

April 2017

# Examining High School Students on their Ideas about the Social Exclusion of Peers with Learning Difficulties

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Graduate Program in Education

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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## SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

### Abstract

This thesis investigated the reasons high school students believed their peers with learning difficulties were excluded, and compared male and female responses. Participants included twenty grade twelve students who were interviewed on why they believed students with learning difficulties were excluded. Responses were analyzed (a) qualitatively to identify response themes, and (b) quantitatively to examine gender differences. Five response categories were identified including (a) thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties, (b) classroom-related activities, (c) differences between students with and without learning difficulties, (d) thoughts and behaviours of students with learning difficulties, and (e) exclusion is not a problem. Categories were divided into subcategories. Gender differences were found in some subcategories. Specifically, males focused more on differences in social behaviour, and characteristics of students without learning difficulties, whereas females focused more on differences in interests and conversation topics, and negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties.

Keywords: exclusion, high school, learning difficulties, disabilities

## SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

### Acknowledgments

I would firstly like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Nowicki, for her continued support and guidance throughout this process, and for her confidence in my abilities to make this thesis my own. I would also like to express my gratitude to the women I have met in this program, for the inspiration I have felt through our discussions, and for all that I have learned from you. I am grateful to have been able to connect with such an inspiring, amazing group of women.

I would also like to thank my parents, Laurie and Randy King, for their love, support and confidence in me throughout my educational experiences. I would not be where I am today without their endless support. Lastly, I would like to thank my partner, Jhorriion Brown, for your love, support, and encouragement throughout this process and for always being there for me. You have made this process even richer with your presence in my life.

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Examining High School Students on their Ideas about the Social Exclusion of Peers with  
Learning Difficulties

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

Goals of inclusive education have been recognized worldwide (UNESCO, 2009) and are in place to allow all students to participate and learn in all aspects of student life. Successful inclusive programs achieve successful learning for all students in the classroom and also promote a more inclusive social environment for students outside of the classroom (Specht, 2013).

Inclusive Education Canada (2017) explained that inclusive education programs ensure that all students attend and are welcomed by their schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of their school. Inclusive classrooms contain students of diverse backgrounds and abilities and are in place to give all students the opportunity to receive quality education. These classrooms enable all students to participate in and learn from the material being taught in a setting where they feel supported and welcome.

Although inclusive programs have shown to be beneficial for students with and without learning difficulties, special education classes for students with learning difficulties remains a common practice in Canada (Specht, 2013). Kohen, Uppal, Guevremont, & Cartwright (2007) reported that the Canadian average of the percentage of students with disabilities excluded from the regular classroom was 41% according to the 2001 Statistics Canada Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) (Statistics Canada, 2003). A harmful outcome of using special education classes is that it tends to create the perception in the school that students with learning difficulties are inferior to those without (Specht, 2013). As such, an inclusive education structure in which all students, regardless of the presence or absence of learning difficulty, are included in the same classroom is important for initiating a more welcome and accepting school climate.



Robo (2014) explained that inclusive education is a component of the broader concept of social inclusion and that segregated classrooms tend to create an environment of social exclusion within the school where students with intellectual and learning disabilities are socially isolated from their peers without disabilities. Despite the positive outcomes of inclusive classrooms, young adults with disabilities who have reflected on their past educational experiences have described being excluded and not accepted by their peers in inclusive classroom settings (Diaz, 2010). They have also stated that they feel more supported and accepted within their special education classes. This may seem to suggest that special education classrooms are beneficial over inclusive classrooms. However, inclusive classrooms are favoured because when implemented successfully they can create a school atmosphere that accepts and celebrates all types of cultural diversity (Robo, 2014).

Despite inclusion efforts, the social exclusion of students with learning difficulties at school has been found to be a common occurrence (Nowicki, Brown, & Stepien, 2014; Hughes et al., 1999; Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Dore, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002). The literature on social exclusion in schools spans across childhood and adolescence and demonstrates its presence throughout both of these developmental stages. Furthermore, several negative effects have been demonstrated from the social exclusion of individuals with disabilities such as decreased emotional wellbeing and hindered social and emotional development (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Kiddle & Dagnan, 2011). These outcomes are especially important during the stage of adolescence as this is a critical developmental stage where identity formation is most important (Rutter, 2003) and the most drastic developmental changes occur in a number of areas including physical, cognitive, social, and emotional (Harkins, 2015). At such a crucial phase when individuals with intellectual and learning disabilities are

already vulnerable to poorer mental health than their peers without disabilities (Honey, Emerson, & Llewellyn, 2011), developing a sense of belonging and acceptance at school through successful inclusion is critical.

The social inclusion of individuals with learning difficulties has been shown to have numerous benefits for these individuals and their peers. Successful inclusive education fosters environments that celebrate all aspects of diversity and elicit a sense of community and social connectedness within the entire school (Robo, 2014) which is beneficial to all students. For students with learning difficulties, inclusive education programs have been shown to increase progress in areas including academic, functional, social, and emotional development as well as increase overall quality of life and development of friendships (Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Hunt & Goetz, 1997). Despite the numerous benefits of social inclusion that have been reported in the literature as well as numerous efforts that have been put in place to promote inclusion, the social exclusion of students with learning difficulties from their peers without learning difficulties remains a major issue (UNESCO, 2009). When examining the reasons for social exclusion, past literature has largely focused on interviews with parents and teachers as well as observational methods, and has failed to examine the perceptions of the students. In an effort to fill this gap, Nowicki et al. (2014) examined the perceptions of students in grades five and six on the reasons they believed contributed to the social exclusion of their peers with learning difficulties. The participants' statements discussed four main themes which focused on the differences between children with and without learning difficulties. The four themes were thoughts and actions of other children; differences in learning ability and resource allocation; affect, physical characteristics and schooling; and negative thoughts and behaviours. The aim of the current

study was to add to the literature on student perceptions of exclusion by focusing on high school students and why they believe exclusion occurs.

When understanding the reasons for social exclusion, it is important to consider the social context of the individual providing the information as this affects their perception. Research has suggested that social context differs depending on the gender of the individual and has shown that boys and girls seem to socially interact in different ways (e.g. Martin & Fabes, 2001; Benenson, Apostolaris, Parnass, 1997; Benenson, Nicholeson, Waite, Roy, & Simpson, 2001; Maccoby, 1998). In general, girls seem to have relationships that are characterized by more intimacy and collaboration whereas friendships between boys tend to be characterized by more dominance and competitiveness (Maccoby, 1998). Furthermore, research has found that female students tend to be more accepting of and have more positive attitudes than males towards their peers with disabilities (Nowicki, 2006; Barr & Bracchitta, 2012; Shaley, Asmus, Carter, & Moss, 2016). Since males and females seem to differ in the manner in which they interact, and also seem to prefer interacting with their same sex (Martin & Fabes, 2001), gender differences in social context appear to result. The female context includes more collaboration, intimacy (Maccoby, 1998) and more positive attitudes towards students with disabilities (Nowicki, 2006), whereas the male context includes more competition (Maccoby, 1998) and less positive attitudes towards students with disabilities (Nowicki, 2006). This in turn may result in differences in how male and female high school students perceive the exclusion of students with learning difficulties. Therefore, the current study included a comparison between males and females on the reasons they believed students with learning difficulties were excluded. If differences are found to exist, inclusion interventions can then be developed in ways that are more specifically targeted to each gender thereby increasing the effectiveness of inclusion practices.

Therefore, the main purpose of the present study was to investigate high school student perceptions on why they believed students with learning difficulties were excluded and examine whether gender differences exist in the responses. There were no specific hypotheses of what the findings might be as the study was explorative in nature.

In the current study, the term “learning difficulties” was used to refer to a broad range of learning problems such as learning disorders, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, exceptionalities, lower academic abilities, and special needs. The term “learning difficulties” was used rather than intellectual or learning disabilities because the focus was not on individuals with a diagnosis, but on those who the students perceived as having difficulty with learning. However, when describing published studies, the terms used by the authors of those studies are used in this thesis.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section includes an overview of the literature. The first section discusses the developmental stage of adolescence and the importance of peer relationships at this stage as these topics have direct application to the current research. The second section discusses the social exclusion of individuals with learning difficulties in adolescence and describes its prevalence and associated risks. The third section discusses the social inclusion of adolescents with learning difficulties and highlights its benefits. The last section describes gender differences in social behaviour and attitudes towards students with learning difficulties.

### 2.1 Stage of Adolescence

The period of adolescence is a critical developmental phase as it has been found to be associated with several important changes. It has been described as the transitional period between childhood and adulthood when individuals experience the most drastic developmental changes (Harkins, 2015). One main goal of adolescence is the development of identity as an independent person (Resnick, 2012; Smith, 2005). Resnick defined identity as the individual's definition of who they are. Although this identity has begun to form in childhood and continues to grow throughout the lifespan, adolescence marks the period where identity development is most evident (Rutter, 2003). Adolescent identity formation is seen as critical because at this stage individuals are differentiating from their parents and caregivers and are transitioning to finding their own place in the world as adults who independently care for themselves. Identity formation is impacted by the various areas of the adolescent's life such as family, school, peer relationships, and activities (Resnick, 2012) and is accompanied by increasing closeness to peers with differentiation from parents and families of origin. Whyte (2001) described that this change

in the nature of the adolescent's relationships is important as it helps the individual gain independence and autonomy from their family of origin and additionally helps them learn how to establish relationships in adulthood and discover their societal roles (Turkstra, 2000). Adolescent identity formation has also been found to be associated with several other important outcomes including the development of intimate relationships (Erikson, 1968), academic success (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005), adjustment to postsecondary education (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005), happiness (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008), and occupational success (Alsaker & Kroger, 2006).

Another reason that the adolescent phase is of critical importance is due to the dramatic developmental changes that occur in all areas of life including physical, cognitive, and social aspects (Harkins, 2015). The topic of the current study is most related to social development, although the different areas are interrelated. Social development helps individuals learn how to navigate their relationships as well as regulate their emotions (Harkins, 2015) and it also helps individuals develop friendships, social competence, and social skills (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013). This development depends greatly on the presence of relationships and interactions with peers during adolescence. Furthermore, it has been found that these interactions should occur naturally in structured and unstructured settings in order for the healthiest social and emotional development to occur (Itkonen, 2007). Healthy social and emotional development can help lower future risk of isolation, loneliness, emotional or behavioural outbursts, and help to teach appropriate social behaviour (Harkins, 2015). It has been suggested that adolescents with intellectual disabilities may have slowed social and emotional development (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013; Church, Alisanski, & Amanullah, 2000) which may be due to the presence of the disability, but also perhaps in part due to lack of peer engagement.

## 2.2 Social Exclusion in Adolescence

Several studies have demonstrated that high school students with intellectual or learning disabilities are socially excluded and rarely interact with their peers without disabilities (e.g. Hughes et al., 1999). Hughes and colleagues conducted an observational study of students with disabilities and students without disabilities comparing the social interaction patterns of both groups. The researchers found that despite being in proximity at the same lunch table as their peers without disabilities, the students with disabilities rarely interacted with any of these peers, even if a classmate was nearby. The finding that there was little interaction is important as it has been consistently repeated in the literature (e.g. Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Dore et al., 2002; Hilton & Liberty, 1992; Mu, Siegel, & Allinder, 2000). An important question that Hughes and colleagues did not discuss or attempt to uncover was why the exclusion occurred. Abells, Burbidge, and Minnes (2008) attempted to address the reasons for social exclusion by interviewing parents of high school students with intellectual disabilities. The researchers interviewed parents on the activities that their children engaged in and asked if they participated alone, with peers, or with family. Parents reported that the adolescents most commonly engaged in activities with family members. Fewer students engaged in activities with peers with the majority of activities being organized, for example organized sports. Parents stated that they suspected that the reasons their children did not engage in more activities with peers was because of the presence of the disability and disability-related needs. An example of a disability-related need was lack of opportunity. However it is not clear what it was specifically about the presence of the disability that caused the lack of peer engagement. This information may be better obtained by interviewing the students.

As discussed earlier, social exclusion during adolescence can be detrimental to an individual's social and emotional development. An additional negative aspect of social exclusion

is its effect on mental wellbeing. Social isolation during adolescence has been shown to increase risk of depression and suicide risk as well as decrease self-esteem (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). Hall-Lande and colleagues conducted a self-report survey with adolescents from middle school and high school and looked at the relationship between social isolation; psychological health; and protective factors including family connectedness, academic achievement, and school connectedness. Results indicated that students who reported feelings of social isolation had elevated levels of depressive symptoms, higher risk of suicide, and decreased self-esteem as compared to students who did not report feeling isolated. Although the study was correlational, it is an important association to consider as it demonstrated a strong relationship that has been repeatedly found between the presence of peer relationships, mental health, and school adjustment during adolescence (Berndt, 1999).

Further adding to the negative impact of social exclusion is that adolescents with intellectual and learning disabilities have been shown to have an increased risk of depression and poor mental health as compared to their peers without disabilities (Kiddle & Dagnan, 2011; Honey et al., 2011). Kiddle and Dagnan summarized several possible contributing factors to this increased risk including individual characteristics such as biological factors, cognitive factors, gender, and temperament; the immediate social environment including parental depression, attachment, and other family-based life events; and the wider social environment including peer relationships, and societal opportunities. When discussing peer relationships, the authors noted that peer relationships are often lacking in adolescents with intellectual disabilities, which may be due to the presence of social skills deficits (Kavale & Forness, 1996), and emotion-perception deficits (Rojahn, Lederer, & Tassé, 1995). Additionally, the presence of social stigma of having a disability may discourage students from pursuing relationships with their peers with intellectual



disabilities and it has been found that individuals with mild intellectual disabilities are often aware of this stigma (Nezu, Nezu, Rothenberg, DelliCarpini, & Groag, 1995; Szivos-Bach, 1993).

A sense of belonging with peers is an important aspect in adolescence for both individuals with and those without disabilities and the feeling of nonbelonging can greatly affect self-esteem (Szivos-Bach, 1993) and mental wellbeing in individuals with intellectual disabilities (Dagnan & Sandhu, 1999). In an effort to understand the actual experiences of individuals with disabilities in school, Diaz (2010) interviewed nine young adults with disabilities on their past educational experiences. The participants discussed several aspects of exclusion within and outside of the classroom. The overall theme that the participants discussed was that they were excluded and not accepted by their peers in mainstream school settings where they were in regular classes with their peers without disabilities. One participant discussed his experiences in the classroom when asking his peers about the class work and shared that he would often be told that it was too hard for him and that he could not do it. He stated that *“the moment my classmates acted that way with me, even if they didn’t mean bad, what happened was that doors shut in my face one after another...[I wish] that instead of laughing maybe they could say to me, you don’t understand but I’ll explain it to you”* (p.171). The participants reported feeling more supported and accepted in their special education classes and stated that these classrooms made them feel like equals and feel that they had a place there. Diaz pointed out that this appears to suggest that special education classrooms are beneficial over inclusive classrooms, but noted that this is a false impression because segregated classrooms still create an atmosphere of exclusion where there are students who do not feel welcome and safe at their school.

The literature discussed thus far demonstrates the importance of developing peer relationships in adolescence as well as its importance on mental wellbeing, especially for individuals with learning difficulties. It has also been shown that adolescents with learning difficulties are often excluded from interacting with their peers without learning difficulties. However, the literature investigating the reasons for this exclusion is largely speculative using parent and teacher interviews and observational methods and is lacking on student perceptions. Nowicki et al. (2014) described a few theories that may explain the reasons behind social exclusion. One theory is the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1988) which states that an individual will likely engage in a social behaviour when it is considered to be good rather than bad, when social expectations support the behaviour, when the behaviour is perceived to be easy, and when the individual perceives that they have control in the situation to perform the behaviour. Roberts and Smith (1999) examined the influence of perceived control on children's intentions to engage in social interaction with children with disabilities in a fictional story. The authors found that the children were more likely to want to interact with children with disabilities when they believed the interaction would be easy rather than difficult.

A second theory which may provide insight into the social exclusion of individuals with learning difficulties is the theory of subjective group dynamics (Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques, Paez, & Abrams, 1998; Marques, Abrams, Paez & Hogg, 2001) which explains the concept of intra-group uniformity and deviance occurring in the larger inter-group context. This model proposes that individuals achieve a positive social identity if they act in accordance with the in-group norms. Individuals who deviate from these norms will in turn jeopardize the positive attitude towards the in-group and as a result will be criticized and potentially excluded by the in-group members. Nowicki (2011) applied the theory of subjective group dynamics in an

attempt to understand the in-group and out-group dynamics of children with and without learning disabilities. Children believed that belonging to a group defined by the presence of learning disabilities was less desirable and held lower social status than belonging to a group defined by the absence of learning disabilities. Therefore there was a clear in-group and out-group distinction between students with and without learning disabilities.

### **2.3 Social Inclusion in Adolescence**

The social inclusion of adolescents with learning difficulties with their peers without learning difficulties can foster many positive outcomes. For example, Fisher and Meyer (2002) assessed two groups of students with severe disabilities across two years, one in an inclusive education program and the other in a self-contained program. Results indicated that the group from the inclusive program made significantly greater developmental progress and gained better social competence than the group from the self-contained program. Hunt and Goetz (1997) reviewed 19 studies on inclusive education programs, practices, and outcomes that used methods such as parent interviews, teacher interviews, student surveys, and observational methods in order to examine the state of research and practice as well as outcomes of inclusive education for students with severe disabilities. These studies demonstrated increases in academic, functional, and social skill development as well as increases in development of friendships and overall quality of life for individuals with severe disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

Several efforts have been made to help increase the social inclusion of adolescents with learning difficulties because of these positive outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005). One program that has been implemented in schools throughout the world in order to help make students' perceptions of diversity more positive is the

Three Cs Program (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). It has been used in diverse settings including students from inner-city, lower-class schools to upper-class private school students. The program aims to help decrease prejudice and discrimination and increase cooperative efforts, constructive conflict, and civic values with students, faculty, and administrators, in order to help students see diversity as positive and to accept their own culture, for example their ethnicity/race, social class, and/or disability. The first “C” is to establish a *Cooperative Community* where there is a sense of social interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Social interdependence occurs when the outcomes of the individual members of a community are affected by the actions of others in the community (Deutsch, 1949; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). The goal is to ensure that interdependence is positive at the levels of classroom, interclass, school, school-parent, and school-neighbourhood. Cooperative learning encourages mutual respect and learning among students with varying talents and abilities, languages, and racial and ethnic backgrounds (Marr, 1997).

The second “C” is to promote *Constructive Conflict Resolution*. Conflict is a critical situation for individuals of diverse backgrounds and has the potential to create positive outcomes such as strengthened relationships (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). Faculty and staff should teach students three procedures for managing conflicts effectively: academic controversy, problem-solving negotiation, and peer mediation. Johnson and Johnson (1995) reviewed seven studies of the effects of conflict resolution training for students from grade one to nine and found that students learned the conflict resolution techniques, retained the knowledge throughout the school year, applied the techniques to actual conflicts in classroom and non-classroom settings, used the techniques in family and school settings, and engaged in problem-solving rather than win-lose negotiations when able to. Johnson and Johnson (1995) also demonstrated that effective conflict

resolution training can increase academic achievement and that the training is overall helpful at teaching students how to resolve conflict with other students.

The third and final “C” is *Civic Values*. This component encompasses the idea that members of the community must share common goals and values that increase the quality of life of all members within the community (Johnson & Johnson, 1996b). These may be taught through direct instruction (e.g. school mission statements), modeling and identification (i.e. building positive relationships with students and modeling behaviour), the enactment of assigned and voluntary roles (i.e. social roles), group influences (i.e. adopting values from reference group, such as the school group), and hidden curriculum existing in the pattern and flow of daily school life (i.e. values learned through daily school activities) (Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

Past research has found that when inclusion values are strongly voiced by school leaders and teachers and incorporated into school mottos that students internalize these values. Allan and Persson (2016) interviewed students in a Swedish municipality that excelled in student achievement, after implementing an inclusive program. Students were interviewed on their experiences at school, and on their school’s efforts to raise achievement for all students. Some participants had previously been in special education classes, and some had always been in regular classrooms. Students discussed their commitment to their school’s values of personal goal achievement and helping other students succeed. Students adopted the school’s values, and felt it was important to include and initiate success with other students when their school consistently encompassed and promoted these values.

Carter et al., (2005) assessed the effectiveness of a program that more specifically targets the inclusion of students with intellectual and learning disabilities. The program is called the

Peer Buddy Program and is aimed at increasing social interaction between peers with and without disabilities. The Peer Buddy Program is a one-credit course where a student without a disability is paired with a student with a moderate or severe disability for one period a day. They engage in activities that are instructional, for example academic, life skills and employment training; and non-instructional, for example, participating in sports and eating lunch together. The researchers found that students with disabilities were more likely to interact with a peer without a disability when the student's Peer Buddy was in proximity. The quality, frequency, and occurrence of social interaction all increased with the proximity of the Peer Buddy as well as the overall affect of the student. Therefore, the Peer Buddy Program has fostered some successful outcomes with respect to increasing social inclusion and interaction. However, it remains unclear as to why the Peer Buddy Program was effective at increasing social interaction and how this can be achieved on a larger scale schoolwide. Research has suggested that the Peer Buddy Program's success may partly result from eliciting a sense of responsibility in students without learning difficulties to include their peers with learning difficulties (Hughes et al., 2002). Hughes et al. (2002) found that by explicitly asking students without intellectual disabilities in the Peer Buddy Program to interact with their peers with intellectual disabilities, occurrence of social interaction increased, quality and reciprocity of interaction improved, and range of communication behaviours performed by students with intellectual disabilities increased.

There are also initiatives that focus on what teachers can do in the classroom in order to ensure successful inclusion within the classroom and in turn within the school community. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Tayler, and Schellinger (2011) discussed the importance of creating a sense of community and belongingness within the classroom by teaching social and emotional learning. This can additionally help to increase the acceptance of diversity and

increase knowledge of the importance of human connection. The authors conducted a meta-analysis of school-based programs that teach social and emotional learning and found several benefits including improved emotional skills, increased attitudes about themselves and others, improved connections to the school, improved positive behaviour, and improved school achievement. The authors found that the successful programs had four common elements that they summarized using the acronym *SAFE*. These elements included using a *sequenced* set of activities to achieve skill objectives; using *active* forms of learning; including at least one program *focused* on developing personal or social skills; and *explicitly* targeting particular personal or social skills for development.

Lastly, there are some instructional practices that teachers can use in order to engage all students in inclusive classrooms. In inclusive classrooms, teachers need to alter their goals, assessment, and instruction, to meet a diverse range of individuals and abilities in order to create successfully inclusive classrooms (Beattie, Jordan, & Algozzine, 2007; Gadberry, 2009; King, 2003; Berry, 2006). Thus, the traditional model of classroom instruction involving teacher dictation and independent student work may not be as helpful in classrooms containing students with and without learning difficulties. As a result, alternative approaches have been developed to replace the traditional model. Firstly, O'Connor (1995) described two instructional models that can increase and improve interactions between classmates: cooperative learning and peer tutoring. Cooperative learning involves groups of students working together to complete an assignment. This model has demonstrated mixed results in terms of increasing the academic success of children with disabilities (Tateyama-Sniezek, 1990). O'Connor and Jenkins (1996) explained that these mixed results may be due to differences in the implementation of the model including differences in teacher monitoring, selection of partners, and the establishment of a

cooperative ethic. Peer tutoring has also been found to increase academic success and interactions between (Greenwood, 1990; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Mathes, 1993) children who are low and high achieving academically. Furthermore, research has suggested that the most successful peer tutoring models pair high and low-achieving students together (Mathes, Fuchs, Fuchs, Henley, & Sanders, 1994).

Secondly, there is the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2011) that was designed to ensure that all students can access and learn from the material being taught. UDL is based on the different brain regions that focus on different aspects of learning such as gathering information and learning it; planning and performing tasks; and the excitement, interest, and challenge of the task. It was designed to appeal to these different aspects of learning by providing multiple means of presenting the information, providing multiple means of allowing students to express their knowledge, and providing multiple ways to keep students engaged and motivated. Third, there is Differentiated Instruction (DI) (Roy, Guay, & Valois, 2012) which is based on the premise that students vary in their readiness, interest, and learning styles. DI recognizes that not all students will be working on the same task or accomplishing their work within the same time frame. The authors provided an inventory of items so that teachers can ensure that the lessons being taught are reaching all students. Some of the items on the inventory include adjusting the work required in accordance with students' capabilities, providing students with additional tools, planning different assignments to match students' strengths, adapting assessments to match students' abilities, varying the complexity of assignments to match students' abilities, and adapting the lesson plan format.

These instructional practices can be used to initiate more successful inclusive classrooms by providing frameworks to help teachers successfully teach a diverse range of individuals.



These teaching methods can then model to students how to include students with learning difficulties and can in turn create a more inclusive school atmosphere. Inclusive education within the classroom is directly related to social inclusion between students outside of the classroom (Robo, 2014) and if teachers can successfully include all students in their teaching, it can potentially create successful inclusion in the school between students with and without learning difficulties. However, the responsibility should not lie solely with the teachers as they voiced several concerns about their ability to create successful inclusion within their classrooms due to difficulty meeting the needs of students with special needs, difficulty changing roles from assigner/teller to collaborative problem-solver, difficulty working in a teaching team effectively, and difficulty working with students with severe behavioural problems (Olinger, 2014; Chestnut, 2000). Chestnut (2000) discussed that many teachers do not have the appropriate support or resources to adequately work with students with severe behavioural problems, and further stated that teachers often go back to their old teaching models when they feel stuck in implementing a new model. The author explained that teachers require sufficient support, for example by having frequent meetings, learning new teaching models, and planning their lessons and curriculum effectively.

Although there are several inclusive education initiatives in place at many schools, social exclusion remains a major issue in Canada and many schools with inclusive classrooms are found to be unsuccessful in creating more inclusive school environments (Specht, 2013). Moreover, UNESCO (2009) reported that the exclusion in education of students with disabilities remains a major issue globally. The report stated that “children with disabilities are still combating blatant educational exclusion- they account for one third of all out-of-school children”

(p.5). Therefore, there is something more that needs to be done in order to promote successful inclusion of students with disabilities.

## 2.4 Gender Differences in Social Behaviour

Several studies have found differences in the manner that boys and girls socially interact during childhood and adolescence (e.g. Martin & Fabes, 2001; Benenson et al., 1997; Benenson et al., 2001; Maccoby, 1998). Firstly, girls have been found to mature earlier and develop intimacy in interpersonal relationships faster than boys (Douván & Adelson, 1966; Maccoby, 2002; Scharf & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2003). Maccoby (2002) explained that girls seem to share more information about their lives and their concerns, whereas boys know less about each other's lives. Furthermore, girls have been found to rate the quality of their friendships higher than boys do. Scharf and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2003) examined the interpersonal relationships of students in grades four and five using self-report questionnaires on the quality of their friendships. The authors found that girls reported better quality of their best friend relationships than boys did on the dimensions of companionship, help, security, and closeness. In an effort to further explain how intimacy is achieved within a relationship, Hauser et al. (1987) distinguished between two different types of interaction. The authors called them *enabling* interactive styles and *constricting* or *restrictive* interactive styles. Enabling interaction represents behaviours or interactions that support whatever the partner is doing and initiate further interaction, whereas restrictive or constricting behaviours are those that tend to inhibit the partner and cause them to withdraw, thereby ending the interaction. Hauser and colleagues suggested that girls tend to engage in more enabling interactions whereas boys tend to engage in more restrictive interactions.

In addition to the different communication styles, boys and girls have been found to engage in different activities together and play in a different manner. Boys tend to play in larger groups, play in more organized group games, and take up more space than girls, whereas girls tend to interact with two or three other girls in a more intimate manner (Benenson et al., 1997). Moreover, boys' play tends to be rougher, and is characterized by competition, conflict, ego displays, risk taking, and striving to achieve dominance; and girls' play tends to be more collaborative, and is characterized by striving for group harmony while pursuing individual goals (Maccoby, 1998).

When attempting to understand why males and females seem to engage in such different behaviours, it is helpful to look at the desires or goals the individuals are attempting to fulfill by engaging in these social interactions. Makara and Madjar (2015) investigated the social goals of students in grades nine through twelve by administering surveys on their social goals at six points over the course of two school years. Berndt (1979) defined social goals as the purposes for engaging in interpersonal relationships with others and noted that these goals are especially salient in adolescence. In their study, Makara and Madjar examined the three types of social goals introduced by Ryan and Shim (2006). The first type of goals is development goals which are aimed at developing and sustaining high quality friendships and improving social competence. The second type of goals is demonstration-approach goals which are aimed at demonstrating friendships by attempting to appear popular and comparing social competence with others. The last type of goals is demonstration-avoidance goals which are aimed at avoiding looking as though one does not have friendships and avoiding being made fun of or appearing unpopular. Makara and Madjar found that females reported higher levels of social development goals and reported an increase over time in their social development goals at a faster pace than

males. Males reported higher levels of demonstration-approach goals and demonstration-avoidance goals than females, with demonstration-approach being the most endorsed goal by males. Therefore, females may be more concerned with developing social competence and as a result seek for more collaboration and intimacy in their friendships in order to achieve this. Males may be more concerned with appearing popular and thus interact in more competitive ways in order to feel more popular than others.

The different social behaviour and interaction styles of males and females also create different gender subcultures. These subcultures can become very pronounced because children tend to prefer to play with their same-sex (Nicolopoulou, 1997; Martin & Fabes, 2001; Vaughan, Colvin, Azria, Caya, & Krzysik, 2001). Nicolopoulou (1997) conducted a longitudinal study with preschool-aged children over the course of one year. The children wrote stories over the year and then chose classmates to act them out. The author found that as the year went on, gender differences in the stories became more pronounced as stories written by boys became more focused on themes of conflict, danger, heroism, and “winning.” Stories written by girls increasingly involved more family and nonviolent themes. Additionally, the girls tended to choose more female actors and the boys chose male actors more as the year went on. Therefore, as the year progressed the genders became more segregated, and distinct gender subcultures became more evident within the classroom. This trend is also evident outside of the classroom as Vaughan et al. (2001) examined the composition of a large sample of preschool-aged dyads of friendship and found that friendships tended to be significantly more same-sex rather than opposite-sex. Although cross-sex interactions do seem to increase as children grow into adolescence, this gender segregation in peer groups is still largely present (Carli, 1989; Maccoby, 1998; Larson & Richards, 1991). This is important to consider when interviewing students for

the present study because the students' responses reflect their own social contexts and the social context is clearly different depending on one's gender.

Lastly, gender differences have also been found in children and adolescents' attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, and have demonstrated that girls tend to be more accepting and have more positive attitudes than boys (Nowicki, 2006; Barr & Bracchitta, 2012; Shaley et al., 2016). Nowicki (2006) interviewed children aged four to ten years on their attitudes towards children with intellectual and physical disabilities using drawings and descriptions of children with either no disability, a physical disability, an intellectual disability, or both an intellectual and physical disability. Participants were shown gender-matched drawings of children representing each of the disability conditions. The drawings depicted the presence or absence of physical disability of the target child and the verbal descriptions were used to describe the presence or absence of intellectual disability. Results showed that girls had significantly more positive attitudes than boys towards children with intellectual and/or physical disabilities. Similarly, Shaley et al. (2016) examined the attitudes of high school students without disabilities who were in inclusive classrooms with students with severe disabilities. They also found that females held more positive attitudes than males toward students with disabilities, although participants overall held largely positive attitudes. Barr and Bracchitta (2012) suggested that a possible explanation for this gender difference is that females have been consistently found to have more empathy than males (Eisenberg, 2006). In fact, Schaefer, Canella-Malone, and Carter (2016) conducted a review of peer-mediated interventions for promoting inclusion, interactions, and shared activities between students with and without intellectual disabilities and found that the majority of students without disabilities that participated in the interventions were female.

The literature discussed in this section has demonstrated that the social exclusion of high school students with learning difficulties is of great concern and can be detrimental to the development and wellbeing of these students. However, little is known as to why this exclusion occurs, and research has failed to examine student perceptions on the reasons for exclusion. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to address this missing piece by interviewing students in grade twelve on the reasons they believe students with learning difficulties are excluded. The value of exploring student perceptions is that they can provide insight into the actual student experience of exclusion and inform what changes need to be made in order to facilitate inclusion between students with and without learning difficulties. Furthermore, students in grade twelve are at the end of their high school careers and are therefore able to reflect on the occurrence of exclusion in all four years of high school as well as its presence throughout their journey through adolescence. Obtaining the students' perspectives of exclusion can enhance inclusion as it can help guide the development of inclusion interventions and may increase their success by focusing on the themes that students see as important. Additionally, the comparison of male and female responses can provide further insight into whether inclusion interventions need to be more gender specific in order to be effective.

## Chapter 3: Method

### 3.1 Participants

Participants included 20 grade twelve students from two high schools in a mid-sized Canadian city. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained that interviewing around 20 participants is sufficient for the qualitative methodology used in the current research as it provides enough detail to achieve saturation. The schools were representative of a broad socioeconomic urban and suburban demographic. Students were invited to participate regardless of the presence or absence of learning difficulties. The study included nine females and eleven males and no participants reported having a learning difficulty (mean age = 18.0 years, standard deviation = 0.55). The schools had specialized education classes for students with learning difficulties as reported by the participants.

### 3.2 Procedure

Ethics approval was first obtained from the university's non-medical research ethics board and subsequently by the school board research officer. The research officer then sent out recruiting emails to all secondary school principals in the school board describing the study and inviting them to contact the researchers to volunteer their schools for participation. Principals were then contacted by the researchers to describe the study, answer any questions, and set up initial classroom visits if interested. Initial classroom visits were then conducted to recruit students by describing the study, answering any questions they had, and handing out assent and consent forms to interested students. Students who were interested in participating in the study set up interview times by email with the research team. Additionally, teachers had the option to contact the researchers to schedule interviews within class time. Some teachers chose to set aside

a day for interviews and allowed students to be taken out of class one-by-one to be interviewed. Students were required to bring their signed assent/consent forms either before or to the interview. The students were required to sign the forms themselves and have a parent or legal guardian sign if under 18 years of age.

**Interviews.** One-to-one interviews took place with participants in a quiet room in their school during a spare period or during class time if allotted by the teacher. The interviewer first described the study, described confidentiality, and described the concept of voluntary research participation. Participants were specifically told that the study had no relation to their studies or grades at school, they could stop participating at any point, and they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to. After answering any questions from the participant, the interview began (see Appendix A for full interview protocol). The interviews were digitally recorded and began with the collection of demographic information including grade, date of birth, gender, and the presence/absence of learning difficulties. Next, the interviewer asked questions to ensure the participants had some knowledge of intellectual and learning disabilities. More specifically, the interviewer asked participants why they thought some students found learning new things difficult, what kinds of things students with learning difficulties would find difficult at school, and if they knew anyone with learning difficulties. The focal question was then asked: *'Are secondary (high school) students who have learning difficulties sometimes left out at school? Why do you think they are/are not left out?'* The interviewer then prompted students to elaborate by asking *'Can you share with me why you think that?'* and *'Is there anything else you can think of?'* Participants were then asked if they had any questions about the interview or study. Participants completed interviews within 5-15 minutes.



In this study, the term learning difficulties was chosen instead of intellectual and learning disabilities because it reflects everyday language and may be better understood by students who may not be familiar with the formal terms of intellectual and learning disabilities (Nowicki, 2007). The focus of the study was on students' ideas of why any students with learning difficulties are excluded rather than on the exclusion of students with specific disabilities. Nowicki et al. (2014) found that the term *learning difficulty* was understood by students in grades five and six.

**Data Preparation.** Digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and statements answering the focal question were then entered into a spreadsheet. Statements included one subject, one predicate, and discussed one idea, for example *'I feel like most people see them as lower.'* All statements from each participant were then combined into one spreadsheet. There were 142 statements in total that answered the focal question. The statements were grouped into thematic categories using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Creswell (2007) explained that grounded theory is a qualitative research design used to form categories of information about a core phenomenon in order to develop a theory of the process, action, or interaction. Statements were grouped into categories found to be meaningful and this resulted in five categories including (a) thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties, (b) classroom-related activities, (c) differences between students with and without learning difficulties, (d) thoughts and behaviours of students with learning difficulties, and (e) exclusion does not happen/ is not a problem. Most of these categories were then divided into subcategories (see Table B1 in Appendix B for preliminary table of subcategories). The initial subcategories were later revised following an inter-rater reliability check, as described below (see Table 1 for final subcategories).

Table 1

*Final Thematic Categories of Reasons for Exclusion*

Category	Frequency	Percent of Total
Thoughts and behaviours of students without LD	47	33.1
Negative thoughts and actions of students without LD	26	18.3
General lack of awareness or effort to include	13	9.2
Characteristics of students without LD	8	5.6
Classroom-related activities	35	24.6
School or classroom structure	18	12.7
Teacher behaviour	8	5.6
Learning styles	5	3.5
Behaviour of students without LD in the classroom	4	2.8
Differences between students with and without LD	30	21.1
Differences in social behaviour	14	9.9
Differences in interests and conversation topics	10	7.0
Differences in level of ability	6	4.2
Thoughts and behaviours of students with LD	24	16.9
Behaviours that exclude themselves	19	13.4
Thoughts and perceptions	5	3.5
Exclusion is not a problem	6	4.2
Total	142	100

*Note.* LD = learning difficulties.

Interrater reliability was calculated by providing a graduate student research assistant with operational definitions of the categories and subcategories, and having them place a random selection of 35 statements from the original list into the category or subcategory where they thought it fit best. The 35 statements represented 25% of the total number of statements and were chosen by selecting every fourth statement from the list. Interrater reliability was initially at 73% and was deemed to be insufficient. Thus, a second round of interrater reliability was completed with revised operational definitions that used more specific wording to help differentiate between subcategories (see Appendix C for revisions). The interrater reliability for the second round was at 91%. Discrepancies were then resolved with a discussion of the discrepant statements and were then placed into the appropriate category. The final model resulted in five categories, most of which were further divided into subcategories. Each category is discussed below.

## Chapter 4: Results

This section describes (a) the qualitative analysis of the previously presented thematic categories and subcategories, and (b) a quantitative analysis to determine if there was a statistical association between thematic categories and gender.

The first chi square analysis was conducted to determine whether males and females differed in the frequencies of responses they made in each of the five categories: (a) thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties, (b) school/classroom structure, (c) differences between students with and without learning difficulties, (d) thoughts and behaviours of students with learning difficulties, and (e) exclusion is not a problem. Results showed that frequency of responses for each category by gender were not significant ( $\chi^2(4, N = 142) = 1.87, p = .76$ ) (see Table 2).

Chi square analyses at the subcategory level are described within the category descriptions below. Chi square analyses were conducted at the subcategory level because the overall category chi square analysis did not capture whether gender differences existed in the frequency of responses made in the subcategories.

It is important to note that several cells in some of the chi square analyses had small expected frequencies. Older guidelines requiring expected frequencies to be at least 5 are now considered to be overly conservative. Specifically, Aron and Aron (2003) explained that expected frequencies can be as low as 1, without affecting Type I error, as long as no more than 20 percent of cells have expected frequencies smaller than 1. In this thesis, none of the cells in any of the chi square analyses had expected frequencies less than 1.

Table 2

*Gender Response Frequencies in Five Categories*

Category	Males		Females		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Thoughts and Behaviours of Students without LD	25	33.3	22	32.8	47	33.1
Classroom-Related Activities	16	21.3	19	28.4	35	24.6
Differences between Students With and Without LD	18	24.0	12	17.9	30	21.1
Thoughts and Behaviours of Students with LD	12	16.0	12	17.9	24	16.9
Exclusion is Not a Problem	4	5.3	2	3.0	6	4.2

*Note.* No significant gender differences were found,  $\chi^2(4, N = 142) = 1.87, p = .76$ .

#### 4.1 Category 1: Thoughts and Behaviours of Students without Learning Difficulties

This category contained the largest number of statements out of all five of the categories with 47 statements (33.1% of the total statements). These statements discussed ideas, perceptions, thoughts, and actions of students without learning difficulties that either exclude or contribute to the exclusion of students with learning difficulties. This category included three subcategories, (a) negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties (26 statements), (b) general lack of awareness or effort to include (13 statements), and (c) characteristics of students without learning difficulties (8 statements). The statements in this category all focused on students without learning difficulties and their roles and responsibilities in contributing to the exclusion of students with learning difficulties. Males and females differed in the number of statements made in these subcategories,  $\chi^2(2, N = 47) = 13.63, p = .001$  (see Table 3).

Post hoc procedures were conducted in order to determine which subcategories had significant gender differences. A procedure explained by Beasley and Schumacker (1995) that uses a multiple regression approach to interpret chi square results of contingency tables greater than 2X2 was utilized. The adjusted residuals of the chi square analysis were used in order to calculate chi square values for each of these residuals and determine their significance. A residual is the difference between expected and observed values in a contingency table. Adjusted residuals are obtained by dividing the residuals by the square root of the expected values and then dividing by the standard deviation of all residuals of the table. The adjusted residuals are standardized values that follow a standard normal frequency distribution and therefore allow for comparison between cells. In this study, a Bonferroni adjusted  $p$  value was used in order to control for Type I error and resulted in  $p = .0083$ . Bonferroni corrections are used when several

Table 3

*Gender Response Frequencies in Subcategories of Thoughts and Behaviours of Students without Learning Difficulties*

Subcategory	Males N = 25		Females N = 22		Total N = 47		$\chi^2$	p
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Negative Thoughts and Actions of Students without LD	8	32.0	18	81.8	26	55.3		
General Lack of Awareness or Effort to Include	9	36.0	4	18.2	13	27.7	13.63	.001 <sup>a</sup>
Characteristics of Students without LD	8	32.0	0 <sup>b</sup>	0.0	8	17.0		

Note. <sup>a</sup> Significant at  $p = .001$ .

<sup>b</sup> Expected value greater than 1.

statistical tests are performed on a single data set. The adjusted  $p$  value is calculated by dividing the critical  $p$  value by the number of comparisons being made. Therefore, in this case it was calculated by dividing 0.5 by 6. Therefore,  $p$  values found to be smaller than .0083 were deemed to be significant. Results of the post hoc analyses for the subcategories in Category 1 are summarized in Table 4, demonstrating that females focused more on the negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties that are directed at their peers with learning difficulties ( $\chi^2(1, N = 26) = 11.76, p = .0006$ ), whereas males focused more on the characteristics of students without learning difficulties ( $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = 8.47, p = .0036$ ). Males and females did not differ in the frequency of responses made about a general lack of awareness or effort to include students with learning difficulties ( $\chi^2(1, N = 13) = 1.85, p = .1738$ ).

The subcategory of negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties included statements that discussed these students' thoughts and behaviours that were either about or directed towards peers with learning difficulties to intentionally exclude them. One student stated that *'Most people see themselves as above them, so they don't really try to include them.'* Another student suggested that *'Students with learning difficulties are seen as not smart.'* Students also focused on specific negative excluding behaviours such as *'Other students are discriminating'* and *'Students with learning difficulties might get teased sometimes.'*

Statements that discussed a general lack of awareness or effort to include reflected the idea that exclusion by students without learning difficulties is unintentional. These statements discussed that exclusion is not an intentional act, but is a result of a lack of awareness and education on the topic of learning difficulties, the importance of including students with learning difficulties as well as how to include them. Some of these statements focused on the idea that students do not make an effort to go outside of their established friend group, for example *'In*



Table 4

*Post Hoc Analyses of Subcategories in Category 1*

Subcategory	Number of Statements		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
	F	M		
Negative thoughts and actions of students without LD	18	8	11.76	.0006 <sup>a</sup>
General lack of awareness or effort to include	4	9	1.85	.1738
Characteristics of students without LD	0 <sup>b</sup>	8	8.47	.0036 <sup>a</sup>

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Significant at Bonferroni corrected  $p = .0083$ , where  $p = .05/6$ .

<sup>b</sup> Expected value greater than 1.

*high school it's like you have your group of friends and then everyone's kind of branched off.'* Some explicitly stated that exclusion is not intentional, for example one student stated that *'I don't think exclusion is an outward intentional thing.'* Students also discussed that students do not understand learning difficulties, for example *'Some people just don't feel as comfortable or that they just don't know enough about it'* and *'They don't understand that person.'* These statements suggested that participants believed that students without learning difficulties had a role in the exclusion of those with learning difficulties, but that it was not intentional or malicious. Males and females did not differ in the number of statements made in this subcategory.

Lastly, characteristics of students without learning difficulties focused on certain personality traits or trends that may lead these students to exclude their peers with learning difficulties. Some statements suggested that individuals exclude their classmates intentionally because of certain traits, and others suggested that they exclude unintentionally. One student suggested that *'I think some of us were selfish when it comes to school'* and another stated that *'Some people are immature.'* One student discussed that insecurities of some students without learning difficulties may be possible reasons they exclude their peers with learning difficulties saying that *'People often use making fun to cover up something else that they're bottling up, lashing it out on someone else'* and *'Could be that they have a learning disability themselves that other people don't know about.'* Males made significantly more responses than females in this subcategory.

Participants made the largest number of statements in this category which demonstrates that participants believed that students without learning difficulties played a major role in the exclusion of their peers with learning difficulties. The largest proportion of statements was in the

subcategory of negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties which demonstrates that students largely saw exclusion as an intentional act based on negative perceptions towards their peers with learning difficulties.

#### 4.2 Category 2: Classroom-Related Activities

This category consisted of 35 statements (24.7% of total statements) and focused on activities within the classroom or related to classroom learning that contribute to exclusion. This category included four subcategories, (a) school or classroom structure (18 statements), (b) teacher behaviour (8 statements), (c) learning styles (5 statements), and (d) behaviour of students without learning difficulties in the classroom (4 statements). Statements in this category discussed that educational exclusion contributes to the social exclusion of students with learning difficulties from their peers. Males and females did not differ in the frequency of responses made in each of these subcategories,  $\chi^2(3, N = 35) = 2.35, p = .50$  (see Table 5).

Statements in the subcategory of school or classroom structure discussed how the use of segregated classes within the school, and the methods of learning and instruction within the classroom, do not provide the opportunity for students with and without learning difficulties to connect. Students talked about not spending time together during the day due to the use of separate classrooms, *'You wouldn't spend as much time in class in a day as him so maybe that's where he feels left out'* and also discussed that being in separate classes makes it more difficult to have things to talk about, *'He doesn't really get the chance to have things to talk about cause he was just in those different credits.'* One student also stated that even within the same classroom, they may be doing different work and that this excludes them within the classroom, *'While we're*

Table 5

*Gender Response Frequencies in Subcategories of Classroom-Related Activities*

Subcategory	Males N = 16		Females N = 19		Total N = 35		$\chi^2$	p
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
School or Classroom Structure	7	43.8	11	57.9	18	51.4		
Teacher Behaviour	3	18.8	5	26.3	8	22.9	2.35	.50
Learning Styles	3	18.8	2	10.5	5	14.3		
Behaviour of Students without LD in the Classroom	3	18.8	1	5.3	4	11.4		

*doing something in class, they'll be working on something else which makes them left out.* Some students discussed that they do not get the chance to interact with other students with learning difficulties because of the different classes, *'It feels like they're in a completely different world with their different classes and different schedules.'*

Statements in the subcategory of teacher behaviour focused on the ways that teachers contribute to exclusion either in the classroom or outside of the classroom. Some students talked about how teachers may exclude students with learning difficulties with their teaching methods. For example, one student stated, *'Teachers have one way of doing something and if a student needs some more another way they're kind of hesitant to do it.'* Some statements focused on how teachers may also contribute to exclusion outside of the classroom and may deter students from interacting with their peers with learning difficulties. One student stated, *'Usually their teachers come [into the cafeteria] and sit with them and they direct where they sit.'*

Statements in the subcategory of learning styles focused on how differences in the manner and pace in which students with and without learning difficulties learn can contribute to exclusion. For example, one student stated that they may be excluded *'If they're just kind of a bit slower at receiving information in the classroom.'* Another student discussed how having difficulty learning in the classroom may cause students with learning difficulties to be excluded in and out of the classroom and said, *'Students with learning difficulties get left behind in study groups or at lunch if they are struggling in class.'*

Lastly, the subcategory of behaviour of students without learning difficulties in the classroom showed how these students may intentionally or unintentionally exclude classmates with learning difficulties for various reasons related to schoolwork and learning. One student

shared that students may be apprehensive to help students with learning difficulties in the classroom, *'Sometimes I will ignore them and get my work done and then just show it to them and not really explain it'* and another discussed instances when students without learning difficulties are seeking help for themselves, *'When I'm studying for a test or something I usually go to one of the smarter people in the class to study with rather than somebody who has a learning difficulty.'*

The proportion of statements in this category demonstrates the importance of inclusive education structures within schools and the effect that the education system has on creating inclusive atmospheres with the students.

#### **4.3 Category 3: Differences between Students with and Without Learning Difficulties**

There were 30 statements (21.1% of the total) in this category focusing on the differences between students with and without learning difficulties in several domains. It is important to note that these statements focused on the presence of differences, rather than student perception of differences. Statements that discussed the perceptions of students without learning difficulties were placed into a separate category. This category included three subcategories, (a) differences in social behaviour (14 statements), (b) differences in interests and conversation topics (10 statements), and (c) differences in level of ability (6 statements). Males and females differed in the frequency of statements made in these subcategories,  $\chi^2(2, N = 30) = 15.64, p < .001$  (see Table 6). Post hoc analyses were again conducted using the method described by Beasley and Schumacker in order to determine which subcategories in category 3 had significant gender differences. Results of the post hoc analyses are summarized in Table 7, showing that males focused more on differences in social behaviour ( $\chi^2(1, N = 14) = 7.24, p = .0071$ ) and females

Table 6

*Gender Response Frequencies in Subcategories of Differences between Students With and Without Learning Difficulties*

Subcategory	Males N = 18		Females N = 12		Total N = 30		$\chi^2$	p
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Differences in Social Behaviour	12	66.7	2	16.7	14	46.7		
Differences in Interests and Conversation Topics	1	5.6	9	75.0	10	33.3	15.64	.000 <sup>a</sup>
Differences in Level of Ability	5	27.8	1	8.3	6	20.0		

Note. <sup>a</sup>Significant at  $p < .001$ .

Table 7

*Post Hoc Analyses of Subcategories in Category 3*

Subcategory	Number of Statements		$\chi^2$	p
	F	M		
Differences in social behaviour	2	12	7.24	.0071 <sup>a</sup>
Differences in interests and conversation topics	9	1	15.61	.0001 <sup>a</sup>
Differences in level of ability	1	5	1.69	.1936

Note. <sup>a</sup>Significant at Bonferroni corrected  $p = .0083$ , where  $p = .05/6$ .

focused more on differences in interests and conversation topics ( $\chi^2(1, N = 10) = 15.61, p = .0001$ ). Males and females did not differ in the number of responses made about differences in level of ability,  $\chi^2(1, N = 6) = 1.69, p = .1936$ .

The subcategory of differences in social behaviour discussed how the social skills and behaviours of individuals with learning difficulties may cause them to be excluded. These statements focused on the idea that individuals with learning difficulties may lack the social understanding that is necessary to fit in and be included. One student discussed that they do not understand jokes the same way, *'Maybe they react to a joke in a different way than another friend would'* and other students discussed that they simply do not fit in with the rest of the students, *'They're just different'* and *'In all high school there's a few students that don't fit in or mix well.'* Males made significantly more statements than females in this subcategory.

Statements in the subcategory of differences in interests and conversation topics focused on the idea that students with and without learning difficulties have difficulty relating to each other and having things to talk about. Some students stated that they would have different experiences and would not be able to relate to each other, for example, *'They wouldn't have the experience to understand what I was going through'* and *'If I brought up a topic that would be more mature or something like that they wouldn't be able to discuss that as well.'* Some students shared that they would have difficulty finding similar interests or things in common, *'I think we just wouldn't share the same interests'* and *'It's hard to have something in common with them cause they're just like different.'* Females made significantly more statements than males in this subcategory.



The subcategory of differences in level of ability focused on how students with learning difficulties may be excluded because they may not be able to do the same things as other students. Some statements focused on physical ability, *'Say you're going to play a sport, some people might want to exclude them because they don't have the same capacity like other people do'* and some statements focused on intellectual ability, *'They're not smart enough to be around those guys even though that's wrong.'* Some students focused on the presence of the disability in general, for example, *'[Exclusion] depends on the level of disability.'* Females and males did not differ in the number of statements made in this subcategory.

Statements in this category demonstrated that some students without learning difficulties perceive that they are too different from students with learning difficulties to be able to include them and find that these differences make it too difficult to interact and engage with each other.

#### **4.4 Category 4: Thoughts and Behaviours of Students with Learning Difficulties**

This category included 24 statements (16.9% of the total) that focused on the idea that students with learning difficulties may intentionally or unintentionally exclude themselves or contribute to their own exclusion. Two subcategories were identified in this category, (a) behaviours that exclude themselves (19 statements) and (b) thoughts and perceptions (5 statements). Males and females did not differ in the number of statements made in these subcategories,  $\chi^2(1, N = 24) = 2.27, p = .13$  (see Table 8).

Comments in the subcategory of behaviours that exclude themselves described ways that students with learning difficulties exclude themselves either on purpose or accidentally. Some students discussed behaviours that were unintentional, for example *'It might be harder for them to focus on announcements'* and *'With everything going around in the school they might not*

Table 8

*Gender Response Frequencies in Subcategories of Thoughts and Behaviours of Students with Learning Difficulties*

Subcategory	Males N = 12		Females N = 12		Total N = 24		$\chi^2$	p
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Behaviours that Exclude Themselves	8	66.7	11	91.7	19	79.2	2.27	.13
Thoughts and Perceptions	4	33.3	1	8.3	5	20.8		

*catch what's going on.* Other students focused on purposeful behaviours, for example, *'People with learning difficulties just hang out by themselves.'* Some students also discussed personality characteristics of students with learning difficulties that may prevent them from including themselves. One student stated that *'People with learning difficulties are insecure'* and another stated that *'They could just be really shy or something.'*

Thoughts and perceptions discussed the ideas, thoughts, or perceptions that students with learning difficulties may hold that lead to their exclusion by others or self-exclusion. Some statements focused on perceptions that students with learning difficulties have about other students, for example, *'If students with learning difficulties are left out, I think it's because they don't feel accepted.'* Other statements focused on the perceptions that they have about themselves, for example, *'Students with learning difficulties feel like they wouldn't be good enough to hang out with us.'*

Statements in this category demonstrate that some students perceive that classmates with learning difficulties contribute to their own exclusion and that they have a responsibility to find ways to include themselves.

#### **4.5 Category 5: Exclusion Is Not a Problem**

The last category included 6 statements (4.2% of the total) that focused on the idea that exclusion does not occur or that the school is mainly inclusive. One student stated that *'I feel like people always try to include them'* and another stated that *'Personally I don't think that they're not included in events.'* Statements in this category reflected a lack of awareness of the need to include students with learning difficulties, but ended up in their own category because they explicitly discussed that it is not a problem or that it does not happen.

The qualitative analysis demonstrated that participants' responses formed five categories including (1) thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties, (2) classroom-related activities, (3) differences between students with and without learning difficulties, (4) thoughts and behaviours of student with learning difficulties, and (5) exclusion is not a problem. The five categories demonstrate that students see several possible causes of exclusion. These causes may be intentional or unintentional, and also may reflect student roles in exclusion or the roles of external factors in exclusion. The categories overall seem to reflect the idea that students may lack awareness of exclusion or knowledge of how to include students with learning difficulties because of perceived barriers such as the differences between students with and without learning difficulties as well as external barriers in the school.

The quantitative analysis revealed that males and females differed in the themes of their responses. Specifically, females made more statements about the negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties as well as differences in interests and conversation topics. Additionally, males made more statements about the characteristics of students without learning difficulties and differences in social behaviour.

To summarize, the qualitative and quantitative analyses demonstrated that participants made most statements in the category of thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties with males and females making an equal number of statements. Within this category, the subcategory with most statements was negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties, of which females made significantly more responses than males. Thus, females saw negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties as a highly important reason for exclusion, and frequently discussed it.

The category with the second largest number of statements was classroom-related activities with no differences in the frequency of males' and females' responses. The next largest category focused on the differences between students with and without learning difficulties. Overall, although males and females made an equal number of responses in this category, they differed in the number of responses made in the subcategories. Males saw differences in social behaviour as a more critical reason for exclusion than females who saw differences in interests and conversation topics as more important. The fourth category, thoughts and behaviours of students with learning difficulties, was not as important in terms of number of responses as the others. Males and females did not differ in the amount of responses made in this category or its subcategories. Lastly, the category of exclusion is not a problem contained the smallest number of statements, demonstrating that most participants believed that exclusion did exist and was an issue. Males and females did not differ in the frequency of responses in this category.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The following section places the results of the current study within the context of the current literature on exclusion and gender differences in high school students. Implications, limitations, future directions, and overall conclusions are also discussed.

### Overview of the Study

The current study was designed to investigate high school students' perceptions of why students with learning difficulties are sometimes excluded at school, and determine whether males and females differed in the themes of their responses. The interview data was analyzed (a) qualitatively to uncover the thematic categories of the participants' responses, and (b) quantitatively to compare the frequencies of male and female responses in these categories. The qualitative analysis demonstrated that participants' responses formed five categories including thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties, classroom-related activities, differences between students with and without learning difficulties, thoughts and behaviours of students with learning difficulties, and exclusion is not a problem. These categories were further divided into subcategories and gender differences were found in some of them. Specifically, females made more responses about differences in interests and conversation topics as well as negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties, whereas males made more statements about differences in social behaviour, and characteristics of students without learning difficulties. A discussion of these findings is presented next.

### Interpretations of Results

#### Category 1: Thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties.

The large proportion of responses made in this category demonstrates that participants mostly focused on the students' roles in the exclusion of their peers with learning difficulties. This finding adds to the current inclusion literature by demonstrating that students are aware of their responsibility to include their peers with learning difficulties and this suggests that giving them the awareness and tools to include their peers with learning difficulties may help to improve inclusion. In fact, past research has provided support for this and has demonstrated that when inclusion values are strongly voiced by school leaders and teachers and incorporated into school mottos, students internalize these values (Allan & Persson, 2016).

This category also appears to provide support for inclusion programs that directly involve peers such as the Peer Buddy Program, and is compatible with research that has demonstrated the success of these programs at increasing interactions between students with and without learning difficulties (Carter et al., 2005; Hughes et al., 1999; Hughes et al., 2002). Research has also demonstrated that interactions between students with and without learning difficulties increase by explicitly asking students without learning difficulties to include their peers (Hughes et al., 2002). Thus, eliciting the responsibility of students without learning difficulties may be important for inclusion efforts.

Therefore, programs that give responsibility to students to include and work with their classmates with learning difficulties have been developed and have demonstrated some success. The participants' responses in the current study demonstrate that formal programming is important for increasing inclusion and interaction between students with and without learning difficulties in and out of the classroom. Inclusion programs should aim to make students aware of their role and responsibility to include their classmates with learning difficulties and

continuously engage them to do so by making these values a salient priority at all levels within the school.

### **Category 2: Classroom-related activities.**

The responses in the category of classroom-related activities demonstrate that external barriers to inclusion exist which are part of the school's structure and practices. These statements discussed that segregated classrooms can contribute to overall social exclusion in the school and that teaching methods may also prevent students with learning difficulties from interacting with and learning from their peers without learning difficulties.

The presence of segregated classrooms as a barrier to social inclusion has been well-documented (e.g. Robo, 2014; Diaz, 2010; Macrae, Maguire, & Melbourne, 2003; Howard, 1999) and the participants in the current study explicitly named this as a barrier to interacting with their peers with learning difficulties due to lack of opportunity as well as to the perception that students with and without learning difficulties are part of '*different worlds*.' Some participants also noted instances of exclusion occurring in classrooms that contain students with and without learning difficulties. This is consistent with past literature that has shown that inclusive classrooms are not always successful at creating inclusive atmospheres (e.g. Specht, 2013; Tateyama-Sniezek, 1990). Specht (2013) explained that this may result from teachers failing to incorporate the social and academic needs of all students within their classroom. Moreover, teachers in inclusive classrooms need to change their instructional methods by altering goals, assessment, and instruction, to meet all individual needs and abilities (Beattie, Jordan, & Algozzine, 2007; Gadberry, 2009; King, 2003; Berry, 2006). Participants in the current study explained that this may not always be the case and that teachers can promote



exclusion in their instructional methods by failing to present the material in a manner that reaches all students and by failing to promote interaction between students with different levels of ability.

Teachers can help increase interactions between students with and without learning difficulties in inclusive classrooms by using peer tutoring or cooperative learning models (O'Connor, 1995). However, teachers have voiced several concerns about their ability to implement these new models successfully in inclusive classrooms because of several difficulties including meeting the needs of students with special needs, changing roles from assigner/teller to collaborative problem-solver, working in a teaching team effectively, and working with students with severe behavioural problems (Olinger, 2014; Chestnut, 2000). Thus, teachers require adequate training and support to be able to implement these new models effectively.

Past research has demonstrated that segregated classrooms and using traditional instructional methods in inclusive classrooms are significant barriers to social inclusion. Thus, different methods for effectively teaching in inclusive classrooms have been developed and have demonstrated some success; however teachers have identified several barriers that prevent them from successfully implementing these new instructional practices. The current study demonstrates that overcoming these barriers is necessary to create successful inclusion because students identified that these school and classroom practices can contribute significantly to exclusion.

### **Category 3: Differences between students with and without learning difficulties.**

Statements in this category demonstrated that students believed they were different from their peers with learning difficulties, and that these differences were a barrier to interacting with

each other. Some statements focused on the idea that students with learning difficulties did not have the abilities to participate in the activities that other students engaged in, but most focused on the differences in interests and conversation topics, and social skills. This category mimics the finding by Nowicki et al. (2014) that children in grades five and six perceived differences between students with and without learning difficulties as reasons for exclusion.

The statements in this category appear to support the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1988) that states that individuals are more likely to engage in a behaviour if they perceive it as good, when social expectations support the behaviour, when they perceive the behaviour to be easy, and when they perceive they have control to perform the behaviour. Based on participants' statements, any of these four conditions could have affected behaviours to include students with learning difficulties. Therefore, inclusive programs that teach children how to see diversity as more positive, for example the Three Cs Program (Johnson & Johnson, 2000), can motivate students to interact with peers who are different from them because they learn that doing so is good, is socially acceptable, and that they are able to do it successfully. Programs that teach social and emotional learning are also important as they can teach students how to manage their emotions, how to see themselves and others more positively, and how to interact with others effectively (Durlak et al., 2011).

Differences in social skills may also demonstrate participants' concern with how they will be perceived if they interact with classmates with learning difficulties. This concept relates to the theory of subjective group dynamics (Marques & Paez, 1994; Marques et al., 1998; Marques et al., 2001) which states that behaving in ways that are deviant from the group's norms can lead to criticism or exclusion from the group. As such, individuals may be hesitant to interact

with peers with learning difficulties because they are concerned about being excluded from their own social group.

Programs that teach students how to accept and celebrate diversity, programs that teach social and emotional learning, communication and conflict resolution skills have been developed (e.g. Johnson & Johnson, 2000), and have been shown to be successful at increasing interactions between diverse students and conflict resolution skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). The results of the current study demonstrate that these programs are important for inclusion as the participants perceived differences between students with and without learning difficulties as barriers to inclusion.

#### **Category 4: Thoughts and behaviours of students with learning difficulties.**

This category demonstrates that students believed that their peers with learning difficulties had a responsibility to promote their own inclusion and that their personality characteristics and behaviours may be self-excluding. Past research provides some support for these statements and has suggested that individuals with intellectual disabilities may have lower sociability than their peers (Zion & Jenvey, 2006) and that this may also depend on the type of disability (Roy, Retzer, & Sikabofori, 2015). For example, individuals with Fragile X Syndrome have been described as being shy, socially withdrawn, and socially anxious, whereas individuals with Williams Syndrome have been described as being friendly, empathic, and sociable (Roy et al., 2015). Therefore, the literature provides some evidence for participants' statements in the current study that these individuals may exclude themselves because of certain personality traits.

Providing an alternative explanation for possible self-exclusion, research has shown that individuals with mild intellectual disabilities are aware of the social stigma associated with

having a disability (Nezu et al., 1995; Szivos-Bach, 1993) and this may deter them from interacting with and pursuing social relationships with their peers. In this sense, the theory of learned helplessness (Maier & Seligman, 1976; Maier, Seligman, & Solomon, 1969; Seligman, 1975; Seligman, Maier, & Solomon, 1971) may explain the social withdrawal of some individuals with learning difficulties as they may exclude themselves because they believe that they will be stigmatized and excluded regardless of their efforts to engage with their peers.

A final explanation of students' focus on the self-exclusion of their classmates with learning difficulties is the concept of responsibility denial (Schmitt, Montada, & Dalbert, 1991). Schmitt and colleagues described three strategies that individuals may use to minimize their responsibility to help disadvantaged individuals including minimizing their needs, perceiving needs as self-inflicted, and making others responsible for helping. The statements made in this category would encompass the denial of responsibility by perceiving needs as self-inflicted. By stating that classmates with learning difficulties exclude themselves, the participants can deny their own responsibility to include them.

Therefore, past research provides some support for the idea that individuals with learning difficulties exclude themselves, but also demonstrates that the participants in the current study may have been denying their own responsibility by placing blame on these individuals.

#### **Category 5: Exclusion is not a problem.**

The small number of statements in this category demonstrates that some students were not aware of the issue of exclusion and/or denied that it was an issue at their school. This seems to demonstrate either a lack of awareness of the issue of exclusion or a denial of the issue. This denial could be a method of denying responsibility, as described in the previous category, or

could be a means of sustaining a just world belief (Lerner, 1980). Lerner (1980) explained that people are motivated to believe that the world is fair and that people will get what they deserve in the world, so they will often rationalize or deny the presence of an injustice, for example by denying the presence of an issue such as racism, sexism, or exclusion. In the current study, participants may have denied the presence of exclusion because they did not wish to believe that their peers would be excluded simply because they have a learning difficulty.

Another explanation concerning the belief that exclusion is not a problem, focuses on the denial of responsibility by using the minimization of needs (Schmitt et al.,1991). Schwartz and Howard (1980) explained that individuals may be motivated to deny their responsibility to engage in a behaviour that corresponds to their internalized values when they perceive that the costs of helping are too high. In this sense, individuals in the current study may have denied their responsibility to include their peers with learning difficulties by minimizing its prevalence and importance because of perceived consequences of including. One possible consequence that individuals may perceive, as described previously, is the possibility of being excluded themselves.

To summarize, responses in this category demonstrate that participants were either not aware of the issue of exclusion, or were denying the issue because they either wished to deny their own responsibility to include and/or were attempting to maintain a just world view.

### **Gender differences.**

Chi square analyses revealed that males and females did not differ in the number of responses made in the different categories, but did differ in the number of responses made in the different subcategories within two categories.

The first difference was found in responses made in the subcategories belonging to the category of thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties. Specifically, females focused on the negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties as reasons they exclude, whereas males focused more on characteristics of students without learning difficulties. When examining the content of these subcategories, it is evident they both focused on perceptions of negative aspects of students without learning difficulties that contribute to exclusion, but males discussed stable characteristics of these individuals whereas females discussed the importance of the thoughts and actions of classmates without learning difficulties. In this sense, males seemed to generalize excluding behaviour to the characteristics of the whole person, whereas females focused merely on the thoughts and behaviours without generalizing to the person. These differences may be reflective of the different interaction styles found between boys and girls where boys' interactions tend to involve more competition, conflict, and ego displays; and girls' interactions seem to involve more collaboration and group harmony (Maccoby, 1998). In relating this to the current study, female participants' focus on the negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties demonstrates that they perceived the exclusion behaviour as changeable which reflects the ability to see alternative behaviour that would improve inclusion and collaboration. Their responses reflected more attention to how to achieve more inclusion and collaboration between students, and they voiced ways that the students without learning difficulties may be behaving in an opposite manner. In contrast, males' focus on the stable characteristics of students without learning difficulties demonstrates that they did not focus as much on the changeability of the behaviour, showing that they did not examine alternative behaviour that could improve inclusion. Male participants

instead seemed to belittle the character of students who exclude which may be reflective of the competitive nature of male interaction.

The second difference was found in the subcategories of differences between students with and without learning difficulties. Specifically, females focused more on differences in interests and conversation topics, whereas males focused more on differences in social behaviour. These differences reflect the different interaction styles and different social goals of males and females. Firstly, females tend to share more about themselves with their friends (Maccoby, 2002) and their relationships tend to be more relational, whereas males tend to be more action-oriented in relationships (Benenson et al., 1997). This helps to explain why females in the current study saw differences in interests and conversation topics as more of a barrier than males because relating to each other through conversation and being able to understand each other is important for fostering intimacy in their friendships (Maccoby, 2002).

These differences also relate to the different goals of friendship found between males and females. Being able to relate to and share with each other is important for achieving development goals that have shown to be more endorsed by females than males (Makara & Madjar, 2015). As described earlier, development goals are aimed at developing and sustaining high quality friendships and improving social competence (Ryan & Shim, 2006). Furthermore, males have been found to endorse more demonstration-approach goals which are aimed at appearing popular and more socially competent than others. This may explain why males believed differences in social behaviour and social skills were more of a barrier to inclusion. Males may have suspected that being associated with individuals with learning difficulties who do not have the same social behaviours as students without learning difficulties may result in them being seen as less socially competent, less popular, and appear as though they do not fit in with the norm themselves.

**Overall interpretation.**

The overall take-home message of the response categories appears to be that students were aware of the role they play in the exclusion of students with learning difficulties, but that they also referred to several barriers to inclusion including perceived differences and educational barriers. Males and females perceived differences with students with learning difficulties as a barrier, but females focused more on differences in interests and conversation topics whereas males focused on differences in social behaviour. Furthermore, females focused more on changeable behaviours and thoughts of students without learning difficulties whereas males focused on more stable characteristics of students without learning difficulties as being a reason for social exclusion. Therefore, inclusion interventions should involve making students aware of their responsibility to include, teach students ways that they can include, target the students' perception of differences as a barrier by teaching them to see diversity as more positive, and target the educational barriers including segregated classrooms and teaching methods. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to develop more gender-specific interventions, for example by focusing on teaching female students ways of relating to others who have different experiences than them, and by teaching males the importance of distinguishing between the behaviour and character of a person.

**Implications**

The results of the current study have several social and educational implications. The participants' responses demonstrated that inclusion interventions should teach students the importance of inclusion, teach them their responsibility to include, help them learn how to see diversity as more positive, and teach them how to effectively include and interact with others



who may be different from them. The students' statements also demonstrate the need for inclusive classroom practices.

The findings of the current study demonstrate that inclusion efforts that have already been developed target the appropriate concepts according to student perspectives. For example, the Three Cs Program (Johnson & Johnson, 2000) that aims to teach students to see diversity as more positive, targets the students' perception that differences between students with and without learning difficulties are too great to allow for effective interactions. As such, school policy should make diversity a positive value to show teachers and students the importance of inclusion. To illustrate an example of how this can be achieved, students in a successful inclusive program in a Swedish municipality reflected on their experiences in the program and stated that their school consistently repeated their mottos of "everyone should be a winner in his own life" and "together we can be more successful" and that they strongly adhered to and carried these mottos with them (Allan & Persson, 2016). Therefore, the values of diversity and cooperative community should be strongly emphasized throughout a school.

The results of the current study demonstrate that when discussing exclusion, students are capable of recognizing their responsibility to include students with learning difficulties. This is hopeful for inclusion efforts as school leaders can include all students in inclusion interventions, openly discuss with them the roles that they play, as well as how they can be more inclusive in and out of the classroom.

Additionally, it is clear that successfully using inclusive classroom structures is important for fostering inclusion within the school. Therefore, teachers should be given the training, support and aids needed to effectively teach a diverse range of students in their classrooms.

Methods that promote student interaction include cooperative learning (O'Connor, 1995), peer tutoring (O'Connor, 1995), differentiated instruction (Roy et al., 2012), and/or universal design for learning (CAST, 2011). Teachers should also include social and emotional learning in their teaching so that their students can develop social skills and emotion regulation skills to use in interactions with each other as well as to learn to view diversity as positive.

Lastly, finding that males and females differed in the reasons they believed students with learning difficulties were excluded is valuable for developing more gender-specific inclusion interventions that target these different perspectives. By implementing interventions that are specific to what different students see as barriers depending on their gender, students can get the most out of the intervention and chances of success are increased.

Obtaining student perspectives and incorporating them into inclusion interventions was important as it can further help to achieve successful inclusion throughout the school. As discussed earlier, inclusion is important for increasing the wellbeing and development of students with learning difficulties and is also important for increasing achievement for and connections between all students within the school. Achieving a successfully inclusive school atmosphere is beneficial to all students as it can teach them to appreciate their differences and can help them see themselves and each other more positively. The current study shed light on the aspects of inclusion interventions that may be most effective and that demonstrate the importance of implementing these interventions because they target the reasons for exclusion identified by students.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations of the current study to consider, some of which are due to the inclusion of qualitative data. Firstly, qualitative data may not be generalizable to other populations and consequently, it may not have strong external validity. Second, the use of face-to-face interviews may have affected participants' responses as they may not have been as comfortable sharing all of their ideas. For example, some participants may have engaged in positive impression management by making statements that they believed would make them seen as more positive by the interviewer. Thirdly, the interpretation of data was subject to researcher bias because it was analyzed qualitatively and the thematic categories were interpreted by the researcher. Fourth, interviews were not all conducted in the same room and some rooms were in more private areas than others. Thus, some participant responses could have been affected by the privacy of their room because of the possibility that someone could walk by and hear their interview. Lastly, there may have been a volunteer bias effect because students who volunteered to participate in the study may have been more knowledgeable or care more about the issue of exclusion. Therefore, the results may not be reflective of all students in similar schools.

### **Future Directions**

Firstly, due to the limitations previously described resulting from the qualitative data, replication studies would be beneficial in order to further understand student perceptions of exclusion and to examine the topic with different populations. Secondly, it may be beneficial to investigate the perception of high school students in grades 9, 10, and 11 in order to investigate whether they differ depending on where the student is in their high school career. Students at the beginning of high school are at a different stage than those at the end of high school and it would be beneficial to examine if and how student perceptions change throughout high school depending on grade. Thirdly, investigating student perceptions of how to increase inclusion

would add to the literature on inclusion strategies. Fourth, developing school-based interventions based on the results of the current study would be an important next step and would help to increase awareness of including students with learning difficulties. Additionally, since the students' statements largely focused on the perception of differences between students with and without learning difficulties, it may be beneficial to further develop and assess interventions that focus on making diversity positive, and to help students see the similarities rather than differences between them. Fifth, the development of gender-specific interventions based on the findings of the current study would be beneficial, and research should examine the utility of such interventions. Lastly, research should investigate the effectiveness of different strategies to overcome the barriers to successful inclusive classrooms.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the reasons that high school students believed contributed to the social exclusion of their peers with learning difficulties, and to examine whether males and females differed in their responses. Interviews were conducted one-on-one with students in grade twelve and participants were asked why they thought students with learning difficulties are sometimes left out at school. Qualitative analysis of participants' statements demonstrated that participants' responses formed five categories including (a) thoughts and behaviours of students without learning difficulties, (b) classroom-related activities, (c) differences between students with and without learning difficulties, (d) thoughts and behaviours of students with learning difficulties, and (e) exclusion is not a problem. The categories were further divided into subcategories and quantitative analyses revealed gender differences in some of them. Males focused more on characteristics of students without learning difficulties and differences in social behaviour between students with and without learning

difficulties, whereas females focused more on negative thoughts and actions of students without learning difficulties and differences in interests and conversation topics. The findings of the current study are an important addition to exclusion literature because they provide further insight into the aspects of inclusion interventions that may be most beneficial to students. The findings also demonstrate that effectiveness of inclusion interventions may increase by being more gender-specific.

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## Appendix A

## Interview Protocol

1. What grade are you in?
2. In what month and year were you born?
3. What is your gender?
4. Can you tell me what a learning difficulty is?
5. What are some examples of the kinds of things students who have learning difficulties would find difficult in English or Math?
6. How many siblings do you have? How old are they? What is the gender of each sibling? Do any of these siblings have learning difficulties? PROBE e.g., which subjects, receive resource help, accommodations/modifications at school
7. Do you sometimes find learning new things difficult? Can you tell me about it? PROBE e.g., do you have an IEP, receive resource help, accommodations/modifications at school.
8. Can you tell me why you think some secondary (high school) students find learning new things difficult? PROBE.
9. Can you give me some examples of the kinds of things that secondary (high school) students who have learning difficulties would find difficult at school? PROBE.
10. Do you know anyone else who has learning difficulties? Are any of them your friends or relatives?
11. Are secondary (high school) students who have learning difficulties sometimes left out at school? Why do you think they are/are not left out? PROBE.
12. What are some things that can be done to help secondary (high school) students with learning difficulties feel more included at school? PROBE.

13. Do you have any questions about what we have talked about?

PROBES: Oh, that is very interesting. Can you tell me more? Can you think of any other examples? Do you have any more thoughts about...? Why do you think that...? What would that look like?

AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW:

1. Thank participants for their responses.
2. At the end of the study (which could take a few more months to finish interviewing people in his/her grade) we will be entering their name in a draw for a \$50 gift certificate for Chapters/Indigo books. There will be one draw per grade.

## Appendix B

## Preliminary Subcategories

Table B1

*Preliminary Subcategories*

Category	Frequency
1. Thoughts and Behaviours of Students without LD	47
1a. Negative thoughts and actions of students without LD	26
1b. Lack of awareness or effort	12
1c. Characteristics of students without LD	9
2. Classroom-Related Activities	36
2a. School/classroom structure	19
2b. Teacher behaviour	8
2c. Learning styles	5
2d. Behaviour of students without LD in the classroom	4
3. Differences between Students With and Without LD	30
3a. Social behaviour	14
3b. Difficulty relating in conversation	10
3c. Level of ability	6
4. Thoughts and Behaviours of Students with LD	23
4a. Behaviours that may exclude themselves	19
4b. Thoughts and perceptions	4
5. Exclusion does not Happen/ Is Not a Problem	6
Total	142

*Note.* LD = learning difficulties.

## Appendix C

## Revisions of Operational Definitions

## First Round Operational Definitions:

- 1) Thoughts and Behaviours of Students without Learning Difficulties: These statements reflect ideas, perceptions, thoughts, or actions that other students hold that either exclude or contribute to the exclusion of students with learning difficulties (LD).
  - a. Negative Thoughts and Actions of Students without LD: Discuss negative thoughts and behaviours engaged in by other students that exclude students with LD.
  - b. Lack of Awareness or Effort: Discuss behaviours or thoughts by other students that are unintentional that contribute to exclusion or a general lack of awareness of including students with LD.
  - c. Characteristics of Students without LD: Discuss personal characteristics of other students that may be reasons why students exclude students with LD.
- 2) Classroom-Related Activities: These statements discuss different things that occur in the classroom or that are related to the classroom that contribute to exclusion of students with LD.
  - a. Teacher Behaviour: Behaviours that teachers engage in either in or out of the classroom that contribute to exclusion.
  - b. Behaviour of Students without LD in the Classroom: These statements discuss different behaviours by students that exclude students with LD in the classroom.
  - c. School/Classroom Structure: Discuss the structures of the school and within classrooms that contribute to exclusion and do not allow for opportunity to connect.
  - d. Learning Styles: These statements discuss differences in how students learn and at what pace within the classroom that may contribute to exclusion.
- 3) Differences between Students With and Without Learning Difficulties: These statements discuss differences in several domains between students with LD and those without as being reasons for exclusion. These statements do not discuss the student perception of differences, but actual differences themselves.
  - a. Social Behaviour: Differences in social skills or social behaviours that cause them to be excluded or not fit in well with others. These statements also discuss how students with LD may just not fit in well in general.
  - b. Difficulty relating in conversation: These statements discuss difficulty relating to each other or having things to talk about and relate to.
  - c. Level of Ability: Discuss how the ability of students with LD including intellectual and physical ability contributes to their exclusion.
- 4) Thoughts and Behaviours of Students with Learning Difficulties: These statements discuss ideas about how students with LD may exclude themselves or be contributing to their own exclusion.

- a. Behaviours that May Exclude Themselves: Behaviours engaged in either on purpose or accidentally that may exclude themselves. Also includes personality characteristics that may contribute to leaving themselves out.
  - b. Thoughts and Perceptions: Discuss perceptions that students with learning difficulties have about themselves or others that may lead to their exclusion or self-exclusion.
- 5) Exclusion does not happen/ is not a Problem: Statements that reflect the idea that exclusion does not exist or that it is not a big issue.

Revised Operational Definitions (operational definitions not listed remained unchanged):

1a) Negative thoughts and actions of other students without LD: Discuss negative thoughts and behaviours towards or about students with LD engaged in by other students that exclude students with LD. These behaviours tend to be more intentional.

1b) General Lack of Awareness or Effort to Include: Statements that reflect the idea that exclusion by students is unintentional. These statements discuss unintentional behaviours by other students that reflect a lack of awareness of the need to include students with LD and a lack of understanding of disabilities.

2b) Behaviour of Students without LD in the Classroom: Statements that focus specifically on behaviours in the classroom by other students that exclude students with LD. These statements focus on classroom exclusion by other students and may be intentional or unintentional.

3a) [Differences in] Social Behaviour: Statements that discuss differences in social skills or social behaviours that cause them to be excluded or not fit in well with others. These statements also discuss how students with LD may just not fit in well in general.

3b) Interests and Conversation Topics: These statements discuss difficulty relating to each other or having things to talk about and relate to.

5) Exclusion is not a Problem: These statements discuss the idea that exclusion does not occur in the school or that the school is mainly inclusive.

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