but not aloud to others.

By the time she reached high school, Erin confidently approached reading assignments in all subjects, armed with the strategies she learned in tutoring and applied in middle grades. Although she felt comfortable in the pace and learning expectations in general education level classes, it was during high school that Erin began to dislike being in different classes from her friends. She believed her academic skills were higher than her peers in the on-level classes, but did not feel she could succeed in the advanced class, placing her in a gap in the educational system. A person whose skills are higher than on-level and lower than advanced-level truly does not “fit” into the ability-leveling in our educational system as a whole. Erin began high school with more confidence in herself and her learning strategies, but still unable to read aloud or feel comfortable speaking extemporaneously in class. But, by the time she reached 11th grade, she found herself excelling in her classes and even placed into positions of leadership in small groups and in the larger whole class grouping. She began volunteering to answer questions and read aloud in class. Because she reads at a slower pace but with inflection and emotion, Erin believes her peers could relate to the text and enjoyed hearing her read aloud since that is how she felt when someone read aloud to her.

During her senior year, Erin was accepted into a mentoring program for struggling middle grades students. She shadowed a middle grades teacher and mentored small groups of students. In this program, Erin read with students and worked on comprehension or “guiding” questions that she created. She loved seeing the progress her mentees made and feels if she had

been placed in a similar class in middle grades that paired with her tutoring sessions, she would have benefitted immensely. As it was, her tutors taught her strategies for learning to cope with her learning disability and for reading, but she feels she would have been more comfortable about taking part in class discussions earlier in her academic life.

Other speaking opportunities came to Erin during her senior year. For the first one, the principal at her school asked her to give a speech in front of her peers near the end of school to encourage everyone to “finish strong.” Erin was amazed to be asked and felt proud of how far her skills had come. She said she enjoyed the whole process of writing the speech, practicing it aloud, and then sharing it with her peers at the pep rally. Then for the second one, she was nominated by the senior class to give a speech during the Baccalaureate Service for graduation. Her family and the families of the other graduates were in attendance as she gave her devotional. Once again, she reflected at the time on her literacy progress and has no doubt she would have never been able to create, write, and give her speech if she had not had interventions in middle grades for her learning disability.

It has been in college, though, that Erin has truly found her “voice.” She began her undergraduate studies as a small southern college before transferring to the flagship university that she now attends. Because she had always felt more comfortable in smaller class settings, Erin chose to spend her first two years in a nurturing environment with supportive professors. It was in this program that Erin blossomed into a scholar with hopes to positively influence the next generation of learners. Her professors had high expectations and nurtured all their students. Erin felt that it was through her classes those two years that she truly learned academic writing. During her second semester, she was chosen by a beloved professor to represent their class in an oral speech competition. Erin was hesitant, but did not want to disappoint her professor, so she

agreed. The professor complimented her writing and reassured her she could do it and do it well; so, she wrote her speech, practiced it in front of her roommates, and gave it on the designated day in front of her peers in the program. There were 30 student participants and Erin made the cut for the semi-finals. She was beyond excited, but knew she would have to give the speech again in the final round. Erin ended up placing 3rd overall and was asked to attend a dinner at the President of the college's house with the other finalists. Through this process of preparing a speech and orally speaking in front of a large group of people, Erin realized she enjoyed the experiences she had been afforded to publically speak and found herself amazed that she loved it and was successful. In fact, she began wondering if she could choose ELA as her second specialization – a novel idea for her and one she had never expected.

In her classes at her current university, Erin reaffirmed strategies for success and coping with her ever-present learning disability. Small class sizes, working with others, a variety of texts, and reading techniques for comprehension and retention of information are all examples of strategies that work well for her. Erin found that partnering in her first placement and being placed in a cohort learning group for her classes best supported her learning and allowed her to find success.

<u>Learning Disability and Strategies Used:</u> Erin began learning to make sense out of books by using context and repetition to "read" picture books. Her favorite picture book, *Any Kind of Dog*, was an early literacy favorite because the illustrations clearly "told" the story and repetition was used to increase comprehension. Erin loved to sit with her grandmother, who was just beginning to show signs of Alzheimer's, and "read" this book together. The book worked well for both of them because it was easily deciphered and the storyline was predictable. Erin started school and was at the top of her class for number of books read in Kindergarten and 1st grade

because of the strategies she had used when reading picture books with her grandmother. However, by the time she reached 3rd grade, her friends were reading chapter books and Erin was content with reading and re-reading books meant for early learners. And, as they were later to discover, her reading skills effectively ended with what she had learned through 3rd grade.

Each year after standardized tests, Erin's mom attended parent-teacher conferences because Erin's scores were not in acceptable range. When asked what was wrong and what the family needed to do to support her learning, Erin's teachers would reassure her mom that all was fine, that since she had no behavior problems she must have been having a "bad" day, and that they would get her to the level she needed to be. Finally, in 6th grade, when homework took several hours each day even with family member assistance, Erin's mom decided to seek help outside of the school system. Erin began attending tutoring several times a week where she had learning disability testing and was diagnosed with Learning Disability-Other, because she did not fit neatly into a specific learning disability label. Her tutors said Erin had "holes" in her learning that began with deficits in phonics knowledge, but with intensive practice, they could fill those holes and help her improve her skills to be on grade-level. Erin was embarrassed that she had to go to tutoring and angry that her mom made her go and could not believe she was "doing" this to her. But, after much learning and practice, Erin saw her skills increasing and decided to work harder to catch up to her peers. After her diagnosis and during the time of tutoring, Erin did not receive any accommodations in her public school classes, but does not believe they would have helped her since her needs were specific to reading skills and most inclusion teachers had to focus on behavioral issues instead of re-teaching curriculum.

In addition to all of these emotions from learning she had a learning disability and then having to go to tutoring, there was guilt both Erin and her mom felt for not realizing there was a

problem sooner. Erin felt guilty that she had done so well until after 1st grade – so what was wrong with her? Her mom felt guilty because she didn't know there was a problem until middle grades and felt she should have recognized Erin's problems as learning disability-related much sooner.

Erin attended tutoring from 6th-8th grades. When she had officially "graduated," her skills were on-level and she felt more confident about independent work. Erin had learned to apply the strategies she was given in tutoring to her academic work in school. She found new levels of success, but still felt the sting of being a "bad" reader – a label she put on herself when she was struggling to learn before her diagnosis. Although she had been embarrassed that her reading skills were not on-par with her peers, by the time Erin started high school, she felt able to "do" school.

It was during high school that Erin discovered her love of working in groups. She had not ever read texts deeply for fear of going beyond surface meanings and into suppositions, which eluded her in most situations. Erin said when she read, she took the author's words at face value and was not able to see beyond for implied meanings found in metaphors and figures of speech. One strategy she used to help her delve deeper into texts was to write down connections she made to her reading, which combined her positive feelings about the process of writing with her desire to access ideas beyond what the author wrote. For these reasons, she loved creating and working with multimodal projects, which combined many different skills into one finished product. When given a choice, Erin preferred creating videos for her personal assignments and for her students' lessons.

Besides the learning strategies previously mentioned, Erin discovered how she most effectively learns and retains information. First, she must have connections to the texts – either

through writing or visualizing as she reads – which helps her personalize the information and better retain what she reads. Second, even though it has been nine years since Erin graduated from tutoring, she found she must still practice various reading strategies the tutors gave her or she loses some of her skills. To this end, when Erin worked with her placement students and shared the reading strategies she had been taught, she was able to see how she could support her struggling students while practicing the strategies herself. Third, Erin preferred to work in small groups because she found others "get" stuff she does not from the assignments and vice versa. Finally, she engaged more readily with interesting texts and assignments. If her curiosity was not piqued with the task-at-hand or she could not see a direct purpose for it, she had difficulties being motivated to engage.

Literacy Experiences: When Erin was young, she was immersed in literacy. Her family was always around and someone – her sister, mom, dad, grandma, or grandpa – was always willing to read to her. It was only when she was older and could no longer "fake" reading by using illustrations in context or having someone tell her the words that she realized she did not like to read. In fact, Erin would rather have done anything than sit down and read. With the diagnosis of her learning disability came negative feelings towards reading, all bundled up with guilt, shame, anger, and frustration with the whole literacy process.

Beginning in 6th grade, Erin thought the whole process of reading was both "bitter" and a "nightmare." She felt anxious when asked to read unfamiliar words and hated that people knew she was not a good reader. While she cannot remember anyone saying negative things about her, Erin labeled herself as a "bad" reader because her skills were below level and she could not keep up with her peers. She did not want to read aloud and was embarrassed for anyone to hear her read, including her tutors. She considers them mentors now, but at the time, her tutors were just

more adults making her read and reinforcing her ideas that she was “less than.” Once she saw progress in her acquisition of phonics skills and comprehension strategies, Erin drove herself to practice more and strengthened her resolve to grasp the literacy skills she had previously missed.

Currently, Erin does not list reading as her favorite activity, but she understands the importance of reading well and continues to practice skills she learned in tutoring long ago. She wants her students to have positive experiences with literacy and vows to help them make connections to their reading through a variety of multimodal strategies. She wants to help them see reading is interwoven in every subject. It is important to be able to read and understand so that they can be successful in whatever academic situation they find themselves.