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DO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES VIEW THEIR SELF-CONCEPT  
MORE POSITIVELY IN A PRIVATE DAY SCHOOL FOR SPECIAL NEEDS  
VERSUS STUDENTS IN AN INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOM?

by  
Jennifer L. Wierski

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts in Learning  
Disabilities Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
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Approved by

Thesis Supervisor

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May 2, 2007

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## ABSTRACT

Jennifer L. Wierski

DO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES VIEW THEIR SELF-CONCEPT MORE POSITIVELY IN A PRIVATE DAY SCHOOL FOR SPECIAL NEEDS VERSUS STUDENTS IN AN INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOM?

Spring 2007

Dr. Stanley Urban

Master of Arts in Learning Disabilities

“An individual’s self-concept is the core of his personality. It affects every aspect of human behavior: the ability to learn, the capacity to grow and change. A strong positive self-image is the best possible preparation for success in life” (Brothers, date unknown). The following paper addressed the three competencies of self-concept in students with learning disabilities: academic, physical and social. The construct of self-concept was compared in students with learning disabilities in a self-contained versus inclusive classroom environment. The author supported the findings through research contained in academic and professional journals and quantitative data gathered from the completion of the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, by students in grades 2 through 8, ages 7-15. Forty-two participants with learning disabilities in both self-contained and inclusive classroom environments participated in the study. Analysis using ANOVA, t-tests and content analysis of all data quantified and described how students with learning disabilities view their self-concept in a private day school for special needs versus students in an inclusive public school classroom. The results of the study

showed that there were no significant differences between the participants in the study and the normative samples enrolled in inclusive public school classrooms.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### Background

The intent of special education law is to provide free and appropriate educational programming to all students who have disabilities. Through the adoption of IDEA and its subsequent revisions in 2004 and the renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, all students with special needs are provided with a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The model for LRE is similar to a pyramid, progressing from the least restrictive at the base containing the largest number of children to the most restrictive mode of service delivery at the apex, with the least number of children. As stated by Hallahan, Lloyd, Kauffman, Weiss, and Martinez (2005), the service delivery model begins with the least restrictive environment (i.e., the general classroom) and ends with the most restrictive environment, a residential school. When the decision is made regarding educational placement, many parents, educators and administrators strive to meet the needs of the individual student. The student who is learning disabled has a myriad of problems which affect how he is able to navigate through each day.

Richard Lavoie (2005), a nationally recognized authority in learning disabilities has stated, "A learning disability is not merely an academic problem- it is a life, language and learning problem that affects every moment of a child's day." Thus, it is imperative that when considering the most appropriate educational environment, the IEP team must

consider the total effect of a learning disability, particularly the social aspects which impact a child's everyday school life and self-concept. While the law mandates that children should be placed in the least restrictive environment, teachers, parents, administrators, learning consultants, school psychologists and social workers must take into account the individual child's needs.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether students who are learning disabled and attend a private school for special needs children perceive their self-concept positively when compared with norm referenced peers who are in an inclusive educational environment. Data from a norm referenced group of children presented in the Piers-Harris manual will be used as the comparison group placed in a less restrictive environment.

#### Research Questions

The data collected from this study will serve to answer the following research questions:

Question 1- Is there any significant difference between the total self-concept score across the three private day schools that are the subjects of this study?

Question 2- Do children with learning disabilities who are enrolled in a self-contained classroom in a special education day school express the same level of self-concept measured by the Piers-Harris 2 as a group of norm-referenced learning disabled children enrolled in a local public school program?

Question 3- How do self-contained learning environments support the self-concept (academic, physical, social) of students with learning disabilities?

## Need for the Study

As advocates, parents and educators should choose the placement that will provide the highest quality of instruction to meet all the needs of a student with learning disabilities. While the general classroom represents the least restrictive environment, many students with learning disabilities have benefited from the quality of self-contained classrooms or day schools which have staff and specialized programs to teach students with learning disabilities cope with their academic and social deficits.

Many of the studies relating to children with learning disabilities have focused on comparing the self-concepts of students with learning disabilities with their average achieving peers within the general classroom. This author views these findings, as comparing two non-comparable groups. One cannot compare the self-concept of average students with those who have learning problems. The academic, social and physical competencies of children vary greatly and this is especially true for the special needs population. Both samples of children are diverse in their strengths and weaknesses. It is more appropriate to compare children who have similar behavioral traits rather than those that are vastly different and who have diverse needs?

## Value of the Study

This study will provide insight into one aspect of the controversy related to separate day schools and the potential negative effects upon the needs of the identified student. Since few studies have compared students with learning disabilities in an inclusive environment versus a self-contained environment, the results may suggest the need for more research on this vital topic. Special education should be an individualized entity, with a continuum of alternative placements for those students who would not do

well in a general school population. Those individuals in special education who make placement decisions should consider the positive aspects of alternative placements along the continuum of services from a regular education class to a special class placement.

#### Research Strategy and Limitations

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, will be administered to students with learning disabilities that attend schools with contrasting service delivery models, i.e. separate day school versus public school resource room setting. The results hope to establish that classroom placement should be a priority when developing an IEP for a student with learning disabilities and auxiliary problems related to his identification.

#### Limitations

The following limitations restrict the generalizability of the results obtained from this study. Variables that may influence how a child perceives themselves include past experiences with average peers in and out of the classroom, teacher self-perception, parent self-perception, the degree of academic difficulties, gender, pre-pubescent maturation (physical and emotional), socio-economic status, race and popularity among peers.

Another limitation in this study is the cooperation of the local public school districts. Due to their reluctance to participate in the study, a comparison group could not be obtained in order to compare group data; therefore, the data from the private schools will be compared to that of the data of public school learning disabled students contained in standardization data accompanying the Piers-Harris 2 technical manual.

## Definitions

The following definitions have a specialized meaning within the context of this study.

**Least Restrictive Environment: (LRE)** “To the maximum extent possible appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are [1] educated with children who are not disabled, and [2] special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.” (IDEA-1975, [www.lrecoalition.org](http://www.lrecoalition.org))

**Specific Learning Disability: (SLD)** “...a category of special education services for students with one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.”

(Wilmshurst, L., & Brue, A.W., 2005)

**Inclusion:** “...a term often used to describe an LRE method of educating children in need of special education in a general education classroom in the school they would have attended if not disabled, with age appropriate peers, and with appropriate supports and services.” (Least Restrictive Environment Coalition)

**Self-Contained Special Education Classroom:** “A dozen or fewer students are enrolled, with a special education teacher and a paraprofessional staffing the classroom. The purpose of such a classroom is to provide an environment in which intensive instruction

can be offered to individuals and small groups.” (Hallahan,D. Lloyd, J.W., Kauffman, J.M., Weiss, M.P., and Martinez, E.A., 2005)

Special Day School: “...is designed to serve a special student clientele during the entire school day but not before or after school hours.” (Hallahan,D. Lloyd, J.W., Kauffman, J.M., Weiss, M.P., and Martinez, E.A., 2005)

Residential School: “Students live in dormitories or other residential units, at least during the school week if not seven days a week, and attend a special school on the campus.” (Hallahan,D. Lloyd, J.W., Kauffman, J.M., Weiss, M.P., and Martinez, E.A., 2005)

Self-Concept: “...a complex system of beliefs about ourselves. We develop our self-concepts based on judgments or evaluations of how we are doing compared with others or to our own so-called self...is formed from three major sources of information that we obtain from others: words, feelings, and behaviors.” (Wilmschurst, L., & Brue, A.W., 2005)

#### Overview of the Study

Chapter I contains a statement of purpose, three research questions to be answered in proceeding chapters, and the limitations which will restrict the inferences that can be drawn from this study. Chapter II comprises a review of literature broadly related to the self-concept of individuals with disabilities. Chapter III includes a plan for analyzing the data obtained and explains the data collection procedure. Chapter IV incorporates the findings from the study and answers the research questions posed in Chapter I. Chapter V contains conclusions drawn from the study and indicates important issues for future research consideration.

## Chapter II

### Review of Literature

#### Introduction

Education today is a very dynamic institution due to the many changes in the law as seen most recently with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-110) and its radical implications upon states, school districts, school administrators, teachers, parents and most importantly, children. Special education is not immune to this federal statute, as high-stakes testing, teacher accountability, research-based curriculum, federal funding, etc. impact upon the climate of the classroom, especially for those students with learning disabilities who “constitute the largest single category of children with disabilities” (Hocutt, 1996). According to Native-American education activist, Madeline Hunter (date unknown), “Expecting all children the same age to learn from the same materials is like expecting all children the same age to wear the same size clothing.” NCLB has its positive points as it strives to correct the injustices of an imperfect educational system which has failed many students, particularly those who are labeled as “at risk.” However, what the proponents of NCLB fail to see beyond their desks in Washington is that a “one size fits all” mentality goes directly against the precepts of special education law. The philosophical foundation undergirding IDEA and its subsequent federal legislation mandates is to take the individual student into account when creating an educational program.

In the following chapter the literature from pertinent academic journals will be reviewed. Special attention will be provided to concepts related to self-concept and the best classroom environment to meet the needs of children who have a learning disability. This chapter will consider the following subtopics which affect children with learning disabilities: the definition of self-concept, the political support and ramifications of special education law, full inclusion versus the self-contained classroom, budgetary constraints, high-stakes testing, and teacher perceptions of children with learning disabilities.

#### Definition of Self-Concept

Wilmshurst and Brue (2005) state that the construct of self-concept is a “complex system of beliefs about ourselves. We develop our self-concepts based on judgments or evaluations of how we are doing compared with others or to our own so-called ideal self” (page 160). They continue to state that “self-concept is formed from three major sources of information that we obtain from others: words, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 160). Childhood and the transition into adolescence are complex, evolving periods of time that every person experiences as a rite of passage. As pre-adolescents and adolescents, everyone has had shared experiences of embarrassing moments, awkward body changes, developing appropriate social skills and group acceptance. No one wants to be the “social outcast” or the last one picked for kickball. If these experiences are daunting for the average student, one can only imagine the obstacles the child with learning disabilities faces on a daily basis. The actions and subsequent reactions of children who are learning disabled are affected by what they hear others say and do; how they feel about others and how others feel about them and the actions they take or they see others



take. In the general education setting, students with learning exceptionalities are not the individuals who are the leaders or even the followers. They are the ones who are constantly trying to fit in and prove their worth to their peers. Wilmshurst and Brue state that students are “influenced by [their] perceptions of self-competence in three specific areas: cognitive (academic/school/career), physical (athletic/artistic), and social (peer groups) domains” (page 163). These areas are what drive a student’s self-concept and have many implications for the student with learning disabilities.

It is almost a cliché but nonetheless true that a parent’s job is in the home or the office, and the student’s job is in the classroom. Just like their parents, a student has a place to go everyday to do his job and is there for about the same amount of time each day. Parents have their boss and students have a teacher, to whom they report every day. Parents have paperwork they are responsible for and reports to write, as do students. Now, imagine if the job one had was awful, the environment unhealthy for the mind, coworkers brutally cut-throat and uncouth and the unbearable boss who does not like you. For most adults the option is to quit and find another job, what is the solution for the student with learning disabilities? Students who are learning disabled go into a “minefield” of the unknown everyday where they never know who is going to pick on them, who is going to make fun of them or which algebra problem they are going to be called upon for the answer. Certainly, the child who is exceptional cannot just quit going to school, or can they? According to Hocutt (1996), “students with learning disabilities have one of the highest dropout rates of any group of students with disabilities” (p. 88). This is a very sad testament to our educational system’s commitment toward our children with learning exceptionalities. If this is the best option our schools can give, then it is not

good enough. Our students who are learning disabled need to be valued and recognized for their contributions in the classroom. The cognitive realm of self-concept is one way “children can measure their success relative to their peers... and for children in special education, learning and achievement can be two areas that cause significant frustration and challenge” (Wilmshurst and Brue, 2005, p. 163). Furthermore, Wilmshurst and Brue (2005) continue to state that these children “begin to avoid academic work because of the frustration and their lack of success” (p.163). Children with learning disabilities are the silent majority. They may not arrive to school in a wheelchair and their disability is not physically evident, but students with learning disabilities are most often the ones who are “misunderstood by their teachers, parents, or peers as not achieving adequately because of their lack of effort” (Wilmshurst and Brue, 2005, p. 164.). This kind of attitude toward the student who is learning disabled is detrimental to their academic future.

The physical domain of self-concept is an important key for a student who is learning disabled because if they are not competent in the academic realm, they can certainly excel in athletics or the arts. In fact, it is recommended by Wilmshurst and Brue (2005) “that extracurricular activities are an important component in building self-esteem for children in special education” (p. 164). A student who is learning disabled who works on skills on the football field or in the recital hall can build confidence. This confidence will eventually transfer to the classroom and can mean the difference between surviving and dying among peers.

Finally, in the social domain, students seek out their peers to develop social skills which are crucial and will affect them for the rest of their lives. Wilmshurst and Brue (2005) mention that the social domain “...gains increasing importance as an influential

factor in the development of self-esteem, as the child matures” (p. 165). Wilmshurst and Brue (2005) continue to state the following:

“Children who lack social competence are said to have poor social skills.

Children who have special needs, especially those who find it difficult to learn because of a learning disability or attention problems, are likely to experience social difficulties. The reason for the overlap is that social learning requires much the same with problem solving in academic situations, they are also likely to encounter problem-solving difficulties in social situations” (p. 165).

Richard Lavoie, author, speaker and learning disabilities guru, said it best that in his long career working with students and parents who deal with learning disabilities that not once did a parent ever cry because their child was not successful in math or reading. These parents were in pain because of the hurt, isolation, peer problems, rejection and humiliation that their children experienced on a daily basis. Mr. Lavoie conveys the idea that children who have learning disabilities not only worry about academics but, more importantly, they live in fear of the “battleground” of life: lunchtime, recess, bus rides, dances, etc. They are the “chronic outsiders” who live in fear not of the 20% of their time spent on academic tasks, but the 80% of the social interactions that happen throughout a school day.

#### Political Support and Ramifications of Special Education Law

The Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) has been a vocal political body which has argued for the rights of those who have learning disabilities. Mention full inclusion to an activist for the LDA and be prepared to get a lecture on the history of special education and the development of IDEA and its subsequent revisions.

According to the LDA (1993), they “do not support full inclusion in the general classroom” (p. 594). As previously mentioned in the discussion of self-concept, the general classroom can be fraught with academic, physical and social obstacles the student with learning disabilities must hurdle in order to survive their day.

Justine Maloney, a legislative chairman for the LDA stated (1995) that “for some students with learning disabilities, total inclusion is a disastrous reality” (p. 25). The LDA (1993) argues that the decision of placement for students with learning disabilities should be “made on an individual basis and be considered only after the development of the IEP” (594). In order to argue for placement, any administrator, teacher, special educator, learning consultant, school psychologist or social worker knows firsthand the two most important parts of special education law which must be met: FAPE and LRE. These two aspects of special education law are also the most controversial because of the language that permeates the legislation. Every special education student is entitled to a free and appropriate education, FAPE; additionally, the student who is exceptional has the right to receive his or her education in the least restrictive environment, LRE.

There is some language in these two concepts which needs to be investigated further, as they impact upon the decision of which placement is the right environment for the child who is learning disabled. While the words “appropriate,” “least,” and “restrictive” have a denotative meaning in terms of the law, there is a connotative interpretation when the decision is made for placement, and it is a controversial one: Does the student stay in the general classroom or should the student be in an alternative environment (i.e., self-contained classroom or specialized day school)? Thus, this opens the argument for the next topic which is inclusion versus the self-contained classroom.

Both sides of the argument will be explored in more detail in proceeding chapters, as they both have implications for the child who is severely learning disabled.

#### Full Inclusion versus the Self-Contained Classroom

In the preceding sub-topic of special education law and its political implications, the argument continues with the continuum of placement options for students with problematic learning disabilities. Those who argue for full inclusion passionately postulate that all students in special education should be taught in the general classroom and nowhere else. Those who advocate for a variety of placement options are individuals who believe in the intended nature of the law. They feel that the purpose behind IDEA and special education legislation is for students who are exceptional learners to have the right to an individualized education in a placement that is conducive for their learning and growth as an individual. According to Strauss and Lehtinen (1947) and Fernald (1943), as stated in Harrington's article, "Full Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Review of the Evidence," "While children with learning disabilities had been served in special classes or special schools for decades, the Education For All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) of 1975, established federal guidelines for publicly funded programs for students with learning disabilities" (1997, p. 64). Anthony (1994) further stated in the same article that, "As public school programs grew after PL 94-142 passed, the number of students with learning disabilities increased and the methods of serving them changed" (p. 64). Zigmond, et al., (1995) continued to state in the article that, "Students with LD were initially served in self-contained, full-time special education classrooms, supplemented by special education services in part-time resource settings" (p. 64). In the article, Harrington (1997) explains that within ten years

of PL 94-142 passing, a shift began in how students with learning disabilities were being placed. That shift was from the self-contained classroom to the general classroom. In Harrington's article, Madeline Will (1986), who was the head of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, emphatically called for the end of this "dual" system of special education and general education, and he further states, [Will] argued that students with disabilities "should be educated in the general education classroom where they would be exposed to more rigorous academic content at less cost to the taxpayer" (p. 64).

Of course throughout the following decade leading up to the present, there have been a number of studies conducted that do not approve of Madeline Will's philosophy of full inclusion. Those who disagree with full inclusion believe that a "one size fits all" philosophy of special education does not work for a majority of students with severe learning disabilities or other exceptionalities. In the study that this author will conduct and in subsequent published studies, it will be proven that students with learning disabilities need options for their education and an environment which fits their needs and not the other way around. Additionally, in a study by Hocutt (1996) inclusion in the general classroom is not always the best option for the student with learning disabilities because "the effectiveness of special education is highly variable, reflecting great diversity" (p.86). Thus, what is considered an ideal placement for one student is not the best placement for another. As the cost of education dramatically increases across the country, the issue of placement brings with it budgetary concerns at the federal, state and local levels.

## Budgetary Constraints

In a country with a national debt in the trillions, it should be no surprise that money factors into the equation of special education and program implementation. In order to provide adequate services for a student with learning disabilities in the general classroom, money has to be spent with individuality in mind and not a *carte blanche* attitude of “what is good for the goose is good for the gander.” It is true that nationally recognized programs such as SRA reading and math, Open Court Phonics Program, the Wilson Reading Program and Handwriting Without Tears, for example, are excellent programs. These highly recommended remedial programs are research-based and are proven to work with populations that are exceptional. The problem is that budgets made at the federal, state and local levels allocate discretionary funds for new and innovative programs or even pilot programs in the hopes that there is a quick fix to educational deficiencies among the “at-risk” populations and the learning disabled. What begins as a good idea has become a cyclical disaster, as this author has experienced first-hand in the turn-over rate of program usage. One year a teacher starts out with a multi-million dollar reading program and it takes years for the teacher to become familiar with the program and its materials. Training is offered for teachers to show how to make the most of the program for all learners from the gifted population to the learning disabled population. After about four or five years, the program is scrapped for another, better reading program. Many teachers both general educators and special educators who may have found the program to work are left with having to learn a whole new program because the school district decides that new money means new programs. A well known piece of homespun knowledge applies here, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” yet, those who are

making the decisions (federal government legislators, state government agencies and local superintendents) are fixated on spending money on any educational or assessment program that is going to improve their image with tax-payers.

According to Fuchs and Fuchs (1995), “policy makers permit the distribution of more resources to poorer-performing groups to compensate for the fewer resources they received in the past—a factor that might account for current inequalities in performance” (p. 5). The mentality of policy makers is “let’s throw all this federal, state and local money into a program—that may or may not work—because groups like the learning disabled or “at-risk” populations have been disregarded in the past, let’s make it up to them.” According to Kauffman in the Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) article, he states that this approach “reflects the strategy of weighting resources in favor of children with disabilities to help them perform as much like non-disabled children as possible” (p.5). Again, the argument compares apples to oranges; children who are not classified learning disabled are different than their peers who are learning disabled. A program designed to help the majority is not necessarily going to be the best program for the minority. Bateman and Herr further explain that “under IDEA, school districts must provide and pay for an appropriate education for every child with a disability, regardless of cost” (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1995, p. 5). Chaikind, Danielson and Brauen’s article is in Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) and they expand the argument of cost by demonstrating how the money is directed to special education with the following example:

“In 1985-86, state-reported expenditures for special education and related services were just under \$16 billion—or \$18.6 billion in constant 1989-90 dollars. Of this sum, \$1.4 billion, \$10.8 billion, and \$6.4 billion came from the federal,



state, and local sources respectively. This works out to a national average per-pupil cost of approximately \$7,800 in 1989-90 dollars, or about 2.3 times the cost of a regular education” (p.5).

The logical question then is where is the money going? If special education is so expensive, what is it funding? Individualized education in the least restrictive environment can be executed in the student’s local district or the child can go to a private, special education school. If a child were to leave his local school district for a specialized program provided by a private school or another district, then the student’s local school district must pay for tuition and transportation. Federal funds which would have gone to the local district would follow the student to pay for his education elsewhere. Recently, individual districts are looking to mainstream all exceptional children into the general classroom in order to keep federal funds within the district. One must ask the important question: What will happen to general education and more importantly, special education students in the regular classroom? Will special needs students receive an appropriate education as stated in the law? By staying in the child’s home district, the child who is learning disabled does not get intensive, research-based academic instruction, specialized social programming, art or music therapy, adaptive physical education or other important programming/counseling to cope with their learning disability or to enhance their self-concept. Now, if the student’s learning disability is considered severe enough that a general education placement would be detrimental to their educational and emotional growth, then a special school or private educational facility is considered the best placement for the student. The local school district will have to pay for this child’s transportation and tuition. To send a child who is

learning disabled to a private school the tuition for one school in this study is \$32,000, which the state pays 40% (\$12,800) and 60% (\$19,200) of which the local district is responsible for paying. What does a student who is learning disabled get from a private school? They get lower class ratios (1:4), education from a certified special educator, assistance from several paraprofessionals in the classroom, auxiliary services (speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological and guidance programs), rigorous academic programs with an emphasis on remediation and not just accommodations, specialized programs to cope with executive functioning, social, organizational, behavior, and study skills. Children who go to private schools like the Vanguard School in Paoli, PA, Centreville School in Centreville, DE and The Pilot School in Wilmington, DE get attention to their cognitive, physical and social needs which can result in an improved self-concept.

Full-inclusion advocates would say that all of these students should return to their local districts, so that the funds which would pay for them to go to a private school will stay in the district. Obviously there is a significant dichotomy to how the funds are best spent. This is especially true when most critics of special education call the learning disabled “the phantom” disabled. These same opponents to special education funding for the learning disabled unequivocally state as reported in the Wall Street Journal and mentioned by Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) that “in lay terms this description [learning disabled]....could fit nearly anyone” (p.3). Obviously these critics have never observed a non-learning disabled student in the classroom versus the child who is learning disabled. To make such a blanket statement and to further fuel the argument like the National Review and Wood, respectively, Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) state in their article that “4 of

the 5 million public-school special education students have no mental or physical handicaps” and “should not be receiving special education services” (p.3). This simplistic thinking supports the conclusion that if a child has a visible disability, he or she should receive funding for their education and the child with no visible exceptionality should be ignored?

#### NCLB and Students with Learning Disabilities

Recently the NCLB Act mandated that students with exceptionalities must participate in high-stakes testing on the same playing field as their non-disabled peers without accommodations which they receive in the classroom as part of their IEP. The testing results dictate how much federal funding the school gets and in the end the scores of those who are identified as exceptional are either ignored completely or the district is punished by not making AYP because the exceptional population has pulled down their school's scores. Ultimately, funding is reduced; the district is punished and the idea of changing the programming to make a quick fix is recycled again.

#### High-Stakes Testing and Students with Learning Disabilities

Today's society has become a constant paper chase of testing and assessment data. Tests like the GRE are administered to determine how well an individual may do in graduate school. Professionals like doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, pilots, etc. must take tests to determine if they are able to apply the knowledge they learned to an applicable series of questions, which will ultimately establish if they are competent to perform surgery, to defend clients in a lawsuit, to write and execute lesson plans, to take a patient's blood pressure, or to fly an airplane. In the past, students in school were given tests at the end of a unit of study, on Friday's for their spelling lists, and in certain grades

a standardized achievement test to chart their academic growth (i.e., IOWA or CAT tests). Go into a classroom now and the times have changed when it comes to testing. Teachers are not only responsible for the daily assessments they give after a lesson, but they are responsible for benchmark tests in reading and math which are given sometimes 2 or 3 times a year. Additionally, due to NCLB teachers are responsible for their school's AYP through state and federal mandated testing. According to Mathis (2003), the goal behind NCLB was "that 95% of all student groups will reach their state test standards by 2014" (p. 683). What does this mean for the general and special educators? What are the effects on the students, especially those who are learning disabled?

Educators are prompted to follow a strict curriculum which does not allow them to be creative in order to meet the needs of all of their students. For instance, every third grade math teacher in a particular school district on a particular date must be on the same page and lesson. There is no time for the reteaching of certain skills because if a teacher does not teach the curriculum of the anticipated test items, then their students will be at a disadvantage and not score as high as their peers in other schools or classrooms. Students with learning disabilities have IEP's which explicitly outline certain goals and objectives in specific academic and content areas. One must remember that a student with learning exceptionalities is not the typical, average third grade student who can learn multi-step addition and subtraction in one lesson. These students need multiple opportunities to practice this type of skill in order to build upon what they have already learned and what they will learn in the next lesson. The validity of high stakes testing is controversial because as stated by Mathis (2003) "Most states claim that their testing systems are "aligned" with their state curriculum standards. Generally, this means that they are not

grossly incompatible. It does not mean that they are a faithful, accurate, and balanced representation of the state's standards for instruction" (p.683). Anyone who has taken a basic statistics class knows that testing itself is not perfect and is not a perfect measure of a student's day to day performance in the classroom. In fact, variables such as the testing environment, testing protocols, student anxiety levels, statistical error, student attentiveness, etc. affect how a student performs year to year on state high stakes testing. So, if the preceding statement is true for the general education population, what does this say for the special education population?

In a child's IEP, specific daily work modifications are made in order for the student to learn the same curriculum as their peers but with certain accommodations to ensure that the student will meet his benchmark goals. A student's IEP also includes testing modifications for classroom assessments and state tests. Again, the idea is to "level the playing field" for the student with exceptionalities. The reality is that there is no consistency among the states when it comes to testing modifications. Therefore, if a student who is learning disabled in one state takes their state mandated skills test with accommodations; they have an advantage over the child who is learning disabled in another state which does not allow for accommodations to be used because it will skew testing results. How is this fair to the exceptional child? This is especially true when the student is accustomed to certain modifications and then for one test they are taken away. If the educator has been using these modifications to assure success for the student in the classroom, then how is the test going to be a valid measure of the student's growth when no modifications are used?

Another facet to the issue of high-stakes testing is how teaching to the test is a factor in order to spare the school district from a fiscal repercussion. Teachers are counseled to coach skills that will be presented on state tests via informative (daily measures) and formative (cumulative chapter tests) assessments. Teachers are instructed to create questions that are similar to the ones students will be seeing on the state tests. Additionally, they instruct the students on how to explain their thinking with extended responses and written problem solving paragraphs. This can be a nightmare to the student with learning disabilities! If the student has written expression issues or expressive language problems, then having him explain his thinking is going to be problematic and a massive mental hurdle for him to overcome. If the student knows how to do the algorithmic part of the math problem, then this is the skill he should be assessed. Punishing the student for not being able to explain via writing the way he solved the problem is unfair. According to Berliner, Glass and Nichols (2005), "To date there is no consistent evidence that high-stakes testing works to increase achievement" (10). Additionally, they continue to state that "Part of the concern is that [high-stakes testing] cannot be determined definitively whether achievement gains on state assessments are real or whether they are the outcome of increased practice and teaching to the test" (p.10). If accountability is the key goal behind NCLB, then why is testing the only reliable measure used to glean information from our students? What about universal design of learning? Universal design utilizes all aspects of learning and learning styles to gather information on student progress and it can be used as a measurement tool for both the general and special education populations! Berliner, Glass and Nichols support the idea of alternative assessment by stating that the "National Assessment of Education

Progress or other measures of student learning are needed...[and] it appears that more empirical studies are needed to determine whether high-stakes testing has the intended effect of increasing student learning” (pgs.10-11).

Again, if there is pressure created in the general classroom and regular education students are feeling the stress of high-stakes testing and teacher perceptions of their academic competencies, then multiply their anxiety by 100 for the student who is learning disabled! When schools make AYP for the academic year, they are given more funding. This trickles down to the classroom where the teacher is able to keep his job and then to the student who gets a false sense of academic self-concept. The student learns to rely on what the scores infer about their academic self-competence rather than developing their own inner sense of worth. The inner self-concept of a student is very fragile because their successes have been scant and their failures overwhelmingly substantial. High-stakes testing only adds more pressure to the student who is learning disabled as he is constantly being told that if you do well on a test rather than on the everyday successes in the classroom, you are a first-rate student. It’s the same principle that if a student behaves well, then he gets an extrinsic reward, rather than the intrinsic incentive of knowing that good behavior is expected from a student in order to be an acceptable member of the classroom community.

Overall, in a clear and conclusive statement, both the Education Commission of the States and Linn, et.al., respectively state in Berliner, Glass and Nichols (2005) that the idea behind high-stakes testing is “The law [NCLB] is massive and forces states to allocate significant resources in the form of time, energy, and especially money towards its implementation—implementation that has been especially cumbersome”...”if not

potentially counterproductive to the goals of schooling” (p.6). As ingénue teachers leave the college campus with idealistic goals of educating students, they are stopped at the classroom door with the reality that test preparation is the most important part of their job. If they are not successful, then they will be reprimanded or at the very least fired for not doing their part to help make AYP for their school. Surely, this can be a factor as students with severe learning disabilities are being included in the general classroom. Thus, this movement can be frustrating and overwhelming for the inexperienced general educator who is under pressure to be sure that all students perform adequately on high-stakes testing. As pressure mounts, the general educator can be a detriment to the student with learning disabilities who only wants to please his teacher. If the student with learning disabilities fails to please his teacher, then the relationship between the teacher and exceptional student can become contentious and the classroom environment, a battlefield of wits.

#### Teacher Perceptions of Students with Learning Disabilities

Just as a child looks to his parents for constant encouragement, the general educator is an equal contributor to the self-concept of the student with learning disabilities. In fact, parents have more at stake and a personal goal to make sure that their child grows up to become a happy and mentally healthy adult with positive self-confidence. Teachers, on the other hand, are more objective in their view of their students. They are responsible for teaching the state curriculum, preparing their students for the next grade level, teaching basic expected, appropriate behaviors, etc. This is not to say that teachers do not have a caring and compassionate side, too. However, there is a population of general educators who do not feel that students with learning disabilities



should be in their classroom. In fact, Harrington (1997) states in his article that “General education teachers vary in their support for inclusion. Some general education teachers describe the inclusionary classroom as a form of baby-sitting that limits the general education teacher’s ability to teach the rest of the class” (p.67). These teachers are more concerned with how much more work they will have to do because a child with specific learning needs is now in their classroom. Furthermore, Vaughn, Elbaum and Boardman (2001) found that “Eight out of ten students with learning disabilities were rated by their teachers as exhibiting hyperactivity, distractibility, and poor adjustment characteristics that result in students not paying attention during a lesson and being off task” (p.50). Additionally, in the article by Vaughn, et.al. Haager and Vaughn, et.al. (2001) state that “In the classroom, students with learning disabilities who exhibit poor social skills...are not as well liked by their teachers” (p. 50). Such statements are the reality in most general classrooms for students who have learning disabilities. Students with exceptionalities are highly sensitive to their environment and are often fearful of how their teachers and peers perceive them. If a student with learning disabilities is educated in a nurturing environment by a teacher who uses various teaching styles and avails himself to the special educator for co-teaching, then most of the aforementioned effects of learning disabilities will diminish. According to Vaughn, et.al., (2001) the “regular education teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of students with learning disabilities are likely to affect students’ self-concept in that setting...Students who are well liked by the teacher are likely to be perceived more positively by other students and thus to view themselves more positively” (p. 56). Of course, this can be true if the general educator is accepting of another teacher in the classroom and the student who is learning disabled.

However, the reality is that few general educators do not want to be baby sitters; they want to teach without interruptions, problems or behavior issues. This puts the child who is learning disabled at a disadvantage because all he wants to do is learn and be accepted. This philosophy is a very simple one, yet a complex idea to undertake by some general educators. The feeling is that, "I did not go to college to be a special educator, I went for elementary education; therefore, I do not have the experience, materials or time to work with students who are exceptional learners and who have special needs. Let the special educator do his job." This is a sad reality for most students who are learning disabled, as they are the ones who are caught in the middle of a classroom tug-of-war.

Therefore, the concept of the self-contained classroom or private school may become a more feasible option for those students with severe learning exceptionalities. These placement options may be the "promised land" for those students who are not able to receive the attention, individual assistance or encouragement in the general classroom, but can be served better in a safer and more positive environment like a private school.

#### Summary

This chapter has defined the theory of self-concept as it relates to students with learning disabilities; explored the politics of special education and its federal mandates; scrutinized the budgetary conundrum at the federal, state and local levels of government; and investigated how general educators can affect the education and self-concept of students with learning disabilities. The issues presented in this chapter, ultimately, affect how students with learning disabilities view themselves. Various academic and research journals were used to present the current attitudes and ideas of educators, researchers,

parents, administrators and politicians who are vested in the issues of placement, education, funding and the law which gives special education its lifeblood.

## Chapter III

### Design of Study

#### Population and Method of Sample Selection

The participants of this study were students who attended private schools in the Philadelphia area. These private schools specifically accommodate students with learning disabilities and educational/developmental exceptionalities. The schools chosen for the study include: The Pilot School (School A) in Wilmington, Delaware, The Vanguard School (School B) in Paoli, Pennsylvania and Centreville School (School C) in Centreville, DE. There were 42 randomly selected students whose ages ranged from 7-15. These private schools do not use specific grade levels because students are grouped by ability and age levels. All students in the study were classified as SLD and any classification which had a co morbid disability of ADD or ADHD were receiving medication.

A summary of the classification of participants can be found in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Classifications and Number of Students at Each School Participating in the Study (N=56)

Classification	School		
	Pilot (N=29)	Centreville (N=17)	Vanguard (N=10)
SLD- Not Otherwise Specified	2	4	10
SLD-Comprehension	2		
SLD-Mathematics	4		
SLD-Reading	14	6	
SLD-Written Language	1	4	
SLD-Both Reading/Mathematics	4		
SLD-Both Reading/Written Language	2		
Multiple Handicapped (ADD, math, non-verbal LD)		1	
Expressive/Receptive Language Disorder		1	
Auditory Processing Disorder-LD		1	

The Pilot School in Wilmington, DE, has a total enrollment of 152 students. The Pilot School serves both public and private schools within the outlying region. Students come from as far as New Jersey and Pennsylvania in order to receive educational services for their learning disabilities. The teacher to student ratio is 1:5. The school emphasizes diagnostic teaching and has no standard curriculum. Instruction is individualized for each student and the ultimate goal is to build their self-esteem. Students receive specialized services in speech/language, guidance, reading, adaptive physical education

and music therapy. There is a lower, middle and upper school which provides educational services for ages 5-14. The Pilot School provides extended year coverage of services so that students retain the maximum amount of curriculum without many holiday or vacation interruptions. The overall ethnic profile of the school is as follows: Caucasian students-138, African-American students-10, Hispanic students-2, Asian students-1 and other students-1. Students were individually administered the Piers-Harris-2 at the Pilot School.

The Vanguard School which is located in Paoli, PA services students in an eight county radius which includes 70 school districts. Students who attend The Vanguard School range in ages 4-21 with a staff ratio of 4:1. There are typically between 4 to 10 students in a classroom under the guidance of highly trained staff. The school services students with learning disabilities, language delays, seizure disorders, sensory difficulties, ADD/ADHD, neurological impairments, serious emotional disturbances and those students who are in the autism spectrum. The school offers a variety of programs in order to develop a student's stronger attributes. The school is divided into a primary program, the lower school, the middle school and the high school. The curriculum is altered for each child so as to meet their individual needs, especially in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics. Additionally, specialized services such as behavior support, guidance, OT, PT, psychology, S/L and an extended school year are offered to assist students in creating a positive school environment.

Students at the Vanguard School were administered the P-H2 in small group settings, not exceeding three students at a time. This is in contrast to the Pilot School where students were administered the P-H 2 individually.

The Centreville School is located in Centreville, DE and has total enrollment of 142 students. The school serves students from the local public and private schools, but also serves students as far as Cecil County, MD. The Centreville School serves students who are ages 4-14 with a staff ratio of 1:5. The average number of students is 8-12 in a classroom. The school curriculum focuses on a multi-sensory approach with a concentration on basic skills such as reading, language arts and mathematics. Classes designed to teach social and organizational skills are offered to assist students with the non-academic issues students with learning disabilities face. Extra-curricular activities such as sports and clubs are offered for students and other programs like parent education seminars, teacher professional development, community outreach and tutoring services help parents, teachers and students foster a working and supportive relationship. The P-H 2 was administered in a whole group setting with all twelve students present for the study.

#### Instrumentation

The Piers-Harris 2 questionnaire was chosen by this author due to its simplicity in administration, validity, norm-referenced data and ease in scoring. Score interpretation is quite straightforward in determining an individual's self-concept, especially, in specific categories.

According to Piers and Herzberg (2002), the Piers Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, second edition is "a 60-item self-report questionnaire subtitled *The Way I Feel About Myself*" (p.3). The scale can be administered to children who are 7-18 years of age. The student should have a second grade reading level. The questionnaire items ask students how they feel about themselves and the student circles whether the statement

applies to them or not. The questionnaire measures a student's total self-concept and six self-concept domains: behavioral adjustment, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, freedom from anxiety, popularity and happiness and satisfaction. The Piers-Harris 2 takes between 10 to 15 minutes to administer to a student. The test can be given either individually or within a group setting.

The re-standardization of the Piers-Harris, second edition was based upon a sample of 1,387 students, aged 7 to 18 years of age. According to Piers and Herzberg (2002) "The sample closely approximates the ethnic composition of the U.S. population" (U.S. Census, 2001) (p.3). The re-standardization of the Piers-Harris has three benefits: 1.) a more ethnically diverse standardization population; 2.) the reduction test items from 80 to 60 and 3.) a more advanced, technical administrative and scoring program.

The validity of the test can be measured by the Inconsistent Responding index raw score and the Response Bias index raw score. Therefore, the examiner can ascertain scoring the test whether or not a student is being consistent with their answers and if they are being biased in answering questions by circling "yes" each time. The P-H 2 is a suitable and quick way of gathering information about how a student feels about himself. It can be administered by a teacher or para professional, but should be interpreted by a trained psychological professional.

#### Measures

As the Piers-Harris 2 measures the self-concept of an individual, certain ranges are given for score interpretation. T-scores and percentile ranges are given to illustrate an individual's general self-concept and to determine whether a student scores within a normal range as determined by the standardization sample. According to Piers and



Herzberg (2002), “T-scores are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10, the *normal* range on the Piers-Harris 2 Profile Sheet is considered to be between 40T and 60T” (p.9). Thus, these scores can be described as ranging between “low average” to “very high” for the Total Scale and “low average” to above average” for the Domain Scales. These scores can be measured against the typical child from the standardization sample.

### Sample Selection

The author contacted each of the following schools: The Pilot School in Wilmington, DE, Centreville School in Centreville, DE and The Vanguard School in Paoli, PA in order to invite them to participate in the Piers-Harris 2 study for the graduate research project. The school was given a copy of the parent letter and parent permission slip. The school sent the packets home either via mail or the student. The school collected all returned paperwork and a time was scheduled for administration of the questionnaire. Upon administering the Piers-Harris 2, the examiner was accompanied by the school psychologist (The Pilot School), the head of the upper school (Centreville School) and the principal of the lower school (The Vanguard School). The test administered developed a rapport with the students, explained why the test was being given and presented the direction for the test. In some instances, certain students had to have the test read to them due to their inability to accurately read and comprehend the statements. The entire questionnaire period took approximately ten minutes. Four out of ten students at the Vanguard School needed the test to be read to them; no students at The Centreville School needed the test read to them and fifteen out of twenty students needed the test read to them.

The questionnaires were collected and scored by the author of this project. Inconsistent responses, response bias and total scores were calculated for each student. Subsequent raw scores were found for the six-domain scales, as well. These raw scores were then converted into T-scores and percentile ranks. Each T-score and percentile rank was given a descriptive label for simple identification of a student's general self-concept and in the specific domain scales. These descriptive labels are as follows: very high (VH), high (H), average (A), low-average (LA), above average (AA), high average (HA), average (A), low-average (LA), low (L) and very low (VL). These descriptive labels and their correlating scores have been presented under the "Measures" section of this chapter.

#### Organization of Materials/Record Keeping

The professionals at each school who were contacted for their contribution to this thesis project were responsible for the following: selecting the group of students for test participation; arranging a schedule for student participation in the study; sending out the parent letters and permission slips; collecting these documents upon their return to school and administering the Piers-Harris to students who were absent on the day of the author's presence for test administration.

Upon administering the Piers-Harris, the author of the thesis project assigned a number for each girl participant and a letter for each boy participant. The thesis author scored each questionnaire as outlined in the test manual. After scoring each questionnaire, the data from each of the three participating schools was collected and placed in charts in order to organize the participants' answers according to gender, age and racial ethnicity. Each sub-group of gender, age and racial ethnicity was given a

certain percentage based upon the total number of participants (n=). See the appendix for a tabular representation of the data.

Each school group was divided into two groups for gender and each number and letter corresponded with each participant in the study. Their subsequent scores for response bias (RES), total (TOT), behavior adjustment (BEH), intellectual/school (INT), physical appearance/attributes (PHY), freedom from anxiety (FRE), popularity (POP) and happiness/satisfaction (HAP) were given with a descriptive label for score depiction. Additionally, percentages for descriptive labeling of overall self-concept and the six domain scales are presented for gender. Finally, averages were given for the descriptive labeling of student responses by age and ethnicity, as well.

#### Research Design and Analysis of Data

Demographic data of the participants from the Piers-Harris 2 study will be presented in descriptive charts contained in the appendices.

In order to answer Research Question 1, an independent sample t test will be computed comparing the mean total self-concept score for each school against the mean total self-concept score for the norm referenced sample of LD children enrolled in general and resource classrooms within a public school (Piers-Harris, 2002).

Research Question 2 will be answered by computing a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine if the mean of the total self-concept score varies across the three private schools that were the subjects of the study.

Both Research Question 1 and 2 will be answered by using the SPSS Version 10.0 (SPSS, 1999 ), a statistical computer software program, to calculate the independent samples to test (p 117) and ANOVA (p 126).

Finally, Research Question 3 will be answered by a content analysis of program descriptions, interviews with school personnel and observations completed by the researcher. Results will be reported in both narrative and tabular form.

## Chapter IV

### Analysis and Interpretation of Data

#### Introduction

The results of the study are presented in a format which attempts to answer the research questions presented in Chapter 1. Discussions of the findings are contained in Chapter 5.

#### Results

Three research questions are answered in this study. The questions are discussed sequentially and the data pertaining to these questions are presented in the form of discussion and tables.

Question 1- Is there any significant difference between the total self-concept score across the three private day schools that are the subjects of this study?

In order to determine if the mean total self-concept score differed across the participating schools an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was calculated using the SPSS Version 10.0 statistical computer software program (SPSS, 1999). Table 4.1 shows the descriptive statistics for data gathered at the three schools. Total self-concept scores ranged from a mean of 51 to 46.60 with the distribution of scores also reported.

Table 4.1

Descriptive Statistics of Private Day Schools Included in the Study

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Centreville School	12	26.00	69.00	51.0000	11.5680
The Pilot School	20	38.00	72.00	53.7500	8.8370
The Vanguard School	10	32.00	66.00	46.6000	9.6862

An inspection of Table 4.2 shows that the mean total self-concept score expressed by students across the schools that participated in this study did not differ from each other. The results of the ANOVA (SPSS, 1999) show the total self-concept score expressed by students enrolled in public school which was used to test the hypothesis of equality of means across the three schools is shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.2

Mean Total Self-Concept

School	N	M	SD	t
Centreville School	12	51	11.6	.30*
The Pilot School	20	53.8	8.8	.89*
Vanguard School	10	46.60	9.6	1.76 *

\*Not significantly different from Test Value of 52 (normative sample TOT self-concept score) at the .05 level of probability.

Question 2- Do children with learning disabilities who are enrolled in a self-contained classroom in a special education day school express the same level of self-concept measured by the Piers-Harris 2 as a group of norm-referenced learning disabled children enrolled in a local public school program? The P-H2 manual indicates that the Total Self-Concept Score of children in public school is 52 which falls within the parameters of 40-59. The total self-concept score measured the Centreville School, The Pilot School and The Vanguard School were shown to be within the average range. This means that the students who participated in the study have a total self-concept similar to their counterparts in the normative sample from the P-H2, who are in an inclusion or general classroom in a public school. Interestingly, the study participants from the Vanguard School were slightly under the average in total self-concept. A possible variable may be that the students at the Vanguard School have more severe learning disabilities with co-morbid issues not otherwise specified.

The results of the ANOVA are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Summary of One Way ANOVA Across Total Self-Concept Score for Each of 3 Schools

Participating				
<i>School</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>dF</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>
Between Groups	341.97	2	170.99	.186*
Within Groups	3800.15	39	97.44	
Total	4,142.12	41		

\*Not significantly different at the .05 level of probability

Question 3- How do self-contained learning environments support the self-concept (academic, physical, social) of students with learning disabilities?

Authorities in the field of learning disabilities such as Rick Lavoie and the Learning Disabilities Association of America would most likely be in agreement that not all students with learning disabilities need to be in a private day school to address all of their academic and social needs. However, students who have severe learning disabilities need a school environment which will aid in their growth and development as a whole individual. Their needs, especially their social self-concept cannot be addressed in a public school setting with the fidelity and consistency which are required for skill acquisition. As Rick Lavoie (2005) explains, "Parents and professional have many misconceptions about children with learning problems. Primary among these is a lack of understanding of the pervasive nature of learning disabilities." Since SLD's are a cluster of neurological disorders, the problem will never go away. Without the proper interventions, students with learning disabilities are at the mercy of their peers, teachers, parents, community, etc. Private schools like Centreville School, The Pilot School and The Vanguard School provide their students with comprehensive programming which addresses all of their academic, social and physical needs. An in depth review of these schools will be provided below.

The Centreville School located in Centreville, DE provides both academic and social development for their diverse population of students with learning disabilities, ages 4 through 14 years of age. According to the information provided in their programming booklet, the "Centreville School provides a hands-on, multisensory curriculum for its students firmly rooted in the basics of reading, language arts and math" (1996). The



school provides a curriculum and teaching approach which is rooted in research-based information. Additionally, the school provides a small class sizes (8 to 12 students with a staff ratio of 1:5) as its current student population is 142 students. Support services are provided with two reading specialists, three speech/language therapists, three occupational therapists and one psychologist. Centreville provides a regular school day (8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.) an extended school day (7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.) and various after school clubs (3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.). Additionally, other programs are provided for students and parents, for example, the summer program, parent education classes, teacher education programs, community outreach services and tutoring services. Also, out of the 50 faculty and staff members, 60% have advanced degrees in their fields of expertise.

Finally, Centreville provides academic and social programming which includes programs like, Saxon Mathematics, Visualizing and Verbalizing, Seeing Stars, and Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing. These academic programs focus on small group and guided class practice, which have been determined to have great effect sizes in research. The “Social Intelligence Program” which addresses the social issues surrounding learning disabilities has specific goals for its upper and lower/middle levels of students. Through the use of Dr. Mel Levine’s curriculum, “The Mind That’s Mine,” issues such as learning and the brain, conflict resolution, friendships, social skills, teasing and bullying, feelings, self-esteem, peer pressure and transitions are addressed (1996). Dr. Len Dostillio, school psychologist, works with the students by utilizing various teaching modalities which include role-plays, videos, classroom discussion, various activities and games (1996). Also according to the program “specific classroom issues are used as needed to address the needs of each class. Some examples of this are lessons on loss, divorce, bullying,

personal space, sharing, following directions and anxiety” (1996). Thus, the whole child is examined and the focus is not solely on the academic issues of the learning disability and the school truly lives up to its mission statement, “We measure our success by our student’s success” (1996).

The Pilot School in Wilmington, DE, is another private day school for learning disabilities whose core philosophy is “to uncover the unique educational challenges of each student” (no date given). The school services about 150 students (ages 5 through 14 years) each academic year with a staff of 35. The Pilot School provides its students with a yearlong academic program so that there are no gaps in learning due to extended holidays. The physical facilities of the school include a gymnasium, an auditorium, an indoor swimming pool, a library, an art studio, a music room, a science lab and a computer room. The school’s teaching staff has “impressive qualifications” and according to its programming booklet, “Many have completed extensive post-graduate work. All participate in frequent in-service training and continuing education seminars” (nd).

The philosophy of the school is to provide a well-rounded education by instructing its students in small groups by teaching them basic skills. The auxiliary staff includes SL therapists, a psychologist, reading specialists, a music therapist and a science teacher provide additional, vital support services for students. Another important and valuable program The Pilot School promotes is its physical education program. Adaptive physical education and life sports experiences are used to advance the motor development of the students. Additionally, the PE program fosters an atmosphere of “teamwork and perseverance in a spirit of healthy, cooperative competition” (nd). The Pilot School does

not provide a standard curriculum; rather programs are developed for the individual student via diagnostic teaching. The ratio of teacher to student is 1:5 allows for teachers to constantly evaluate their student's daily academic performance and adjust their teaching methods and instruction delivery accordingly. The school uses a language-based curriculum which focuses on reading, writing, spelling, listening and speaking skills. Math, science, social studies, art, music therapy, library skills and health are also provided for students. According to the school, "Training in fundamentals such as speech, expressive language, gross and fine motor skills, as well as visual and auditory perception, and memory skills is also provided for children having those needs" (nd). Through the "building of strengths" and "instilling the love of learning," The Pilot School, offers its students a foundation to build upon their skills and the encouragement to build up their self-esteem in academic and social contexts.

The Vanguard School in Paoli, PA is a school and community of teachers, parents, therapists, administrators and students where there is a "commitment to the individual abilities and rights of each student. It's a place where every child is valued for his/her uniqueness, and success is measured by confidence and self-sufficiency" (2006). The Vanguard school offers a student to teacher ratio of 3:1 with individualized programming for students. The students range in ages 4 through 21 years with varying classifications of exceptionalities ranging from Neurological Impairment to Autism Spectrum Disorders. Learning disabilities are secondary to the primary classification of students.

Vanguard offers primary programs for students who fall under the Autistic Spectrum Disorders. The lower, middle and high schools place importance on

academics, as well as social/life skills. Therapy services are provided by SLP's, OT's, PT's and staff concentrating on adapted PE and psychological/counseling services. Nursing services are also available for students who need specific medical therapies. Besides academics, an emphasis is placed on the social skills development of students. Through the P.A.C. E. program (program of adventure-based counseling experiences) students are challenged via wilderness activities to use team work and communication skills to successfully complete the course. Additionally, summer programs (extended school year) and specialty camps are provided for students to enhance academic and various other skills through arts/crafts, field trips, etc.

The staff of Vanguard is highly qualified and considered to be experts in their individual fields of instruction. Teachers and staff have advanced degrees and participate in staff development on a frequent basis. Additionally, because of Vanguard's experienced staff and remarkable programming, graduates of the program have "significantly higher employment rates than the national average for adults with disabilities" (2006). Opportunities to learn and grow as students and individuals makes The Vanguard School a place where students can be individually challenged yet receive services for their areas of need.

When looking at the qualitative data provided from the aforementioned schools, it is clear that the services provided by these institutions are invaluable to students who live with severe learning disabilities. While public schools do provide guidance services, inclusive classrooms, self-contained classrooms, in-class support, etc., the amount of staff to provide these services with average classroom ratios of 1:20 is an insurmountable feat. The student with severe learning disabilities does not get the individualized instruction

and guidance needed with the fidelity which is provided by private schools like Centreville, The Pilot School and The Vanguard School. Perhaps students whose needs are not as immediate can survive in a public school setting, but they are competing with students who do not have learning disabilities. As mentioned previously, students with learning disabilities face many daily challenges, not just academic, but social, as well. Public schools are not equipped to handle the problems of the severely learning disabled when they are dealing with students with other problems, as well. Again, parents and students need options when attempting to find the best learning environment. As stated by the federal law all students are guaranteed FAPE in the LRE and special education seeks to provide students with individualized programming. Where that programming takes place is left to the parents and child study team to decide; however, parents need to know that their options are not always the local public school and that they need to research their options in order to advocate the best possible education placement for their individual child. Is that not what a continuum placement of options is for in the law?

#### Summary

When looking at all of the data presented in this chapter, the total self-concept of students with learning disabilities in a private day school are the same and do not vary significantly from a quantitative standpoint when compared to the normative sample of the P-H2. After analyzing the qualitative data in the forms of booklets and pamphlets from the three participating schools, each school offers specific programming to meet the diverse needs of their student populations. Each school provides social programming and interventions for students who are learning disabled. Educational programming with research-based foundations and strategies are used to teach students on an individual,

small group and whole class basis. Teachers are highly qualified individuals in their fields of expertise and supplemental programming is provided for students to work on all aspects of the effects of their specific learning disabilities. As previously stated, learning disabilities are not exclusive to the classroom, but affect a student's life in all realms.

Rick Lavoie (2006) relates a superb analogy:

“Every major metropolitan area has a discount furniture outlet whose advertising trumpets the fact that it sells, “living room sets” that include a couch, loveseat, recliner, two end tables, two lamps, and a coffee table. These stores, as a matter of policy, will not see you a single piece of furniture—you’ve got to buy the entire set! So it is with a child’s learning disorder. You must come to accept the fact that the learning problems will likely impact all areas of the child’s development—academic, social, and emotional. It is unfair to accept some of these difficulties while refusing to tolerate others.”

One has to remember that whether the student with learning disabilities is in a public or private school setting, it is crucial to treat the whole child and not just the academic problems he/she presents.

## Chapter V

### Summary, Findings and Discussions

#### Summary

This thesis paper addressed the question: Do students with learning disabilities view their self-concept more positively in a private day school for special needs versus students in an inclusive public school classroom? Although they have similar social, academic and physical competencies, the author's hypothesis was that students with learning disabilities in a private day school for special needs viewed themselves with a better self-concept as opposed to their counterparts in a public school inclusive classroom.

In addition to defining self-concept, this paper investigated how students with learning disabilities manage the individual competencies in either a private day school versus an inclusive public school classroom environment. The author supported these qualitative findings through research of academic and professional journals and books and the quantitative data gleaned from the completion of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, by students in grades 2 through 8, ages 7-15, 29 participants in all, with learning disabilities in both self-contained and inclusive classroom environments. The results of the study showed that there were no significant statistical differences between the participants of the study and those of the normative samples from

the P-H2. ANOVA, t-tests and content analysis of all data quantified and described how students with learning disabilities view their self-concept in a private day school for special needs versus students in an inclusive public school classroom.

### Findings

The author of this thesis found that there were no significant statistical differences between the normative group of learning disabled students in the general and inclusion classrooms versus the student participants of the study who attend private day schools for children with learning disabilities. The average TOT self-confidence among all three schools was 50, which is the average mean TOT score one can achieve on the P-H2. When one compares these findings with those of the normative samples, the same results were found to be the case in both studies.

### Discussions

As with any study, more research is needed to investigate how students with learning disabilities perceive their self-concept in any school environment. It was this author's observations as both a teacher and a graduate student that students with learning disabilities have more than just academic problems. Their world is fraught with social hurdles which can prove to be detrimental to their self-concept. This thesis paper presented three research questions which sought to prove that students with learning disabilities, particularly those with severe learning disabilities, have a better self-concept in a private day school versus a public school inclusion classroom. After analyzing the results of the P-H2 and comparing them with the normative data of the PH-2, the conclusion was that those students in the private day school quantitatively had the same mean total self-concept. As more research is continued on this vital topic, researchers



may find that students with severe learning disabilities in the public school setting may be overwhelmed with so many other issues directly related to their disability that they are having problems coping in the general education classroom or public school environment. Furthermore, these students are not consistently receiving the vital counseling, therapies and interventions or innovative educational programming needed to be successful in a regular education classroom.

According to the law, LRE is always considered first when writing an IEP. However, child study team members do not always think of private day schools in the continuum of placement. The team says the child should be placed either in the general education classroom, a self-contained classroom or receive in-class support from the special educator. Parents, as the best advocates for their child, should research their options carefully and consider their child's strengths and needs and whether the current educational placement is the best one to meet their child's individual and diverse needs. Students with severe learning disabilities need academic, social and emotional interventions in order to help them become more successful individuals and so that their disability does not interfere with their future academic, employment and life endeavors.

At this time, America is in the midst of an educational crisis in the public school system, especially for those student receiving special education services. Critics often say that our public school system is terrible when compared to other countries. If public schools want to keep their classified students within the district, then they must prioritize their funding and hiring practices so that children with learning disabilities are receiving the programming they deserve. Both general and special educators need to look at students with learning disabilities as an opportunity to provide excellent educational

opportunities for all students. Additionally, they need to be more flexible and willing to work together to provide this type of programming. Teachers and staff need to be willing to go beyond their bachelor's or master's degrees to become leaders in their fields, so that they learn the newest and best educational practices in education. However, money is an issue and most districts must provide a way for their faculty to be able to obtain this goal through reimbursement, credits toward certification or an increase in salary. Parents must realize that if they want the best possible education for their children, then they need to advocate for funding or higher taxes to either acquire or retain the staff needed to make their schools improve, particularly with NCLB pushing for AYP among all students, not just in the general education categories.

Additionally, there needs to be supplemental programs under the tutelage of therapists (behavior specialists, school psychologists, guidance counselors, OT's, PT's, SLP's, and educational specialists) to provide adequate and additional programming needed for students with learning disabilities. Also other populations of classified students will benefit from these programs, as well. Again, funding and scheduling is a problem in the public school system and these problems must be dealt with and resolved so that the students are not the individuals who suffer the consequences of politics and red tape.

The proposed changes as mentioned above are those which are found in the three private schools which are profiled in this thesis project. The private day schools all provide their students with programming such as, research-based educational curriculum, social intervention programs, therapeutic art/music/adaptive PE classes, counseling on small group and individual basis, fundamental life and academic strategies, SLP and OT

curriculum and extended school days. If public schools are to compete with the benefits of sending students with learning disabilities to private day schools, then they must reevaluate the kinds of programs they can offer their students and be willing to make more changes which will benefit their diverse populations and stop the crisis in our public school system.

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## Appendix A

### Piers-Harris II Study Results

School: The Pilot School (A)

N=Participants-20

	#	%
<b>Boys</b>	9	45%
<b>Girls</b>	11	55%
<b>Race</b>		
<b>Caucasian</b>	16	80%
<b>African-American</b>	2	10%
<b>Hispanic</b>	1	5%
<b>Other (Brazilian)</b>	1	5%
<b>Age</b>		
<b>Age: 7</b>	1	5%
<b>Age: 8</b>	3	15%
<b>Age: 9</b>	5	25%
<b>Age: 10</b>	3	15%
<b>Age: 11</b>	3	15%
<b>Age: 12</b>	0	0%
<b>Age: 13</b>	5	5%
<b>Age: 14</b>	0	0%

	RES	TOT	BEH	INT	PHY	FRE	POP	HAP
<b>Girls</b>								
<b>1</b>	38-L	48-L	62-AA	44-LA	42-LA	46-A	50-A	51-A
<b>2</b>	46-A	58-HA	62-AA	59-AA	52-AA	54-A	60-AA	51-A
<b>3</b>	38-L	63-H	62-AA	59-AA	48-A	65-AA	60-AA	51-A
<b>4</b>	46-A	38-L	54-A	34-L	29-VL	46-A	33-L	47-A
<b>5</b>	61-H	49-A	46-A	59-AA	52-A	46-A	44-LA	51-A
<b>6</b>	60-H	51-A	54-A	59-AA	52-A	46-A	47-A	59-AA
<b>7</b>	48-A	72-VH	62-AA	65-AA	65-AA	65-AA	60-AA	59-AA
<b>8</b>	48-A	49-A	62-AA	54-A	42-LA	48-A	41-LA	51-A
<b>9</b>	48-A	60-H	62-AA	51-A	65-AA	54-A	60-AA	59-AA
<b>10</b>	50-A	50-A	62-AA	48-A	52-A	46-A	54-A	51-A
<b>11</b>	58-HA	50-A	46-A	51-A	52-A	54-A	44-LA	59-AA
<b>Boys</b>								
<b>A</b>	72-VH	40-LA	35-L	46-A	58-AA	43-LA	41-LA	47-A
<b>B</b>	54-A	53-A	62-AA	48-A	58-AA	51-A	47-A	59-AA
<b>C</b>	43-LA	69-H	62-AA	65-AA	58-AA	65-AA	54-A	59-AA
<b>D</b>	50-A	52-A	54-A	48-A	52-A	51-A	60-AA	51-A
<b>E</b>	43-LA	60-H	49-A	51-A	65-AA	58-AA	60-AA	59-AA
<b>F</b>	68-H	47-A	49-A	51-A	52-A	39-L	44-LA	47-A
<b>G</b>	43-LA	56-HA	54-A	51-A	52-A	65-AA	54-A	51-A
<b>H</b>	46-A	47-A	46-A	48-A	42-LA	46-A	50-A	37-L
<b>I</b>	43-LA	63-H	54-A	59-AA	52-A	65-AA	60-AA	59-AA

RES=response bias TOT= total BEH=behavior adjustment INT=intellectual/school PHY= physical appearance/attributes FRE= freedom from anxiety POP= popularity HAP=happiness/satisfaction  
 VH=very high H=high A=average LA=low average  
 AA=above average HA=high average A=average LA=low average L=low VL=very low

## Appendix B

### Piers-Harris II Study Results

School: The Vanguard School (B)

N=Participants-10

	#	%
<b>Boys</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Girls</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Caucasian</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>90%</b>
<b>African-American</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Age: 10</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Age: 11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Age: 12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Age: 13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>30%</b>

	RES	TOT	BEH	INT	PHY	FRE	POP	HAP
<b>Girls</b>								
<b>1</b>	64-H	38-L	41-LA	38-L	40-LA	39-L	31-L	51-A
<b>2</b>	61-H	55-A	49-A	54-A	65-AA	46-A	54-A	51-A
<b>3</b>	50-A	50-A	62-AA	54-A	45-A	46-A	39-L	47-A
<b>4</b>	60-H	51-A	39-L	51-A	58-AA	58-AA	54-A	59-AA
<b>Boys</b>								
<b>A</b>	46-A	66-H	54-A	65-AA	65-AA	65-AA	60-AA	51-A
<b>B</b>	48-A	41-LA	54-A	42-LA	35-L	51-A	33-L	47-A
<b>C</b>	40-LA	32-L	33-L	34-L	38-L	39-L	41-LA	27-VL
<b>D</b>	40-LA	48-A	46-A	51-A	48-A	54-A	50-A	40-LA
<b>E</b>	58-HA	45-A	54-A	42-LA	45-A	37-L	54-A	40-LA
<b>F</b>	54-A	40-LA	41-LA	48-A	40-LA	46-A	33-L	47-A

RES=response bias TOT= total BEH=behavior adjustment INT=intellectual/school PHY= physical appearance/attributes FRE= freedom from anxiety POP= popularity HAP=happiness/satisfaction  
 VH=very high H=high A=average LA=low average  
 AA=above average HA=high average A=average LA=low average L=low VL=very low



## Appendix C

### Piers-Harris II Study Results

School: Centreville School (C)

N=Participants-12

	#	%
Boys	8	66.6%
Girls	4	33.3%
<b>Race</b>		
Caucasian	12	100%
African-American	0	0%
Hispanic	0	0%
Other	0	0%
<b>Age</b>		
Age: 11	4	33.3%
Age: 12	3	25%
Age: 13	2	16.6%
Age: 14	2	16.6%
Age: 15	1	8.3%

	RES	TOT	BEH	INT	PHY	FRE	POP	HAP
<b>Girls</b>								
1	38-L	53-A	62-AA	48-A	52-A	54-A	60-AA	51-A
2	50-A	45-A	54-A	48-A	40-LA	41-LA	47-A	43-LA
3	56-HA	43-LA	54-A	54-A	40-LA	35-L	47-A	35-L
4	61-H	44-LA	43-LA	40-LA	45-A	37-L	50-A	47-A
<b>Boys</b>								
A	54-A	26-VL	35-L	32-L	23-VL	31-L	29-VL	30-L
B	38-L	63-H	62-AA	59-AA	52-A	65-AA	54-A	59-AA
C	35-L	61-H	49-A	54-A	58-AA	65-AA	60-AA	51-A
D	29-VL	43-LA	49-A	40-LA	35-L	51-A	50-A	40-LA
E	50-A	58HA	62-AA	48-A	65-AA	54-A	60-AA	51-A
F	43-LA	53-A	49-A	51-A	52-A	54-A	50-A	51-A
G	48-A	69-H	54-A	65-AA	65-AA	65-AA	60-A	59-AA
H	48-A	53-A	54-A	54-A	48-A	51-A	54-A	59-AA

RES=response bias TOT= total BEH=behavior adjustment INT=intellectual/school PHY= physical appearance/attributes FRE= freedom from anxiety POP= popularity HAP=happiness/satisfaction  
 VH=very high H=high A=average LA=low average  
 AA=above average HA=high average A=average LA=low average L=low  
 VL=very low

## APPENDIX D

### Sample Letter to Participating School

October 2, 2006

Ms. Kathleen Craven  
Director  
The Pilot School, Inc.  
100 Garden of Eden Road  
Wilmington, DE 19803

Dear Ms. Craven:

My name is Jennifer Wierski and I am a graduate student seeking my MA and certification in learning disabilities at Rowan University. Under the supervision of Dr. Stanley Urban, professor of Special Education, I am currently working on my thesis research paper entitled: **Do students with learning disabilities view their self-concept more positively in a self-contained educational environment versus students with learning disabilities in an inclusion environment?**

My hypothesis is that students with learning disabilities in a self-contained educational environment, such as The Pilot School, view their self-concept more positively. Self-concept is being defined as the academic, social and physical competencies which students identify with and which ultimately drive their attitudes toward success in the classroom.

In order to glean data and compare and contrast its results, I need to give the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale to students in your school who are in grades 4-6, ages 9-11. I will need to survey 20 students, both girls and boys, in order to compare their results to those of their counterparts in an inclusive model of instruction.

All data will be treated with the utmost confidentiality in order to protect the identities of your students. No names will be used in the study, only a number will be given to each candidate and their corresponding number will have their gender and grade/age for identification purposes for the study.

I realize that the completion of such a questionnaire is an imposition of classroom time; I am amenable to working with you if there is a more conducive time for me to give the survey so that valuable classroom time is not interrupted. I would be so very appreciative of such an extended professional courtesy, as your assistance will help me collect the pertinent data which will help me prove my hypothesis.

If you should have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Stanley Urban at Rowan University. His phone number is 856-256-4500, ext. 3795 or his email is [urban@rowan.edu](mailto:urban@rowan.edu). If you wish to contact me, my phone number is 856-354-0960 or email is [jwierski2@yahoo.com](mailto:jwierski2@yahoo.com).

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Wierski

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Dr. Stanley Urban, Special Education Department

## APPENDIX E

### Sample Letter to Candidate Parent

November 15, 2006

Dear Candidate Parent:

My name is Jennifer Wierski and I am a graduate student seeking my MA and certification in learning disabilities at Rowan University. Before my graduate school endeavors, I was an elementary school teacher for 5 ½ years with varied grade level experience. Under the supervision of Dr. Stanley Urban, professor of Special Education, I am currently working on my thesis research paper which discusses the idea of self-concept and the student who has learning disabilities.

Your child has been selected to take part in the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, which will be administered by me. The P-HCSCS is a comprehensive scale which measures a child's self-concept through six domains: **behavior, intellectual/school status, physical appearance/attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness/satisfaction**. The scale is a 60 question battery in which your child will fill in the appropriate circle corresponding "yes" or "no" to how they feel when asked a question. Some examples of questions your child will be asked are: "I am smart," "I have good ideas," or "I wish I were different."

All data will be treated with the utmost confidentiality in order to protect the identity of your child. No names will be used in the study, only a number will be given to each candidate and their corresponding number will have their gender and grade/age for identification purposes for the study.

Your child's participation in this study would be most appreciative. Please send back the signed parent permission slip to allow your child to take part in this thesis study.

If you should have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Stanley Urban at Rowan University. His phone number is 856-256-4500, ext. 3795 or his email is [urban@rowan.edu](mailto:urban@rowan.edu). If you wish to contact me, my phone number is 856-354-0960 or email is [jwierski2@yahoo.com](mailto:jwierski2@yahoo.com).

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. Your child's cooperation is so very crucial to the success of my study.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Wierski

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Dr. Stanley Urban, Department of Special Education

APPENDIX F

**Parent Permission Slip**

**I give my parental permission for my child to participate in the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale administered by Jennifer L. Wierski, graduate student at Rowan University. I understand that my child's identity will be protected and participation is completely anonymous. All data will be treated with confidentiality and professionalism.**

---

**Parent Signature**

---

**Date**

---

**Dr. Stanley Urban, Department of Special Education**

---

**Jennifer L. Wierski, Graduate Student Rowan University**

