The Experiences Of Three Students With Learning Disabilities as they Transition from High School to Postsecondary Education

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ABSTRACT:

This qualitative study examines the transition to life after high school of three young men with learning disabilities (LD). The research focuses on their individual journeys from the end of grade 12 in June until to the end of May the following year and provides overarching themes as to their lived experiences during this year of transition. Using a longitudinal multiple instrumental case design, a series of four in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the three participants. The findings showed that although the students had unique experiences over the year, there were several commonalities in their stories including readiness, emotions, the importance of social connections, coping skills, changes over time, accessing supports, and learning online. We discuss the stories of the participants based on these overarching themes. Although the study only examined the experiences of three men with LD from one high school, their stories provide valuable information and highlight several recommendations for supports and services, such as types of support offered to students and the timing of these supports. Moreover, their stories highlight the need to develop a positive sense of self during the high school years, and social integration once on postsecondary campuses.

Keywords: Learning disabilities, School transitions, Postsecondary education, Case Study Design

INTRODUCTION

Each spring, a new group of grade 12 students graduate from high school. This final year of K-12 schooling is important because students need to make decisions about what life after high school will bring. For many students, the first decision is whether or not they will pursue postsecondary education (PSE): the answer to which is a resounding *yes* for more and more students. Indeed, since 2000, the number of Canadian students choosing to enroll in postsecondary institutions following high school graduation has increased steadily (Statista Research Department, 2022). This is not surprising as completing PSE is generally associated with various positive outcomes. As examples, individuals who obtain a bachelor's degree tend to earn more money, be employed full-time (Frank et al., 2015), have higher job satisfaction, and report better health than individuals without a postsecondary degree (Alonso, 2023; Barrow et al., 2013).

A specific group of students increasing in number at postsecondary are those with learning disabilities (LD; Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2018). Between the 2008-2009 and 2014-2015 academic years, the percentage of students in PSE with LD climbed by 20% (LDAO, 2018) meaning that the rate of individuals with LD attending PSE is growing faster than the general population. Moreover, LD is the most common disability reported by students at postsecondary institutions (McGregor et al., 2016). However, while students with LD desire a PSE and the associated benefits, they are less likely to complete their degree than their peers (Bolt et al., 2011; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Lipka et al., 2019) and dropout is most likely to occur within a student's first-year (Freeman, 2009). Dropping out of PSE may exacerbate the existing negative trajectories experienced by individuals with LD after high school such as lower earning and higher unemployment relative to the general population (LDAC; PACFOLD, 2007). While researchers have examined students with LD transitioning out of high school (e.g., Eseadi, 2024), often to postsecondary institutions (e.g., Plasman et al., 2024), little research has examined the perspectives of high school students with LD specifically concerning this process and their experiences (see systematic review by Yeager & Morgan, 2023). Moreover, the authors were unable to locate a study that followed students with LD through this timeframe from high school graduation into PSE. As such, the purpose of this paper is to document the journeys of three students with LD as they navigate the year after high school. To provide a framework for our investigation, we draw on the Inputs-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model as our conceptual framework.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Astin proposed that research in higher education "is incomplete unless it includes data on student inputs, student outcomes, and the educational environment to which the student is exposed" (Astin & Antonio, 2012, p. 19). Astin enacts this sentiment in his Inputs-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model, which serves as the conceptual framework for this study (Astin, 1993; Astin & Antonio, 2012).

Inputs

According to the I-E-O model, *inputs* consist of the experiences and characteristics of students that they bring with them to their postsecondary institutions. This can include demographic information, educational background, reasons for attending school, and academic self-concept just to name a few (Astin, 1993; Astin & Antonio 2012; House, 2002; Thurmond et al, 2002; Sam et al., 2013). Traditionally, demographic inputs have been the main consideration (e.g., Pingry O'Neill et al., 2012), however, more recently psychosocial inputs are gaining prominence because they are more malleable and thus a venue for support and intervention. Previous research has found that psychosocial factors have a significant, positive relationship with various academic outcomes in PSE (e.g., Fong et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2012; Robbins et al., 2004). For example, Robbins and colleagues (2004) in their meta-analysis found that student academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation were strong predictors of success at PSE. Similar results were found by Schneider and Preckel (2017). Indeed, for students with LD, self-efficacy is instrumental to success in their education (Casali et al., 2024; Fleming & Wated, 2016; Hampton & Mason, 2003). However, it has also been found that students with LD identify lower self-concepts in academics when compared to their peers (DuPaul, 2017; Yakut & Akgul, 2023). Arguably, student inputs in the form of psychosocial factors begin during compulsory education and are then carried by students into PSE. For this reason, it is important for research on the transition to PSE to begin while students are still in high school accumulating experiences that carry forward.

Environment

Environments are the "lived experiences" of students while completing their education (Astin & Antonio, 2012,

p. 87) and can be conceptualized according to Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975; 1999; 2006). Tinto suggests there are two systems within the post-secondary environment, academic and social. Academic integration consists of the student's intellectual development, such as accessing academic support, or going to class and taking good notes. Social integration consists of the social interactions one has on campus, and their sense of belonging with others (Chrysikos et al., 2017; Meeuwisse et al., 2010). For students with disabilities broadly, academic and social integration are positively related to student persistence (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). In terms of students with LD, they tend to report lower levels of academic and social integration at postsecondary (DaDeppo, 2009; DuPaul et al., 2017). Moreover, while social integration is important for all students in postsecondary, the connections between social integration and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and satisfaction are stronger for students with LD than their peers without LD (Goegan & Daniels, 2020).

In addition to these general environmental factors, students who graduated in 2020 or 2021 had to additionally manage the unique "lived experiences" of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Goegan et al. (2023) found several themes in the experiences of students with LD at postsecondary institutions because of the shift to learning online required by COVID-19. Students in their study identified challenges with accessing accommodations, the importance of staying connected with others, how online learning is different from learning in-person, the emotional impact of being a student during a pandemic, and finally the importance of resilience and perseverance. Many of these themes can be subsumed under the notions of academic or social environments and highlight the need to attend to these two categories of experiences not only at the beginning of PSE but throughout the entire first year.

Outcomes

According to Astin, *outcomes* are indicators of academic success. While grades and GPA tend to be the most commonly utilized indicators of success (York et al., 2015), researchers are beginning to embrace additional indicators such as learning important knowledge and skills, being able to apply learning to real-life or future careers and feeling satisfaction with one's learning experience (Goegan et al., 2020). In part these additional variables recognize that all notions of academic success are highly individualized and based on the goals established by the individual (Goegan et al., 2020). This is true even

in terms of grades and GPA wherein one student might see a B as a failure while another student might interpret it as a success. One way to acknowledge this is to allow students with LD to identify their own definitions and experiences of academic success concerning their transition from high school to PSE.

The Current Study

Using the I-E-O model as our conceptual model, (Astin, 1993; Astin & Antonio, 2012), the purpose of the current research was to examine the lived experiences of three students with LD during the transition from grade 12 to life after high school, which for all three participants involved starting PSE. For this research project, instrumental cases were identified through a partnership with a school specifically designed to support students in grades 3-12 with a formal diagnosis of LD. The school takes pride in developing programs to assist students in acquiring the necessary knowledge and abilities to support their academic pursuits. For example, the school provides a transition planning guide for students, annual postsecondary transition events where representatives from all the local schools come to meet with students to provide important information and resources, and a Grade 12 Transition Program. Students who participate in the Transition Program meet with team members to review their psychoeducational assessment, learn about their strengths and challenges at school, and practice important self-advocacy skills. The school highlights the importance of this program and their school philosophy more broadly for supporting the success of their students as they transition to PSE or the workplace. By choosing instrumental cases from within this context, we were able to focus on three research questions: (a) How do students with LD describe their experiences with the transition from high school to PSE? (b) How do students with LD come to adapt to their new learning environment? (c) Are their commonalities in how students with LD experience the shift from high school to PSE?

METHOD

We used a longitudinal multiple instrumental case design to gain an in-depth understanding of the transition out of high school and into PSE (Crowe et al., 2011). This allows for the investigation of how the experiences of three students changed over time from the end of grade 12 to the end of the first after graduation (Yin, 2018). We have strategically picked four time points to reflect the stages of anticipated change in their experiences,

(1) the spring of their grade 12 year, (2) the fall, (3) the winter, after the first semester since entering postsecondary education, and (4) the following spring wherein a year has passed since graduation. This study was part of a larger project examining the transition to PSE, that included surveys about students' emotions and supports during the transition (*n* = 23), and initial interviews about their plans for after high school (*n* =7). Three of the students involved agreed to take part in the longitudinal portion of the study. Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the university's Human Ethics Research Office.

Participants

The participants in this study all came from a high school in Western Canada designated for students with a diagnosis of LD. Adam, Brian, and Chase (pseudonyms) each had a formal diagnosis of LD, consistent with DSM 5R criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), but the specific presentation of their symptoms differ and are described according to their lived experience of having an LD (see Table 1 for additional details). These three participants completed four individual interviews with the researchers. When first meeting them, they were finishing their 12th Grade year and were receiving specific accommodations to support their learning. All three had decided to pursue further education in the Fall following graduation.

Procedure

As part of the larger study, information letters were sent home to parents explaining the research which included an option for students to participate in a longitudinal series of interviews about their transitioning to life after high school. With parental consent, three participants consented and completed four individual interviews in which they described the nuances and evolving nature of their first year after high school. The first interview took place in June just as Adam, Brian, and Chase were finishing their grade-12 year. This allowed us to gain insight into their initial thoughts and feelings about leaving high school and the anticipation of what awaited them. The second interview occurred in September/October shortly after the participants began their programs/classes. At this time, we were able to explore their first impressions and adjustment to this significant transition and a corresponding new routine. We conducted the third interview in January/February of the following year. This was the mid-point of the academic year. The fourth and final interview took place in May, almost a full 12 months after high school graduation, and served as a reflection of their experiences.

All participants were interviewed by the same interviewer throughout the year. The interviews took place virtually and lasted between 60-75 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured. There was some individual variation in the questions asked given the participant's unique context and experiences, however, the interview protocol and questions posed were largely consistent across participants and interview time points. These interview questions asked participants to share their lived experiences since the previous interview, by focusing on what and how questions (Smith & Osborn, 2007). For example, "What has been the greatest struggle you have faced since leaving high school?," and "How have you been feeling since we last talked?" A list of interview questions is available upon request.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. These tran-

Table 1. **The Participants**

Participants	Age	Diagnosis	Accommodations	Plan for postsecondary
Adam	17	Unspecified	Extra time for tests, memory aids (e.g., formula sheets, mnemonics/ models)	Enroll in a 4-year undergraduate program
Brian	18	Specific learning disorder with impairment in reading (e.g., Dyslexia)	Extra time for tests, assistive technology (i.e., speech to text, text to speech, Dragon Naturally Speaking, Read Write, C-Pen)	Enroll in a two-year technical program
Chase	18	Specific learning disorder with impairment in written expression (e.g., Dysgraphia); Processing Speed Disorder	Extra time for tests, notes provided by instructor (in advance, during, or after lessons), extra time for assignments, homework supports (e.g., extra time, reduced questions, multiple attempts), one on one coaching	Gap year to take missing high school classes for desired postsecondary program

scripts were then read repeatedly, making notes in the margins and highlighting relevant components throughout. Three members of the research team engaged in this process to ensure the experiences of the participants were properly captured to formulate individual cases from the data. Member checking was used to support the trustworthiness of the data. As such, participants were each sent their individual case formulation (*see below*) and asked to approve that the writeup was authentically representative of their spoken experiences. All participants indicated that these were indeed reflective of their year post-high school. Moreover, the team then engaged in a cross-case analysis separately and agreement was reached on the shared themes that transcended all three participants' accounts.

Researcher Positionality

Goegan is an advocate and person with LD who is concerned with how the challenges already experienced by students with LD impact their entry into PSE and during their studies. As such, her general program of research seeks to understand the experiences of students with LD in the hopes to provide postsecondary institutions with information to support student success. To ensure her personal experiences did not overshadow the perspectives of participants, Chazan conducted the interviews. Chazan is a Ph.D. candidate that mainly researches body image and student's academic motivation. Goegan led the data analysis with Chazan and Olowolagba and worked to minimize the influence of her own LD by working closely with these co-authors who do not identify as LD. Daniels reviewed the themes that emerged from the lived experiences of the participants. The full team believes that all students are capable of success and that institutions are responsible for creating learning environments – online or in person – that position students for success.

To triangulate the data and maintain objectivity in the interpretation, the authors engaged in several actions (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). First, a reflexivity exercise wherein the team reflected on their own assumptions, values, and biases that could influence their interpretation of the data (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Second, participant debriefing, or member checking, by providing the participants with a summary of the results to review. Each participant was asked to review the summary of their interviews and then was asked if the summary was a complete representation of their experiences or if they would like to clarify or elaborate on the summary (Busetto et al., 2020). Lastly, the authors engaged in peer debriefing, by discussing their findings with colleagues and peers to provide constructive feedback on our interpretations (Laumann, 2020).

RESULTS

Individual Case Studies

To answer our first research question, "How do students with LD describe their experiences with the transition from high school to PSE?" we provide a summary of each of our interviews with the three participants that took placed in the spring of their last year of high school. To answer our second research question, "How do students with LD come to adapt to their new learning environment?" we provided a summary of the following three interviews which each student highlighting key elements of each of their interviews.

Adam

When first meeting, Adam was a 17-year-old high school student diagnosed with a LD. He received accommodations such as extra time and the use of memory aids to support his learning. Adam would be attending university in the Fall, to begin an entrance program before declaring a major. Adam chose this university because of the smaller class sizes and the positive information he heard from others. Overall, he believed that it would be a good fit for him. To facilitate his transition, Adam attended a virtual open house, participated in his school's transition program, and connected with an academic strategist at the university that he would go on to see on a semi-regular basis throughout the year. He noted that his parents did not aid in his decision-making process. His goal was to achieve a 3.7 GPA this first year, which would allow him to transfer to psychology. He was confident that he could achieve this if he was "willing to put in the work and dedication." Moreover, Adam was certain he could advocate for himself next year based on his previous experiences at high school. The transition was met with mixed emotions, happy to be finishing, nervous for the next step, albeit excited.

We reconnected with Adam early in the Fall. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, his courses all took place virtually, something Adam appreciated: "starting [university] online is really nice. I've been enjoying it". He also shared that communication with his professors had increased and attributed this to feeling comfortable online. Adam noted to be enjoying his university courses more than his high school classes due to the independence that they afforded him. However, he shared that he was adjusting to the heavier workload and it being "a lot more

difficult to stay on top of things". The increased independence that comes alongside postsecondary studies was also testing Adam's self-proclaimed procrastination tendencies. In addition to doing well in his courses, Adam expressed his desire to improve his public speaking skills to feel more comfortable sharing his ideas in class. When asked to reflect on the transition supports he received, he shared that at times he felt overwhelmed and confused by all the information directed toward him. Adam noted that much of this information came while he was still focused on finishing high school and focusing on graduation. He indicated what was most helpful was being introduced to the university campus in the late summer by a friend who was already an enrolled student. Furthermore, he shared that his sociable nature assisted him in being able to make "friends in every class so far".

Shortly after starting his Winter semester, Adam shared that his second semester was going much smoother than his previous one. He expressed having been very stressed getting through his first semester as all his courses were paper-based. Adam specified that some of his final exams entailed hand-written essays which were especially challenging for him given his learning difficulties in this area. Adam decided that he no longer wished to pursue psychology and instead, applied and got accepted into the business program. Adam was enjoying the courses he was taking as they were more math-based and required less lengthy written components. He decided to drop one of his courses as it did not align with his new career goals nor did he feel confident in being able to achieve a grade he would be happy with. Moreover, he had redefined what success looked like for him at postsecondary, letting go of the need for a 3.7 GPA required for psychology, placing less emphasis on his grades, and was more focused on simply wanting to learn as much as he can. Adam was continuing to meet with his academic strategist, who offered him solutions to better manage his workload.

At the end of his first full year at university, Adam stated that although his overall experience was positive, he was glad it was over and was looking forward to enjoying his summer break. Although Adam was approved for accommodations at university, he did not utilize them in his first year. He expressed not having done so as he was not informed of how to indicate his accommodation rights to his professors and worried he would unintentionally come across as "rude". In hindsight, Adam noted that he could have benefitted from the extra time allotted to him on his exams and plans to take the necessary steps to utilize his accommodations in the following aca-

demic years. Despite not yet feeling entirely comfortable with university life, Adam feels he has seen tremendous growth in himself from where he started, in terms of his work-life balance, study habits, comfort with presentations, and knowledge of university-related administrative tasks.

Brian

Brian was an 18-year-old high school student when we first connected who was diagnosed with a LD and receiving corresponding accommodations to support his learning that included extra time for tests and use of assistive technology. Brian shared that he was confident in his self-advocacy abilities going into PSE as he noted feeling comfortable telling relevant others about his learning needs. Brian would be starting a two-year technical program in the Fall. He chose this particular postsecondary institution as he had several previous positive experiences being there for summer camps as well as due to his long-standing interest in computers. Brian found the two-year program appealing, over a four-year university degree, as he "d[id]n't want to go to school for all that long". To support the upcoming transition, Brian attended two sessions put on by his high school. He was not concerned about accessing other transition resources as he planned to "figure it out" as questions came up naturally for him in the Fall. Brian shared that his parents are always there for him if he needs them, but noted not particularly needing specific help from them in his decision-making process, aside from general support. He appreciated how they did not push him to go into a desired field instead telling him to "do what you want to do, we're comfortable with it". While he felt "solemn" realizing he would no longer be seeing his high school peers, he also shared excitement for what was to come.

After starting PSE in the early Fall, Brian indicated really enjoying his classes and it being especially refreshing to "finally be engaged" in class given his active interest in the subject matter. He was looking forward to being allowed to take even more specialized technical courses in the following semesters. Although having to adjust to the more memorization-based demands of his class work, he prides himself in being able to apply time management techniques to meet each of his deadlines. At the start of the term, Brian took action to ensure he signed up with the disability office for his entitled accommodations and similarly informed each of his professors. He expressed profound disappointment that his postsecondary institution chose to have all the students learn remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Brian shared that he would

have much preferred in-person learning, specifically for the opportunities of social networking. This sentiment went as far as sharing that "because of COVID, everything has changed". He inquired about joining one of the offered clubs, however, unfortunately, received no response.

We reconnected with Brian in the early Winter semester. He was feeling relieved having finished his first semester in the program and to now be moving into the more technical courses. He noted having difficulty towards the end of his first term regarding his academic performance and needing to adjust his work ethic from high school, sharing the sentiment that the new demands of PSE gave him a "slap in the face". Brian astutely recognized that while test-taking is not his strongest area, it does not define his overall competence/mastery over the material and therefore makes comparing grades with his peers futile. Instead, he was generally feeling pleased with his academic integration into PSE and felt supported by the extra time and reading accommodations during tests. Brian described taking breaks between study sessions and accurately parceling out the time required for each assignment through the use of a phone application to be the main work strategies that have helped him thus far.

After concluding his first year of PSE, Brian started working a full-time job in his field that he was introduced to through a family friend. He indicated "enjoying it a whole lot more than [he] was enjoying school". Brian finished his first year with much less excitement for it than he began with; now feeling some frustration with the process, the teachers, the online format, and overall noting that much of the material learned was irrelevant to his clarified work goals. Taken together, Brian shared being "done with school" and stated that if his summer work position offered to keep him on in the Fall, he would seriously consider it as an option as he sees "work experience as more valuable than what [he could] get with a diploma". Looking back on his last year, he noted wishing that his high school would have presented additional alternatives to PSE when guiding him for life after graduation. Brian expressed that it would have been helpful to have critically examined the true purpose of PSE for his personal trajectory.

Chase

At the initial time of meeting, Chase was an 18-year-old high school student who was diagnosed with LDs. He received accommodations to support his learning that included extra time for assignments/tests, classroom notes, and homework support. Chase was about to embark on

a gap year in order to take two chemistry courses required for admission to his desired university in their biology program. He had dropped these courses earlier in high school as the shift to online learning during the pandemic was "too much for [him]" at the time. He heard good things both about the specific program and its ample support for students with LD. Chase attended the university open house and two sessions with a psychologist that were offered by his high school to facilitate the transition that he deemed helpful in bolstering his confidence in being able to self-advocate for his learning needs. He noted these sessions were also helpful in equipping him with strategies for navigating social relationships and coping with negative emotions. Although he noted being a bit worried about how the first year after high school would go, he kept his goals in sight. Chase's goals for the upcoming year included doing well in his chemistry courses and placing emphasis on his well-being (e.g., connecting with friends, and engaging in hobbies).

When connecting with Chase in the Fall, he was taking the first of two chemistry courses lined up for the year as well as working a part-time job. He shared that he had been feeling quite lonely and lacking social connection. This was partly due to the online learning environment that he reported "brings its challenges" and "really not doing well with". Further, Chase shared that most of his peers went straight into PSE whereas he was "stuck at home doing chemistry". Although he started connecting with friends through video gaming, he expressed that this type of social interaction did not replace being with them at school. Having had more time to reflect on his future goals, Chase had been further exploring other universities and programs of interest and was grappling with several options as he prepared his upcoming applications. During this process, he had been drawing on support from his parents (e.g., in looking at a variety of program options), albeit indicating missing the academic advisory support he accessed when in high school. Chase shared that his resiliency has gotten him through tough times and stays hopeful for better days by "looking forward to the future". He hoped to soon find purpose and improve his mood.

When we touched base with Chase in the Winter, he had just begun his second chemistry course. He was tutored by a friend twice a week to support his learning. He had started to find chemistry quite uninteresting. Despite indicating that he received a good overall grade in the first course, he shared that he was not enjoying the process or subject matter. With this realization, Chase concluded that pursuing biology in university was no longer his plan as that would entail more required chem-

istry. Instead, he had already been accepted in the open studies program at a different university and felt it was more suited to him as it would allow for the exploration of a wide variety of interests before deciding. In hindsight, he shared that it would have been beneficial if his high school prepared him in understanding what different university programs entailed (i.e., biology involving chemistry). Chase continued to struggle with his mental health and deemed the COVID-19 health risks and cold weather prevented him from seeing his friends freely and staying active, further contributing to his loneliness. He noted that he was actively searching for mental health support and a therapist suited to his needs.

In June, Chase was finishing his course and was feeling ready for the summer break. He noted that his mental health had become so poor that it started to interfere with his ability to work on his chemistry studies. Chase recognized that his tutor played an enormous role in his ability to push through and maintain some motivation to finish. Additionally, he learned the necessity of working in "short bursts" and taking ample breaks in between. Chase reported that if he could go back and redo his past year, he would make bigger efforts to stick to a daily goal-setting system. In hindsight, Chase indicated several things that would have been helpful to him before making the transition. He noted the need for more detailed university class descriptions, a full template of what a university class entails, as well as more support in deciding on university fit. He was looking forward to starting university in the Fall, both for the in-person classroom experiences and for the opportunity of making new friends. Chase plans to place finding enjoyment and attending to his mental well-being at the forefront of his next chapter.

Themes Across the Case Studies

To answer our third research question, "Are their commonalities in how students with LD experience the shift from high school to PSE?" we examined the shared experiences across the participants during the year post-high school through a cross-case analysis and discussed below. All participants voiced ***readiness*** for the transition. This was identified through attending events to support their transitions (e.g., open houses) and feeling confident they could advocate for themselves in their new environment. The participants also expressed various ***emotions*** throughout this significant transition. Some were positive, such as indicating happiness and enjoyment with the new path, and others with a negative valence, such as feeling nervous about the upcoming changes or lonely with the differing social climate. In this vein, everyone

mentioned some aspect of how their ***social connections*** factored into their year. Some participants noted how their parents played a role in their plans for PSE. Others commented on the support from both old and new friends, or lack thereof.

To deal with the pressures of leaving high school and carving a new path, various ways of ***coping*** were mentioned, such as practicing self-advocacy, taking a reduced course load, implementing time management strategies, and seeking therapy. Relatedly, all participants referred to notable ***changes*** that either occurred cognitively or behaviorally for them during the year. Some cognitive changes related to the mindset of having newfound increased independence in postsecondary and the shift to adopting different goals. Behaviorally, changes related to switching academic programs/trajectories. All participants referred to ***accessing support*** in their accounts of their first year after graduation. Some discussed the supports they accessed before choosing their postsecondary path (e.g., open house), whereas others talked about those they accessed during the year (e.g., academic strategist, time accommodations, tutoring). Finally, each participant shared how ***learning online*** factored into their first-year experiences. While some preferred virtual learning and felt more comfortable in that modality, others strongly disliked it and experienced negative effects on their social life and mental health.

DISCUSSION

Our research examined the transition after high school to PSE for three students with LD. We focused on their individual journeys from June of their grade 12 year to May of the following year. We identified seven parallel themes across their stories to highlight similarities between their experiences during this time including (a) readiness, (b) emotions, (c) learning online, (d) change, € coping, (f) social connections, and (g) accessing supports. In this discussion, we examine how our findings here extend the research on individuals with LD transitioning to PSE after high school, make connections to associated theories, and provide potential avenues for supporting students during this time of change. In closing, we discuss the limitations of our study and some recommendations for future research.

The Transition to PSE After High School

All three of these students chose to further their education after grade 12 graduation, although their approach and experiences following this decision were multifaceted

and represented different routes to PSE. This is consistent with previous research that describes the year after high school as a "complex constellation of challenges" for students with LD (Connor, 2012, p. 1005). Despite a clear decision to continue with schooling in some form, each individual experienced changes across time within each story highlighting the importance of constantly adjusting over this year and recognizing that goals shift over time. Adam wanted to get a high GPA to transfer into psychology and ended up going into business. Brian started a two-year program and ended the year considering continuing to work instead of going back to school in the Fall. And Chase was looking to take biology courses to get into his desired postsecondary program and shifted to applying for open studies instead. The reasoning behind all of these shifts differed but collectively they demonstrate the individual's ability to cope with the changing landscape of PSE. This finding may highlight the importance of positive self-efficacy and self-beliefs when it comes to the journey after high school (Casali et al., 2024; Elliott, 2016; Goegan & Daniels, 2020). Indeed, when the students were presented with a challenge, they were able to navigate the postsecondary landscape and adjusted their plans accordingly, coming out of the experience excited for the journey ahead and ready to face the next challenge.

Even as their goals shifted, one commonality among the participants was a desire for support to aid them during this year of transition. While they did note accessing valuable supports they were offered, such as attending open houses and utilizing services offered by their high school, they wanted more. For example, Brian and Chase both commented on wanting more information about PSE, such as class descriptions, explanations of what was involved in different classes, and potential alternatives to attending university or other postsecondary institutions. Moreover, Adam commented on the difficulty of the timing of support as he was focused on finishing high school and graduating and wanted access to important resources later in the summer when he was better able to engage with them.

Taken together, our results speak to two important considerations for support for students when transitioning to life after high school. First, is the consideration for the types of support offered to students. Venezia and Jaeger (2013) found that many new postsecondary students are unprepared and highlight the need for a variety of services to be offered, from academic preparation and information about postsecondary institutions to more psychosocial and behavioral support. Second, the consideration of the timing of these supports. For example, the participants mentioned attending university open houses to gain additional information, and the structure and timing of these sessions might need to be shifted to meet the needs of students. Also, a general information event might be advantageous to gain broad information about what PSE is, and how it differs from the experiences students have at high school. Moreover, campuses often have "welcome weeks" at the beginning of the term to assist students, and these could incorporate additional information before classes begin. It might also be valuable to develop a peer mentoring program (DaDeppo, 2009; Queiruga-Dios, 2023). This may be particularly helpful for students with LD who often feel misunderstood because of their disability (Roussy, 2016). From Adam's experience, he found it most helpful to connect with a friend who was already a student and could provide him with important information. Another potential avenue to support students during this transition is by incorporating what Tinto (1999) referred to as learning communities for first-year students. One of the elements of these communities involves the coordination of courses into clusters so that groups of students take courses together which could support social connections and means to target information to new students once they arrive on campuses.

Integrating Oneself into Campus Life

Based on the experiences of the participants, there are several themes related to the importance of integration at postsecondary. For example, learning online was an important theme in the stories. Indeed, understanding how to navigate online learning platforms is important for academic integration, and yet, students with LD often struggle with this (Burgstahler, 2015; Fichten et al., 2009; Goegan et al., 2023). Moreover, the participants identified other challenges related to academic integration that we categorized as coping, as they learned ways to navigate the course load, implement time management strategies and reduce procrastination tendencies. For students who continue to struggle in these areas, we recommend connecting with a learning strategist who can provide one-on-one academic learning support to students with LD (Moukperian & Woloshyn, 2013).

In terms of social integration, we see the importance of maintaining connections with family and friends and making new connections. The importance of staying connected when learning online for students with LD has been found in previous research (Goegan et al., 2023) and in particular, the academic and emotional support

that these social connections provide have been suggested to be critical factors in their success with online learning (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). Overall, the importance of social integration to the success of first-year postsecondary students with LD has been found in previous research (Goegan & Daniels, 2020) and therefore, it is not surprising that this theme emerged from the participant responses. To aid in their social connections, we gain highlight the importance of a mentorship program for students with LD (DaDeppo, 2009), and further recommend that students seek out opportunities for involvement in co-curricular activities on campus (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As is common among all case study research (Yin, 2018), there are limitations to the generalizability of the study's findings. The different pathways towards higher education of each participant (e.g., university, trades, year to complete courses before PSE) shed light on the various possibilities of post-high school plans and their implications. However, all participants were male and came from the same high school, specifically designated for students with LD, that already had a postsecondary transition program in place. As all participants noted challenges with their transition despite this additional support, it would be interesting to examine whether these difficulties would be exacerbated in students with LD who did not attend a high school as such. Future research may extend these findings to other samples of students with LD.

Furthermore, the participants in our study all selected PSE as their plan for after high school. Therefore, we cannot speak to other important life choices such as choosing to get married, travel, or enter a full-time job right after high school. Therefore, further research could extend our findings here to other important life choices individuals may make after completing their high school education. Moreover, the participants self-selected to be involved in this research by choosing to complete each subsequent interview throughout the year, whereas others were lost due to attrition. It is possible that selection effects resulted in more eager and conscientious students or, alternatively, perhaps those who persisted throughout the longitudinal study were especially drawn to sharing the ups and downs of their transitional experience due to the presenting challenges they were concurrently facing. While self-selection is not a concern in an in-depth case study analysis like this, it is something worth considering in future research with a varying methodology that aims to build on the findings of this study.

CONCLUSION

The year after high school is multifaceted for students and various supports and services are required to assist students in navigating this transition when it involves PSE. The responses from the participants in the current study highlight that in their experiences with the transition from high school to PSE, there are various similarities and differences for students with LD. Nevertheless, for the most part, they can adapt to changes over time based on the coping skills they have developed and the social connections they draw on. While this study only examined the experiences of these three men with LD, from their stories overarching commonalities were found including readiness, emotions, the importance of social connections, coping skills, changes over time, accessing supports, and learning online. From their stories, the need to consider the types of support, and when those supports are offered to transitioning students needs to be taken into consideration to aid in a positive school transition. Moreover, the stories here emphasize the need for students to develop positive self-beliefs during their schooling and the importance of social integration into their new postsecondary environments. It is important to consider how best to integrate students into their new environments by considering academic and social components. The stories of our participants provide a glimpse into how this year of transition can unfold for students with LD.

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