Transitioning from Primary to Secondary School in Jamaica: Perspectives of Students with Learning Disabilities and or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Thesis

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**DEDICATION**

*This study is dedicated to the students who participated in this research. Their stories of school remind us of the long road ahead that educators need to travel in order to make quality education truly accessible to all students.*

**ABSTRACT**

This is a qualitative research with an ethnographic flavour. It seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of a group of Jamaican students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) on their transitioning from primary to high school. At present, Jamaica does not have a transition policy and many students with disabilities transition to high school but are not receiving the level of support, and accommodations they need.

Interviews were used in this research to gain an insider view of the students’ transition experiences. The students’ stories of high school were compared for similarities and differences using thematic analysis. Through inductive and deductive analysis their stories were examined and interpreted. Four general themes were identified as factors that influenced how students experienced school. These themes were pedagogy, ableist beliefs, the hidden curriculum and social networks. These themes were related to the theories of social capital and sense of belonging and it is argued that social capital and sense of belonging are likely to significantly impact students’ transition experiences, and future outcomes.

The findings suggest students use their social capital in the form of social networks to navigate high school and access academic, emotional and social support. Belonging to a social network is associated with positive feelings towards school, as well as with a greater sense of connectedness to their school.

Recommendations include the creation of a national transition policy to encourage a smooth transition of students from the primary to the secondary level of schooling. It is also suggested that teachers create opportunities for students to build social networks thereby increasing their social capital in schools.

This research contributes to knowledge by presenting a Caribbean perspective on transition. It adds to the literature by giving voice to an often silent minority that is, Caribbean students with disabilities.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

APA - American Psychiatric Association

CAPE – Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination

CCSLE – Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence

CSEC- Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate

CXC- Caribbean Examination Council

DDA – Disability Discrimination Act

DSM4- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV

DSM5 -Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V

GNAT – Grade Nine Achievement Test

GSAT – Grade Six Achievement Test

ICF – International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health

ICIDH – The International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicaps

ID- Intellectual Disability

IDA- International Dyslexia Association

IDEA- Individuals with Disabilities Act

IQ- Intelligence Quotient

LD – Learning Disability

LDA – Learning Disability Association

NJCLD- National Joint Committee on Learning Disability

PH – Predominantly Hyperactive

PI – Predominantly Inattentive

PTA – Parent Teachers Association

RD- Reading Disability

SEN – Special Education Needs

UN- The United Nations

UPIAS – The Union of the Physical Impaired Against Segregation

WHO – World Health Organization

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**PREFACE**

This research is aimed at understanding the perspectives of a group of students who have been identified as having learning disabilities (LD) and or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) on their experiences of transitioning to high school. The research focuses on listening to the students’ voices and contributes to the literature on transition by presenting a Caribbean perspective of transition experiences and the voices of children seldom heard, those identified as having LD and ADHD.

In Jamaica, children transition from primary to high school, usually around age eleven or twelve. This is a pivotal marker in students’ lives and can be particularly challenging for students with disabilities. The general perception is that this defining phenomenon is associated with feelings of anxiety and stress, as well as anticipation and opportunities (Topping 2011, p. 269). Transition experiences can therefore be both disconcerting and exciting for students.

Transitions involve not only the physical movement from one environment to another, such as from primary to high school, but also psychological changes as students adjust to a new reversed social status; they are no longer the big fish in a small pond as they “move from being the oldest and most experienced children in primary school to being the youngest and least mature in secondary school” (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008, p.6). Issues of identity and belonging come into play as students question their identity in their new environment (Who am I?) and examine their sense of belonging (Where do I fit?) as ‘individuals strive to define themselves positively’ (Haslam *et al.* 2012, p.204); and perception of self is shaped by their membership in their social group and how they see themselves in relation to the other members of the group. This concept of social identify is discussed further in chapter three as the significance of social networks is argued. Having a sense of belonging is important to everyone. It is considered to be one of the basic human needs (Maslow, 1962) and it is critical in the development of one’s social identity.

Schools are not only places for academic learning but they are also environments where social interactions occur and friendships are formed. For adolescents, these friendship groups are the spaces within which their identity is socially constructed, their identity issues are addressed and decisions made about who they are relative to their peers. Transitions can break these bonds of friendships and create a sense of disconnect. For some, a sense of disconnection leads to a sense of dis-belonging and this may put them at risk for developing connections with antisocial groups in an effort to fit-in (Beck and Malley, 1998). Discontinuities are associated with school transitions as friendships are often severed, and the security and familiarity of the primary school, its environment, curriculum and activities are gone. This can contribute to “a sense of alienation, apathy and isolation” (Beck and Malley 1998, p. 136).

For students who are identified as having LDs and or ADHD, transitioning can be particularly challenging and presents both academic and social concerns (Mackenzie *et al.* 2012). These students are likely to find it more difficult navigating new school environments, understanding and coping with new rules, routines, teaching styles and expectations than their peers without LD and ADHD. These students also tend to have greater difficulty forming friendships with peers and are likely to experience loneliness. This is possibly due to the difficulty they may experience in accurately interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues in social and cultural contexts (Pavri and Monda-Amaya 2001, p. 392) and where there is no support in the transition process, this may be further exacerbated.

Jamaica does not have a transition policy. This, and the resultant inadequate supports available in secondary schools for students who are identified as having special education needs (SEN), is an issue that needs to be brought to the forefront of the disability agenda. UNDP *Education for All* (1990) demands equality of access to education for all (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.146). The Jamaican government’s actions imply support for *Education for All* (1990) by their signing and ratifying the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006). This agreement demands all member states provide equal access and an inclusive education system at all levels for persons with disabilities. To this end, the Jamaican government encourages the inclusion in government schools, of students who are identified as having SEN. However, the government recognizes that the education system at present is ill-equipped to adequately address the needs of these children due to an inadequate number of trained teachers, large classes, and inadequate facilities (Vision 2030, Education Sector Plan, 2009). Gale and Densmore (2000) posit “access does not automatically deliver equality” (p.23). This is particularly applicable when supports for inclusion are missing.

Supports that are likely to enhance inclusion can include: training more special educators to offer academic support;providing ongoing monitoring and assessment of students; having a smaller student/teacher ratio; making the physical facilities of schools more accessible; improving teacher training; providing on-going training for teachers and principals that support the philosophy of inclusion; encouraging schools to offer learning supports for students such as note takers and readers; and providing assistive technology.

A blind pursuit of inclusion without putting in place support systems is likely to create negative consequences for students with disabilities as without support, these students are likely to flounder, and their academic and social challenges are likely to be compounded. Inclusion then becomes merely an issue of physical placement; and access, social acceptance and belonging continue to remain out of reach for some students. Inclusion is only likely to succeed when students receive both academic and social support.

The concept of inclusion supports theories of social justice. Emperor Justinian in the sixth century believed that “justice was the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone their due” (cited by Gale and Densmore 2000, p.1). It can be argued that inclusion allows equal access to education and this right is due to everyone. From this perspective inclusion could be seen as socially just as equal access levels the playing field by allowing all students to have equal opportunities. Robinson (2014) defines social justice as promoting a just society, challenging injustice and valuing diversity. Social justice supports an inclusive society and by extension can be argued to challenge ableist beliefs, a concept that is discussed in chapter five.

The complexities of school transitions for students with LD and or ADHD, as well as the rights for *just* schooling suggests that listening to the children’s voices is a critical component in transition planning. Just schooling involves children experiencing fairness and inclusiveness in schools. School transitions should aim at facilitating these concepts and I argue one way to encourage fairness and inclusiveness is to hear what children have to say about their school experiences so that educators and policy makers can have a clearer understanding of how fair and how inclusive students perceive secondary schools to be for them, and to be willing to initiate change where opportunities for fair practices are lacking and exclusionary practices exist.

Students who are considered to be disadvantaged or at-risk often experience academic failure because schools fail to serve these students well (Gale and Desmore, 2000). When schools pursue curricula that are highly focused on the delivery of academic content and fail to take into account students’ cultures, interests, and voices, they are likely to contribute to students’ feelings of disconnection with a resultant decrease in motivation and learning (Evans, 2001). Children’s perspectives of transitions can help to shape transition policies at the micro and macro levels. By identifying what they perceive to be stressors in transitioning and communicating what supports they believe are most helpful, students’ voices can help high schools become more welcoming places for all students.

The chapters included in this thesis will be introduced in chapter one. There I will provide a short synopsis of what is addressed in each chapter. I acknowledge that chapter five presents a heavy focus on pedagogy. This is so because (1) the students identified pedagogy as a central concern for them as the synergy between teaching and learning seemed to be weak and (2) in my analysis of the students’ stories I found that pedagogical issues were at the heart of their experiences of transition, schooling and education.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**Introducing the Study- Secondary Schools, Disability and Postcolonial Jamaica**

*Introduction*

The complexity of the secondary school system in Jamaica is presented in this chapter as well as the lack of a policy on transition. The importance of listening to children’s views of their world is argued and ethical considerations when working with children is discussed. The terms, learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are defined as they are understood and used in the Jamaican context.

As the researcher cannot be separated from their research, I share my story and I acknowledge how it has influenced my interest in listening to the children’s stories of school. Jamaica’s colonial past, its lingering effects on the education system and on social stratification are discussed. These show how our past and present are closely interwoven, and how they contribute to understanding social capital and a sense of belonging as the theoretical frameworks through which this research can be understood. The participants are also briefly introduced and the chapter concludes with the research questions this research seeks to answer.

*Background*

In 2013, 90% of children 13-18 years were placed in a high school in Jamaica (Thwaites, 2013). This is an admirable post-colonial achievement as Evans (2001) argues our colonial legacy created a dual education system for whites and blacks [rich and the poor], which has only been dismantled within the last twenty to thirty years (p. 19). Up until the late 1990s only 65.2% of poor children were enrolled in secondary education while 94.3% of the wealthier students attended secondary schools (Evans, 2001, p. 3). In spite of increased access to secondary education, the general education classrooms for some special needs students (SEN) can be an environment that “damages self-esteem and feelings of self-worth more than provide literacy and numeracy” (Bergsma 2000, p.10). Many of these students are unidentified and often unsupported in the general education classroom. The Jamaican government supports inclusive education and the rights of students with disabilities to be educated in government schools (Vision 2030, Education Sector Plan, 2009) but has not put in place policies and available services to effectively support inclusion. Students with SEN therefore, are placed at increased risk for academic failure (Vision 2013, Education Sector Plan 2009, p. 26). Compounding the situation is the fact that the majority of schools in Jamaica do not have teachers who are trained to teach students with disabilities. In a survey on access and inclusion for persons with disabilities, involving 100 schools (approximately 10% of schools in Jamaica) Morris (2011) found, 66.7% did not have teachers who were trained to teach children identified as having disabilities (Morris 2011, p. 14).

Although Jamaica was among the first countries in the world to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Hamilton, 2011) and is a signatory to many international conventions ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities (Vision 2030 Persons with Disability Draft Act 2009, p. 9) it remains, to date, without a national disability act (Hamilton, 2011). A national disability policy was tabled in parliament in September 2000 (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2006) and more than a decade later it still waits to be passed into an Act.

Additionally, Jamaica, in spite of its perceived positive stance toward persons with disabilities at the present time, does not have a national transition policy. Without a comprehensive plan or government policy for transitioning, there is likely to be no unified approach among high schools for providing transition support for students.

*Transition and Children’s Voices*

Transitioning to secondary/high school is a major life event for young adolescents. However, most of the research that has been done on transition has not directly involved the persons most intimately affected by the process (Akos and Galassi 2004, p. 212). That means that the students themselves have not had the opportunity to speak, as adult voices have traditionally spoken for children on issues that affect children. Adults are no longer privy to or members of childhood and as such they cannot accurately represent children’s views of their world because they are no longer insiders to that world (Kirk, 2007).

Children are considered to be persons below the age of 18 (Article 1, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and they are increasingly being seen as active agents in their own lives. As such, they have the right to be heard and their views considered (Article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Children need to be reconceptualised as active agents and their competencies respected (Morrow, 2011; McDonald, 2009; and Kirk, 2007). This perception of children is influenced by the new sociology of childhood that emphasises the competence of children as social actors and informants about their lives (McDonald 2009, p.242). Children can be “keen constructive and thoughtful commentators on their everyday lives at home, at school and in the community” (Prout 2002, p.71) and as such, have valuable knowledge to offer. When children are given a voice, it is highly likely that they can help inform research and policies that are focused on their lives and their future.

The participants in this research are six adolescents between the ages of thirteen and fifteen who have been identified as having LD and or ADHD (these terms will be clarified shortly). Rather than hearing from adult stakeholders, who may speak on behalf of students but may not accurately represent students’ perspectives (Akos and Galassi, 2004), this research is focused on hearing the children’s voices. These young stakeholders are active agents in their transition from primary to secondary school and are favourably positioned to provide first-hand information on their transition experiences. In sharing their stories, these participants are providing an insider view of what high school is like for them. Interviews have been used to provide opportunities for them to bring into focus issues that are of significance to them. It is possible that what they say may help to shape school transition policies in the future especially for students with special education needs.

*The Secondary School System*

In Jamaica, children usually begin their secondary education at around age eleven and most exit the system by age sixteen or seventeen. The secondary level of education is complicated and diverse. It is divided in two cycles and is offered in six different kinds of schools. These schools include: All-Age, Primary & Junior High, High schools, Special schools, Technical schools and Agricultural schools. The first cycle is for three years and provides Grades seven to nine (eleven to fourteen years old). All-Age, Primary and Junior High schools provide only the first cycle of secondary education (Livingston, 2012). The second cycle is for two years and provides Grades ten and eleven (fifteen to sixteen years old). Some High schools offer the opportunity to continue on to Grades twelve and thirteen also called Sixth Form (Livingston, 2012).

Students sit a variety of exams at the secondary level depending on the type of school they attend. These including the technical entrance exam at Grade eight, the Grade Nine Achievement Test at age thirteen (G.N.A.T. 13+), the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) taken at Grade eleven and the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (C.A.P.E.) taken in Grades twelve and thirteen. Students who attend Agricultural and Technical High schools take the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) and the Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence (CCSLC) (Livingston, 2012).

Table 1 below presents the complexity of the secondary school system.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| TYPES OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS | CYCLE | GRADES & AGES | GOAL |
| All-Age | One | Grades 7-9  11-14 years | Students sit the technical entrance exam in Grade 8 and may transition to a technical high or sit the G.N.A.T. and transition to other high schools. Students receive a school leaving certificate after Grade 9 and may exit the school system or transition to a technical or agricultural high school. |
| Primary & Junior High | One | Grades 7-9  11-14 years | Same as above |
| Secondary High [upgraded secondary, traditional high and independent/private high schools] | One  &  Two | Grades 7-11  11-16 years  and  Grades 7-13  11- 18 years | Students sit the C.X.C in Grade 11. May exit the school system or may transition to sixth form and sit C.A.P.E. in Grades 12 & 13. May transition to tertiary level education |
| Technical High | One & Two | Grades 7-11  11-16 years | Students sit CSEC or CCSLC. May transition to tertiary level education |
| Agricultural High | Two | Grades 10-12  15-17 years | Same as above |
| Special schools | One & Two | Grades 7-11  11-18 years  Students tend to exit special schools at an older age. | Same as for secondary high. \*A very small number of students who have been identified as having a disability transition to tertiary level education. |

Information taken from Livingston (2012) MOE Education Statistics 2011-2012, and from the MOE – the Ministry of Education Story (2014). \*Since 1995 just over 100 persons identified with disabilities have graduated from the University of the West Indies (Morris 2011, p.3)

Since 2000, several secondary schools were upgraded and all secondary schools are now termed ‘High’ schools (MOE –Education Story, 2014). The term *Traditional High school* is used to distinguish the former high schools from the newly upgraded high schools (Evans 2001, p. 12). Traditional high schools offer education from Grades seven through thirteen, are more focused on an academic curriculum and charge higher fees than other types of schools. They are the preferred secondary schools for the vast majority of Jamaican parents particularly parents from middle and upper class backgrounds as they are more likely to provide access to a university education (Evans, 2001).

Traditional high schools, in most cases were originally church schools, but now they receive government aid and are considered grant-aided. Generally, theyare more likely to have better qualified teachers, better facilities, more resources and produce better academic outcomes (Evans, 2001). Evans argues that this is most likely related to the higher status these schools enjoy in comparison to other types of schools. The level of social and cultural capital these schools possess through their parent body makes it possible for them to access supports and resources to which other less endowed schools are likely to have access. Traditional high schools are considered to be ‘first choice’ schools and they “represent the best promise for upward social mobility” (Evans 2001, p.12).

Students who leave the primary system at the end of Grade six must sit the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT). These tests function as a national placement exam for students transitioning to the secondary level of schooling. Craig (2006) explains such selection machinery is necessary because of an inadequate number of equally prestigious secondary schools to accommodate students (p. 19). The type of high school in which students receive placement depends on the scores attained in the GSAT. Traditional high schools generally receive into their Grade seven (first form), students who score over 90% in the GSAT examinations (Douglas, 2011). This suggests that they receive the top performing students from the cohort of students who sit the exam.

In 2013, of the 42,268 students who sat the GSAT examinations approximately 85% were placed in high schools; the remaining 15% were placed in Technical schools, All-Age schools, Primary and Junior High, Private schools and Special Education schools (Bromfield, 2013). The students involved in this research attend ‘first choice’ traditional highschools. This could suggest that of their peers, they fall among the top performers. However, most of participants had transferred from their original schools of placement to their present school which is likely to suggest that their placement in a ‘first choice’ traditional high school was influenced by their cultural and social capital. Weller cites Ball (2003) who argues social capital confers class advantage in the competition for good school places (Weller 2007, p. 340).The concepts of social capital will be argued in chapter three as well as its relevance to this research.

*Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*

In the long awaited Policy for Persons with Disabilities and in the Population Census for 2001 the Jamaican government defines disabilities as:

Any restriction to perform an activity in the manner or the range considered normal for a human being. Such restriction or lack of ability must be as a result of impairment (Vision 2030 Jamaica (2009) Persons with Disabilities- Sector Plan 2009-2030, p. 6)

This research focused on the particular disabilities referred to as learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Students with LD, a disorder sometimes referred to as specific learning disabilities (SLD), make up the largest category of students in special education (Hallahan *et al.,* 2009) and it is estimated that 4%-7% of school-age children are identified as having specific LD (Büttner and Hasselhorn, 2011).

LD is often considered to be a hidden disability because the challenges it presents are not immediately obvious and generally surface as academic concerns after children begin formal schooling. LD is considered to be a language-based, neurological disorder that affects the way an individual perceives, processes, stores, retrieves and produces information (Scanlon, 2013). Individuals with LD have average or above average intelligence but are likely to experience academic challenges based on the way information is processed by their brain. This criterion is one distinction between a student identified with LD and one identified with having an intellectual disability (ID). Processing difficulties may result in difficulty in reading, writing, spelling, listening, speaking, and thinking and in doing mathematical calculations.

In Jamaica it is reported that 7% of school age children have LD (Dixon and Matalon 2009, p.13) and most of these students are being educated in the general education classrooms and are unsupported (Vision 2030 Jamaica – Education Sector Plan p. 26). The inconsistencies that are characteristic of the academic performance of students with LD is often frustrating to general education teachers who may have little if any training in special education. This, along with ineffective pedagogy, can contribute to these students being at increased risk for negative life outcomes (Firth *et al.* 2010, p. 77) and low motivation for learning. Students with LD who are unsupported and misunderstood can become passive learners and develop *learned helplessness.* This isa psychological phenomenon that occurs when an individual perceives a sense of helplessness or loss of control over their situation; the individual loses the will to persevere because of repeated experiences of failure (Firth *et al.,* 2010 and Fincham, 2009).

There are different types of LD and it is possible for an individual to have more than one type. For example, 17% of students who have dyscalculia, a math LD, also have dyslexia, a reading LD (Büttner and Hasselhorn, 2011), increasing the academic challenges these students are likely to experience.

Since the 1970s, there has been much controversy surrounding ADHD. It has been argued that ADHD does not qualify as a genuine disability as the behaviours associated with the condition fall on ‘the extreme end of normal’ (Faraone, 2005). In recent years, a large body of studies supports ADHD as a genuine problem and a consensus statement on ADHD was signed in 2002 by a number of scientists and clinical researchers that supports ADHD as a valid disorder (Barkley *et al,* 2002). The controversy no longer appears to be focused on whether or not ADHD is real, as it is widely accepted as such, but arguments persist about how it is diagnosed and treated (Mayes *et al*. 2008).

Students with ADHD characteristically have difficulties with attention, hyperactive and impulsive behaviours and these challenges are likely to affect students’ academic outcomes. Poor academic outcomes are the most common feature associated with ADHD as these students are found to be at risk for failing grades, and increased likelihood for grade retention (Frazer *et al.* 2007). The prevalence rate for ADHD is approximately 5.3% of school age students in the US (Czamara *et al.* 2013) and in Jamaica approximately 3% of primary school children have been identified with ADHD. However an alarming 19.6% of primary aged students demonstrate significantly high levels of inattention and hyperactivity which may indicate that the figure is likely to be higher than the reported 3% (Pottinger, 2010). This significantly higher figure could suggest other factors may be at play that could have affected the findings of this research such as: class size, gender distribution, level of teacher proficiency and classroom management styles, and perhaps how the research questions were interpreted by teachers and parents.

LD and ADHD have a high co-occurrence rate with between 31% - 45% of students with ADHD also having LD (Du Paul *et al.,* 2013). This greatly increases the negative impact on students’ academic outcomes, social interactions and life trajectories.

The Jamaican government’s education policy is guided by the philosophy that *Every Child Can Learn, Every Child Must.* (MOE and Culture 1999, *The Green Paper* 2000, p.2*)* In order for this statement to be every child’s reality, schools must be challenged to be more accommodating and inclusive. Bergsma (2000) argues if inclusive education is to work in the Caribbean there needs to be a paradigm shift in education from one that is curriculum centred to one that is student centred (p.8).

Students with LD and ADHD are often oppressed by ableist practices in schools. The concept of ableism will be discussed in chapter five but a synopsis of ableism is presented here as follows: holding a perspective that values able-bodiness, maintaining a rigid view of what is normal and disadvantaging persons who are identified as having a disability. Ableism devalues differences that are likely to be part of the life experiences of an individual identified with a disability. Consequently, ableist beliefs would expect students with disabilities to behave and learn in the same manner as nondisabled students assuming there is only one right way to learn (Hehir, 2007). For example, students with dyslexia are often expected to read grade level text although dyslexia means these students have reading difficulties and are likely to be reading below their grade level. Also, students with ADHD are penalized for not being attentive or for being fidgety although these are behaviours commonly associated with ADHD.

Hehir (2002) defines ableism as “the devaluation of disability” (p. 1). Ablest views perceive disability as something to be fixed or cured (Smith *et al.* 2008, p.304). Students with disabilities become square pegs in round holes as schools try to change them in an attempt to get them to fit-in by either ignoring or overly focusing on their disability. In order to provide schooling that is just and inclusive, schools need to accept students for who they are and remember that one size does not fit all. Obstacles that are likely to hinder access and ultimately achievement need to be removed and policy makers need to ensure that the right services and accommodations are provided in schools for children who have disabilities so that they can “minimise the impact of disability and maximize their opportunities” (Heir 2007, p.1).

I believe it is important to note that disability as a category of human experience plays a “latent role in contemporary understanding of normality, the body and intelligence” (Goodley 2001, p. 11cites Marks 1999a) and is socially constructed through educational intervention, professional discourse and policy making. Concepts of disability and disablism morph over time; and are usually directed by changes in social policy, government guidelines and legislation Goodley 2001, p.9).

*My story*

I am interested in investigating this research topic for personal and professional reasons. I am a parent of a child who, twenty five years ago, at the age of seven was identified as having dyslexia and later ADHD as well. My daughter received support in reading both in and out of school during her preparatory school years. However, schooling at the secondary level was a completely different experience as there were no supports available and often the schools refused to make accommodations as she was expected to fit in. I recall feeling isolated and frustrated and every new school year I had to speak with all her teachers and tell them about dyslexia. This did not seem to make a difference as most teachers did not know what to do. My daughter’s secondary education included attending three different high schools and a period of home schooling as we searched for a school that would accommodate her learning needs. The transitions from one school to another created social discontinuity and made it difficult for her to establish peer friendships.

Two decades later, as a teacher educator in special education I believe I am well positioned to make a difference by sensitizing novice teachers to ableist beliefs, helping them to see diversity as a good thing and removing social barriers where possible. I think I have a role in preparing student teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to engage children in learning in today’s classrooms. It is unfortunate that some students still struggle unnecessarily in classrooms because of obstacles and challenges imposed on them by ableist practices and beliefs. It is time for a change and this is why I was interested in hearing what the young participants in this research have to say. I believe these participants, as insiders, can bring valuable insight into the secondary school experience of students who have been identified as having disabilities and by listening to their stories, teachers, policy makers and other stakeholders can have a better understanding of the needs, challenges and concerns that these students may have and be better able to serve and support students so that they can all experience success at the secondary level.

*The Participants*

Initially, there were seven participants who attended five different traditional high schools in Kingston. The schools included two all-girls schools, one all-boys school and two co-education schools. One participant withdrew early on from the research having changed his mind about participating. This meant that one of the co-educational schools was no longer a part of the research. The remaining participants were four girls and two boys between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. They have all been identified as having LD or ADHD and in the case of two participants as having both LD and ADHD. They were all placed in secondary schools based on their GSAT scores. All six participants however had been transferred from their original school of placement to their present schools by their parents. These transfers were driven by parents’ desires to have their children attend one of the top high schools in Jamaica. Some transfers were also based on strong family tradition where previous generations had attended the school. This was particularly the case with the all-girls schools.

Table 2 below describes the participants

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participants’  Pseudonyms | Age | Grade | Type of School Attended | Type of Disability |
| Julianne | 14 years | 8 | Anglican – all girls | Learning disability |
| Megan | 15 years | 9 | Catholic – all girls | Learning disability (dyslexia) & ADHD |
| Amelia | 13 years | 8 | Catholic – all girls | Learning disability |
| Giselle | 14 years | 9 | Anglican –all girls | ADHD |
| Lee | 15 years | 9 | Anglican –all boys | Non-verbal learning disability & ADHD |
| Ben | 14 years | 9 | Private with religious affiliations,  Co-educational | Learning disability (dyslexia) |

*The Shadow of Colonialism*

Britain captured Jamaica from Spain in 1645 and Jamaica remained under colonial rule for over three hundred years before it gained independence in 1962. As a colony, its social order was structured according to racial stratification, and colonialism is credited with “creating the Caribbean pigmentocracy” (Clarke 1983, p. 491). From a post-colonial perspective, the impact of colonialism is reflected in the language, politics, law and education of the country as English is accepted as the official language and the political, legal and educational systems are fashioned off the British systems. After emancipation in 1832, Britain established the Negro Education Grant in 1835 which was to provide a basic level of education for the children of ex-slaves (Davis, 2004). This was the beginning of a two tiered education system where one type of school was created for the children of the gentry and another type for poor black children.

This unequal system of educating Jamaican children prevailed for more than a century and became entrenched in the social fabric, functioning as the most powerful gatekeeper of the status quo (Davis, 2004). This supports Bourdieu’s perspective of schools as institutions that perpetuate the social and cultural capital of the elite. What is British is perceived as more valuable than the ‘other’ and Western knowledge, values and culture in many former colonial societies continue to dictate the social fibre of these societies. Hence, schools perpetuate in their structure and curricula, those things British such as using English as the language of instruction, using text books written in standard English, presenting information from a Western perspective and testing students in English using methods that are Western. The disdain for Jamaican Creole/patois continued until the late 1960s when Jamaica entered a period of Black pride (Bryan, 2010). In spite of the increased acceptance of Jamaican Creole, English is still regarded as the language of status (Bryan 2010, p.25) and the “hegemony of English as the language of instruction” (Lingard and Pierre, 2006) is protected in the traditional high schools.

Jamaica is considered to be predominantly an oral society (Hickling –Hudson, 2006; Cross 2003, p. 75) yet schools, because of past colonial influences, continue to resist indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and rely on paper and pen and other Western methods of assessing student learning. Such “disadvantaging structures continue to perpetuate inequalities through schooling” (Hickling-Hudson, 2006) benefiting those who already have large amounts of social capital. The instruction and assessment of students continue to favour the elite as Hickling-Hudson (2006) argues, they are focused on academic literacies and do not readily engage the oralities and folk form of our region (p. 211).

Schools perpetuate the dis-empowerment of some students by maintaining the “hegemony of Eurocentric education” (Hickling-Hudson 2006, p. 205) and Western ways of knowing, thus students with high levels of social and cultural capital are disproportionately favoured in the way schools are structured. This is because these students possess the Western knowledge and values that school value. Chevannes (2006) argues there are two Jamaicas, “divided not so much by social class as by thinking” (p. 222). This is reflected in the value assigned to the languages of English and Creole/patois. These languages, Chevannes explains, act as codes for social positioning, advantage and power as Jamaicans who can code switch, that is, move fluently from Creole to English are able to take advantage of both worlds. Chevannes explains, “Code switching is an expression of the inequalities between languages” (p. 218). Children who can code switch effectively are likely to have higher levels of social capital as they are likely to come from backgrounds where English is spoken at home and they have the knowledge to know when code switching is necessary and advantageous to them. Children for whom Creole/patois is their first language are likely to be at a disadvantage because they are required to learn and be tested in a language in which they are not fluent.

As previously stated, colonialism shaped the social structures of Jamaica and to date we are still influenced by our colonial past. This is so, because our “political, economic and educational systems in which we are enmeshed continue to bear the stamp of European colonialism even when we reform them” (Hicking-Hudson 2006, p. 212). Colonialism created the class system in Jamaica which was originally based on race. It created an unequal school system which to present date has not been completely redressed, as schools perpetuate the dominance of the mono-cultural curricular and Euro-centric education (Hickling-Hudson, 2006). Although this research is not focused on postcolonial theory, the impact of colonialism on the school system cannot be ignored as it helps to provide a framework within which to understand why schools are the way they are. The creation of the class system and an education system that perpetuates the elite (Gale and Densmore, 2000) helps in understanding how social capital tends to be preserved in the middle and upper classes and why certain students are disadvantaged.

This research investigates the perceptions of high school of students with LD and ADHD and seeks to understand the role social capital plays in their experiences. Social capital theory is briefly introduced in the theoretical position that follows and a more in-depth discussion is presented in chapter two. The lingering effects of colonialism in postcolonial Jamaica and the level of social capital existing in the social classes are therefore integrally related and important factors to this research.

*Theoretical Position*

A post-colonial perspective and cultural analysis are commonly used in research done on schools in Jamaica (Evans 2001, p.19). For example, looking at secondary school through a post-colonial lens could help in understanding why schools are structured as they are, what happens in schools and the differences that exist between different types of schools. Applying the perspective of cultural analysis can help to explain who and what are valued in the school system and can explain the power of language such as whose language is valued: English or Jamaican Creole? The concept of social capital is useful in understanding the opportunities students are likely to have access to and having a sense of belonging is important because it allows the transmission of social capital among and between members of a social group. The theoretical position I took in relation to this research was to view the students experiences from the perspective of social capital and sense of belonging as I believe these concepts can help in understanding the students’ school experiences. It can also be argued that both the post-colonist view and cultural analysis are to some degree subsumed within the concepts of social capital and sense of belonging.

*Theoretical Framework*

As mentioned above, the concepts of social capital and a sense of belonging provide a framework through which this research can be understood. Social capital is understood to mean various things. The main theorists associated with the concept of cultural capital as it relates to educational are Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam. For Bourdieu, social capital is simply a case of ‘who you know’. What really matters is ones social connections; the greater ones social connections, the more capital and resources one potentially has access to as “the value of social capital possessed by a given agent depends on the size of the network connections” (Bourdieu 1986, n.p.).

Coleman sees social capital as residing in the family. It is described as less tangible than other types of capital (physical) as it is embodied in the “relations among persons” (Coleman 1988, p. S100). Coleman argues social capital facilitates action and makes it possible to achieve certain goals that would otherwise not have been possible in its absence (p.S98). It is therefore instrumental in the development of human capital. Putnam argues that social capital benefits both the individual and the community as individuals make connections that are mutually beneficial. Putnam argues that communities that are well connected have large amounts of social capital and even if an individual is not personally involved with their community, they are likely to enjoy spill-off benefits (Putnam 2000, p. 20). Social capital can also have negative effects as persons outside the social network may be subjected to prejudice, oppression and social injustices as seen in the actions of the Klu Klux Klan, apartheid government, and terrorist groups.

Social capital in relation to this research is understood as being the attributes and powers students have or have access to that can be used to help them navigate their social arenas. Social support is considered to be a form of social capital as it is a “relational concept that allows resources to flow between interconnected individuals through their social networks” (Offer and Schneider, 2007). Children are presented as social agents who possess social capital and they can create social capital through their social networks as these provide them with social support.

Having a sense of belonging is a strong human need and adolescents in particular have a strong need to belong (Goodenow 1993, p.22). They form friendships and peer networks usually with like-minded peers in order to fulfil their need to belong to a group. Peer groups function as social supports for students and can help them to navigate the turbulence of transitioning to high school. Research indicates that students who fail to establish positive peer relationships are at greater risk of disengaging from school and are at higher risk for engaging in negative behaviours, as youth who feel excluded are likely to gravitate towards other excluded youth and engaging in anti-social activities (Roffey 2013, p.42).

When adolescents feel a sense of belonging in school and have positive peers group affiliations, they are more likely to be resilient when faced with challenges, and tend to view school more positively and become more academically engaged (Faircloth and Hamm 2011, p.50). Teachers play an integral role in creating a sense of belonging and connectedness in the classroom (Ma 2003, p.341) as students perceive teachers’ attention, help and the respect shown to them as important to their sense of belonging. The relationships teachers establish with students, the classroom atmosphere they create and the pedagogy they implement have the potential to create welcoming and engaging learning environments or environments that squelch students’ spirits, quiet their curiosity and encourage ennui. It is likely that some children may experience school failure not because of a lack of ability but because they feel detached, alienated and isolated from others and from the educational process (Beck and Malley 1998, p.133).

When students feel a sense of belonging, they are likely to feel personally accepted and supported in school by teachers and classmates (Faircloth and Hamm 2011) and they are more likely to be motivated and engaged learners. Pursuing pedagogy that makes students feel *capable* of success, and that provide opportunities for students to *connect* with peers and to *contribute* to learning, validate the importance of students to the classroom and help to secure feelings of belonging (Ma 2003, p.341). The concepts of social capital, social network and sense of belonging are different but related concepts that intertwine and support each other. They will be used to help in the analysis of the data that has been collected. The theories of social capital and a sense of belonging will be discussed further in chapterthree.

*Ethical Considerations*

Children are vulnerable to exploitation (Kirk, 2007) and in order to protect children from unscrupulous or injurious actions in research involving children, it is important to satisfy ethical requirements. Ethical clearance was sought and received from the university ethics board prior to beginning this research.

When conducting research with children and when using interviews it is important to be conscious of ethical issues. Issues of power, language, informed consent, respect, authenticity, confidentiality and safety (Kirk, 2007; Baker and Weller, 2003 p. 214) must be considered in relation to how they may impact the child and the research.

Children may perceive the power imbalance between themselves and an adult researcher and may skewer their responses to satisfy what they believe the researcher wants to hear. The researcher may also use his or her power as an adult to direct the outcome of interviews rather than to be more reflective and allow the participants’ responses to guide the direction of the conversations and the development of the research. The issue here is whose voice is valued?

The language competencies must also be carefully addressed to ensure that the participants clearly understand what they are being asked to do. This is particularly important when interviewing participants who have a language based disorder such as LD. The researcher must endeavour to use language that is unambiguous and non-threatening and to listen attentively and re-present what is said in order to avoid misunderstanding what has been said. The communication competence of the participants is also important to consider as language is a vehicle through which children’s social action can be made known (Drew *et al.*2006, p.33). Encouraging a relaxed atmosphere is likely to support effortless conversation and encourage an unfettered flow of information that may yield generous insights into the participants’ world. Clarity of language is also important in gaining consent because unless a child fully understands what is being asked he or she cannot provide informed consent (Kirk 2007, p.1254).

The researcher must respect the right children have to their own opinions and to voice those opinions (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Ethnographic research seeks to understand the perspective of others and so, in engaging in research with children, it is important to respect the agency of children and their competence to speak about their own experiences (Shah 2006, p. 208). The important question to ask is whose voice is being presented? To satisfy ethical demands and ethnographic inquiry, it is important that participants’ voices be respected and re-presented in an authentic manner so that the voice that is presented is an accurate representation of participants’ voices and reflect accurately what they say about their lived experiences. Participants should also have the right to withdraw from participating and should not feel cajoled into participating (Kirk 2007, p.1252).

Research involving children must also be safe. This is an important ethical issue since children are vulnerable and can be manipulated or misled by researchers. Safety is not limited to physical considerations but emotional and social safety need to be considered as well. Participants should not feel threatened in anyway when they participate in research. To protect children’s wellbeing, careful consideration must be given to places where interviews are conducted. As Baker and Weller (2003) state “space is never an issue of mere location” (p.209) certain spaces carry certain meanings for children. For example, schools may be convenient locations but may threaten a child’s sense of identity as they may not want their friends to know they are participating in a research of this nature. Schools are also places that encourage the surveillance and control of students (Baker and Weller, 2003, p. 213) and so it may be difficult to find a place that offers privacy and confidentiality.

The home environment may provide a sense of safety but private conversations may be difficult to conduct. Confidentiality must be assured so that participants feel free to talk. However, participants need to be aware of the limits to confidentiality and this is likely determined by the ethical responsibility to ensure that participants are safe. The pros and cons of possible locations need to be considered within the framework of the child’s best interest.

After receiving ethical clearance, introductory letters and consent forms were personally delivered to five pre-selected high schools but only one of these provided a participant. I contacted six families I had known in an effort to secure additional participants and eventually five children from these families agreed to participate in the research. The ethical issue of using children I had previously worked with is acknowledged and discussed in chapter four. The sixth participant was unknown to the researcher and was selected by her school as she received support from their special education department.

Introductory letters and consent forms were sent to the parents and to the participants. The parents and participants had two weeks to read the information letter and to return the signed consent forms if they agreed to participate in the research. The originally intention was to conduct the interviews at the students schools but due to school vacations and various activities students were involved in, this was only possible for one participant. The other participants were interviewed at their homes with the permission of their parents. These were conducted in a semi-private space such as the patio or living room. A final group interview was conducted at my home. Telephone interviews were also conducted with some participants.

*Research Questions*

In the plethora of research on school transition, the views of young adolescents who have been identified as having LD and or ADHD have received little representation in the available literature. Although children’s voices are increasingly being accepted as valid sources of information, the voices of students with disabilities remain conspicuously silenced in much of the research literature as adult proxies continue to speak for these children. It is the aim of this research to hear from these children in order to better understand the unique challenges they face in transitioning to high school. As a result this research attempts to seek answers to the following questions:

* How is transitioning to high school perceived by students with LD or ADHD?
* What supports do secondary schools offer for students with LD and or ADHD?
* What supports do these students perceive as helpful?
* Does gender play a role in the perception of transition?
* What is the role of social capital, social networks and sense of belonging on students’ transition experiences?
* What are the implications for the future?

These questions are re-presented and discussed in relation to the findings of the research in chapter six.

*The Structure of the Thesis*

The structure of this thesis continues as follows: In chapter two the extensive literature on transition is discussed. Much of the literature is focused on the impact of transitioning on academic decline, motivation for learning, negative behaviours, social and emotional outcomes, post-school outcomes and teacher and parent perspectives. Few studies sought to access children’s perspectives. Some studies investigated transition experiences of students with intellectual disabilities and autism and most studies focused on the transitioning in the early years of schooling or transitioning to post- secondary environments. The literature on concepts of disability, social capital, the impact of disability on social capital, social networks sense of belonging and pedagogy are also discussed. These are helpful concepts for understanding the data that is presented in chapter five.

Chapter three presents the theoretical framework within which this research is placed. In this chapter, the concepts of social capital, social networks and sense of belonging are discussed further.

Chapter four is the methodology and methods chapter and discusses ethnography as an appropriate methodology for investigating the research topic. Interviews are presented as methods for collecting the data with some discussion on the use of semi-structured interviews as well as the use of students’ writings and telephone interviews. A detailed description of the participants is also presented and ethical considerations are further discussed.

Chapter five presents the findings and analysis of the data. Participant responses to interview questions are compared for similarities and differences and themes are identified and are related to the theoretical anchors of social capital and sense of belonging. I acknowledge there is a heavy focus on the theme of pedagogy. However, this is because it emerged as a dominant theme in the children’s stories of school.

Chapter six is the concluding chapter and presents a final overview of the research and the discussion on the findings. A reflective response to the research and my recommendations are also presented. The university ethical clearance letter, information letters, consent forms, and interview schedule are found in the appendices at the end of the paper.

*Conclusion*

This chapter presented an overview of the secondary school system in Jamaica and the challenges associated with transitioning from primary to secondary school particularly for students who are identified as having LD and or ADHD. Ethical issues in relation to research involving children were also introduced. The lingering impact of Jamaica’s colonial history and its influence in shaping the social systems were presented especially as it related to the creation of a class system and a dual education system. Recognising the colonial impact on education and social structure helps in identifying and understanding who is likely to have large stores of social capital and how social capital impacts the school system and by extension one’s sense of belonging. The concepts of social capital and belonging are presented as theoretical frameworks through which this research can be understood.

This research adds to the existing literature by presenting a Caribbean perspective on transitioning and it highlights the lack of support that exists for students with LD and ADHD at the secondary level. It also validates the infrequently heard voices of students with LD and ADHD. These voices can provide authentic insights into the secondary school experiences of students, as argued by Fernqvist (2010) “being a child does not disqualify an individual from being competent to interpret their situation as framed” (p. 1314).

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Literature Review**

*Introduction*

Prior to reviewing the literature on transition and theoretical concepts that are significant to this research, it is important to define some terms in order to aid clarification. The following disability related terms are explained here as they are understood and used in the Jamaican context. These terms are also revisited later in this chapter. These terms are defined by the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5) which is used in Jamaica. These definitions are based on a North American understanding of disability as a loss of function rather than a British understanding of disability as the result of social barriers (Goodley 2011, p.11).

A learning disability, also called a specific learning disability or specific learning disorder is understood in the Jamaican context, to be a type of Neurodevelopmental Disorder (Tannock, 2014) that impedes the ability to learn or use specific academic skills which are fundamental for other academic learning (DSM-5, Malow, 2013). These learning problems occur in the absence of intellectual disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, mental disorders, and language differences (Malow, 2013). This understanding underpins the Federal definition for specific learning disability which is presented and critiqued later in this chapter. Individuals with a specific learning disability have average intelligence or may fall in the gifted range. In this chapter, I used the term learning disability instead of specific learning disability.

The term learning difficulties is not generally used in Jamaica as it is considered to be a much broader term than the term learning disability. The former can be applied to any learner who may have problems learning. These learning problems can be the result of several factors including but not limited to intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, poverty, poor instruction, absenteeism, ill health, lack of motivation, and living in a volatile community (Dixon and Matalon, 2003). Learning difficulties can be a temporary problem whereas learning disability is considered to be permanent

A mild disability refers to individuals who are slightly below average in some developmental milestones (Dixon and Matalon, 2003). Although average is a subjective term it is usually understood in terms of the normative. Mild disabilities often include children with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities and emotional/behavioural disorders. The terms mild, moderate or severe generally relate to the type of support children may need; as children with mild disabilities generally receive instruction in the general education classroom with some support (Lerner and Johns, 2009) whereas a child with a moderate disability would require a greater level of support in the classroom. Students considered to have a severe disability are not usually educated in the general education classroom in Jamaica. These terms have significance in the Jamaican special education context because they determine the educational placement and kinds of support that students are likely to experience.

The DSM-5 defines an intellectual disability/impairment as a deficit in intellectual functioning (IQ score of 70 or below), and in adaptive functioning (skills needed for independent living such as cognitive, social and practical skills). The disability must also occur during the developmental years (Reynolds *et al.,* 2014). Intellectual disability may be described as being mild, moderate, severe or profound. These descriptors are related to IQ levels and levels of support needed to function. This research is not focused on individuals with intellectual disabilities.

This chapter discusses the literature on transition, its definitions, challenges and impact on students who have been identified as having a disability as well as the main theoretical concepts that help to frame this research. Since the 1970s, school transitions have been substantially researched and the consensus is that for most students and their parents, transitions are periods associated with stress and challenges as well as excitement and opportunities (Topping, 2011; Pietarinen *et al* 2010; Smith *et al* 2008; Akos and Galassi, 2004 and Akos, 2002). Transitioning from primary to secondary school is a major event for children (Topping, 2011) and is likely to involve changes in the academic, social, emotional and physical aspects of children’s lives. These changes can be particularly challenging for children who have been identified as having disabilities.

*Transition*

Children experience at least four periods of transition: transition from home to pre-school or kindergarten, transition from pre-school or kindergarten to primary school, transition from primary school to secondary school and transition from secondary school to territory institutions, the community or work. The plethora of literature on school transitions reveal that a great deal of research has been done on investigating transitions at both ends of the school spectrum that is, transitioning from home to school (Schischka *et al.,* 2012; Noel, 2011; Wildenber and McIntyre, 2011; Dunlop and Fabian, 2007; McIntyre *et al.,* 2006; Lam and Pollard, 2006) and transitioning from secondary school to college, the community or work (Masdonti, 2010; Davis and Beamish, 2009; Sabbation and Macrine, 2007). In fact, much of the literature on transition as it relates to students with special education needs (SEN) is focused on transition that promotes the movement from school to post-secondary school activities (Cleveland and Crowe, 2013; and Durodoye *et al.* 2004).

Although the transition period from primary to secondary school has been identified as a particularly difficult period for early adolescents (Mackenzie *et al.,* 2012 and Rice *et al.,* 2011), there are few research studies that have focused on these middle years of schooling (Rice *et al.,* 2011). In fact, very little research has been done on understanding the transition experiences of children with mild disabilities during this period. Knestling *et al.,* (2008) investigated the transition experiences of a small group of students with mild disabilities and found that these students took a longer time to adjust to their new environment and had greater difficulty with developing a sense of belonging. They also argue students with mild disabilities often have problems with organizational and social skills (Knestling *et al.* 2008, p. 273). This is likely to impact their ability to cope with the discontinuities that are often associated with transitions.

Transition involves the movement from one state to another and requires individuals to make adjustments usually involving having to “change roles, status and identity” (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007, p. 34). Students experience both horizontal and vertical transitions within the school system. Horizontal transitions can be described as ‘side-way movements’ that occur throughout the school day such as when a child moves from one class, group or activity to another while vertical transitions are movements that are linked to developmental mile stones such as moving up from one grade to the next. Pietarinen *et al.* (2010) propose “schools are nested learning environments” (p. 231) that provides opportunities to transverse different environments through vertical and horizontal transitions.

Horizontal transitions are further described in Dunlop and Fabian (2007) as children moving between formal and informal settings as they move between interconnected systems (p. 4). This requires children to interpret and understand what is expected of them in each environment and to adjust their actions accordingly. Children need to learn the rules of the game if they are to successfully navigate these environments. Horizontal transitions involve movements across the same time frame, whereas vertical transitions involve movements from one time frame to another (Lam and Pollard, 2006 cited in Field *et al.*, 2009) such as when a child moves from one level of schooling to another, in this case from the primary to the secondary level. Horizontal transitions are embedded in the everyday practices of school (Pietarinen *et al.*, 2010) as children move between the formal school environment and the less formal environment of after school activities.

Vertical transitions are hierarchical in nature, implying the demands and expectations at the higher level are likely to be more challenging that at the previous level. Vertical transitions can be both exciting and challenging as students eagerly anticipate their rite of passage but are simultaneously filled with trepidation about what demands this new environment may expect of them, a phenomenon referred to as “anxious readiness” (Topping 2011, p.269).

Transition has been defined in many ways and the various descriptions reflect the theoretical premise through which it is viewed. Ecclestone (2007) argues that the way researchers view transition is affected by the emphasis placed on the concepts of identity (sense of self), agency (capacity for autonomy and empowerment) and structural factors (race, gender, social class, and economic and material conditions). These three factors interrelate to varying degrees and impact the process and outcome of transition.

Crafter and Maunder (2012) describe transition from a sociocultural framework based on Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory and posit transition involves “negotiation between the individual and the social context they inhabit” (p.11). Transition is characterized by both internal change (developmental) and physical change (movement from one environment to another). Crafter and Maunder (2012) argue transition is a multifaceted phenomenon that impacts both the individual and the environments with which they interact and presents the potential “to alter one’s sense of self” (p.13). Furthermore they argue issues of identity and structure are interwoven in the transition process.

Identity issues are likely to occur because transitions usually change the social positioning of children as they move from one environment to another such as from primary to secondary school. Children may question their social identity in this new environment. This could involve questioning who they perceive themselves to be in relation to others in the new group and deciding who they need to be in order to fit in (leader, follower or class clown). Identity issues can also relate to new identities imposed on children by others in the new environment.

As children move from primary to secondary school, their self-concept may be challenged as they experience what Hallinan and Hallinan (1992) call “transfer paradox” (cited by Jindal-Snape and Foggie, 2008, p.6). This concept presents the contradiction of social positioning students may feel in moving from the top of the social ladder in primary school to the bottom in secondary school, a move that can potentially produce feelings of irrelevance, uncertainty and anonymity which have been associated with a decline in students’ self-concept (Mackenzie *et al.* 2012, p.299). Field, *et al.* (2009) argues transition demands “a change and shift in identity and agency as people progress through the education system” (p.11).

McDonald (2009) posits children’s identity is both structural and ontological (p. 245). In relation to the impact of transitions on children’s identity, I believe children’s identity is shaped by the environment with which they interact and is a composite of who they are perceived to be in these environments as well as who they perceive themselves to be in terms of their agency and social and cultural capital.

Transition to secondary school can be perceived as a period of disequilibrium as students move from the comfort of what is known to the discomfort of the unknown. This transition usually challenges students to navigate new social and organizational fields in an effort to fit-in and experience a sense of belonging. Transitions that challenge students’ sense of belonging were perceived by students to be highly significant (Pietarinen *et al.* 2010, p.240).

Definitions of transition that involve change, evolving identity and complex interactions between individuals and their environments fit well with the ecological concept of transition and supports Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) framework for the *Ecology of Human Development* as presented inLerner (2002).Bronfenbrenner shows how children live in and are affected by the environments they inhabit. His design of nested but interrelated systems shows how human development is shaped by the dynamic interactions between the different systems within which an individual exists. These systems include the microsystem which is the one that the child actually interacts with through the home and school; it is the environment that is closest to the child. The mesosystem communicates with the various immediate environments; the exosystem is external to the child but affects the child indirectly; the macrosystem includes the politics, culture, value and belief systems that affect the child (Lerner 2002, p.41). Brewin and Statham (2011) investigates the impact of transition on children in care using Bronfrenbrenner’s model to show that children’s experiences in transition are impacted by their interactions with each system in the ecological model. The ecological system can reduce some of the challenges associated with transitioning when the various systems remain closely interwoven and supportive of each other.

Children “belong to several microsystems [home, school, church and peers] and communicate between these environments, adapting to their different demands and learning from each” (Dunlop and Fabian 2007, p.13). For example, if the peer group and school microsystems are supportive of each other and are closely interwoven, it is likely to reduce some of the discontinuities and challenges that are often associated with transition. Transition is a period of discontinuities for children that are both social and organizational (Brewin and Statham 2011, p.365). Anderson *et al.* (2000) uses the term *institutional discontinuities* to argue discontinuities can be organizational and social (p.326). The former relates to physical structures, procedures and policies and the latter to social factors that can impact a student’s sense of belonging. From this perception, transition is seen as an interruption to the continuity of life.

Lam and Pollard (2006) define discontinuity as “experiences children have as they move from one environment to another” (p. 126) proposing children must adjust and adapt to the new environment. Their research is focused within the framework of agency. In their study of young children’s transition to kindergarten, transition is viewed through sociocultural lens and they oppose the perception that children are passive in the transition process. Children, they argue are active agents who are able to make sense of, respond and adapt to the demands of their new kindergarten environment. This, they posit, demonstrates empowerment as children actively engage in “dynamic and continuous negotiation processes” with their environment (p. 137).

Many students who transition from primary to secondary school experience social discontinuity as old friendships are severed and making new friends may be difficult. As “children move from being the big fish in a small pool to minnows in an uncharted ocean” (Jandel-Snape and Miller, 2008, p.222) they can experience feelings of anxiety and stress (Ganeson and Ehrich, 2009). Making new friends can be particularly challenging for students who have a learning disability (LD) or attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) as these students tend to have difficulties with peer social functioning (Estell *et al.*, 2008).

Peer relationships play a pivotal role in helping students transition to secondary school (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2012; Ganeson and Ehrich, 2009; Anderson *et al*., 2000). Brewin and Statham (2011) argue that peers foster a sense of belonging and security that helps students navigate wider social networks and build social capital. Booth and Sheehan (2008) argue transition places existing peer relationships in flux as young adolescents shift their social focus from family to peers. Being a member of a peer group takes on significance particularly as “the boundaries of adolescent peer groups become more rigid and students either fit in or not” (Booth and Sheehan 2008, p. 724). Eccles and Roeser (2011) examined the impact of peers on student motivation and achievement and found that peers influenced students’ identity formation, goals, aspirations and educational choices during the secondary school years (p.231).The connections between peers, social networks and social capital have been extensively investigated (Craft and Maunder, 2012; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2012; Waters *et al.,* 2012; Knesting, *et al.,* 2008). Peer relationships act as a buffer during transitions that help adolescents navigate the social and organizational terrain of secondary school.

Keeping the focus on the interplay of environments on human development Waters *et al.* (2012) use a social ecological perspective to investigate the effects that transitioning to secondary school has on the social and emotional development of students. Their findings indicate that when children create extensive social networks, transition is perceived more positively and when adolescents fail to develop relationships with others and with their school they are more likely to experience mental health difficulties and or feelings of loneliness (p. 191).

Using the stage-environmental fit paradigm, Eccles *et al.* (1993) investigated the impact of transition on academic motivation in young adolescents. Their study proposes that students experience academic decline in this period because there is a mismatch between young adolescents’ developmental needs and the demands of the traditional classroom environment. The traditional classroom is socially constructed and therefore is likely to look different in different cultures. For the purpose of this chapter, I describe the traditional classroom as environments that focus on: covering an academic curriculum, maintaining discipline, encouraging competition, and transmitting cultural values. Additionally, they are usually teacher centred. This is not to imply that these goals are intrinsically wrong but rather to emphasize the power imbalance that usually exists in these types of classrooms.

Eccles *et al.* (1993) argue young adolescents want choices and autonomy, have more developed cognitive skills, need peer relationships for fitting in and want social mobility. These needs are unlikely to be satisfied in traditional school environments that are likely to provide little opportunity for choice of what and how to learn, encourage greater teacher control in order to maintain discipline and coverage of academic content; emphasize lower-level cognitive strategies that may discourage divergent thinking and support policies that disrupts social networks. Eccles *et al.* (1993) and theorists interested in ‘person-environment fit’ argue that the poor fit between young adolescents and their school environments greatly contributes to lowered motivation and academic decline that is associated with transitioning to secondary schools (p. 557).

The adolescence years are argued as a turbulent and challenging period in child development (Anna Freud 1969, in Lerner 2002, p.406). It is considered to be a time of major change and stress for young people as they experience biological, social, emotional and cognitive changes. For young adolescents these developmental changes are juxtaposed against changes in schools, friendships, academic demands and expectations that come with transitioning to secondary school. The challenges associated with transitioning from primary to secondary school are particularly difficult for children who have special education needs and it is therefore important to understand the special challenges these students experience.

Maras and Aveling (2006) investigated the challenges students, who have been identified as having SEN, experienced when they transitioned to secondary school. They found that children with LD struggled more with transition than did children without LD and that the challenges they experienced included lower self-concept and sense of control over performance and greater challenges in instructional mastery and in making friends. These challenges are likely to make it more difficult for these students to fit-in, to feel as if they belong and to cope with academic and social demands of high school.

Transition studies have focused on investigating transition programmes, academic outcomes, social concerns, pre and post transition experiences, teachers’ and parents’ perspectives and concerns, peer influence and gender differences. The challenges associated with transition have been identified and investigated by numerous studies (Mackenzie *et al.,* 2012; Topping, 2011; Brewin and Statham, 2011; Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006) and can be placed into two categories: internal and external challenges. Internal challenges include factors within the child such as feelings of anxiety and depression related to concerns about increased work load, homework, teachers’ expectations, getting lost, fitting in, being able to make friends and bullying. (Eccles and Roeser, 2011; Topping, 2011; Knesting, *et al.,* 2008; Tilleczek, 2008; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Akos and Galassi, 2004) External challenges include factors associated with the school such as the school climate, pedagogy, procedures and structure (Eccles and Roeser, 2011; Daniels, 2011; Riera, 2010; Barber and Olsen, 2004; Eccles *et al.,* 1993).

The voices of those who are most directly involved in transition are often not represented in most transition research. Children’s voices are usually filtered through others who speak on their behalf. Akos and Galassi (2011) posit “a child’s view is not always perceived accurately by people in the child’s environment” (p. 212). This gives credence to the significance of listening to children’s voices in order to more completely understand their world. Akos and Galassi (2011) examined both the challenges and opportunities children experience in transitions by listening to what children had to say about their transition experiences and concluded that their major concerns focused on academic, procedural and social issues. Smith et al. (2008) and Smith (2006) concur as their study supported the findings that academic, procedural/organizational, and social issues are paramount concerns amongst stakeholders. Their research proposed that the information gap between primary school and high school be addressed so that students can be better prepared for transitioning to high school.

In addressing the complexity of transition and the challenges associated with transition Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) suggest that successful transition is related to students’ ability to be resilient and the level of support they receive from external networks. They define resilience as a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008, p.218). Resilience is composed of both internal factors within the child such as temperament, IQ level, internal locus of control and external factors include supportive parents, friendship networks and close relationship with a mentor (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008, p. 220).

Risk factors that can affect transition are also presented as internal such as learning disabilities, poor educational performance and low self-esteem; and external including poor family relationships, poor friendship networks and low social capital (Jindal-Snape and Miller, p.228). How these factors play against each other affects how children experience transitions. Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) also argue that transition can present events that have the potential to influence an individual’s self-competence and self-esteem. Children who may have academic challenges such as children with LD and ADHD may have had “work matched to their ability” when they were in primary school; in transitioning to secondary school however, they may be faced with tasks that “highlight their lack of understanding or competence” (Jindal-Snape and Miller 2008, p. 228). The performance difference between them and their peers can result in feelings of inadequacy and self-judgment and ultimately to question feelings of belonging. It is likely that having a sense of belonging affects one’s perception of life challenges and inadvertently encourages resilience.

In investigating which students are likely to be most challenged by transition, Bailey and Baines (2012) examined the role risk and resilience play in students’ ability to handle the challenges experienced in transitioning from primary to secondary school. They describe risk as including socio-economic status, sex, and intelligence, and resilience as ‘buffers’ such as personal qualities, the quality of the social environment and having positive social relationships. This perception seems to support the previously made argument that belonging and resilience are closely and intricately related. Bailey and Baines (2012) concluded that it is how an individual perceive risk and protective factors that enables them to be resilient in stressful situations (p. 49). This has important implications for students with SEN who may have issues with self-confidence, self-determination and self-efficacy.

Bailey and Baines (2012) also found that the sources of resilience found in primary schools made SEN students less prepared for secondary school. This argument is contrary to many other studies that have found that a common concern at the secondary level is that supports are less available or accessible, possibly because of the way secondary schools are organized (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; and Ganeson and Ehrich 2009). Eccles *et al.* (1993) argue that teachers are often less accessible and there is less personal and positive teacher /student relationship (p.558). Anderson *et al.* (2000) argue “support from others is an important aspect of successful systemic transitions” (p. 331). They further posit that when teachers are accessible, students have more successful transition experiences. However, they found that among the three main sources of support [parents, peers and teachers], teachers provided the lowest level of support (p. 332). Barber and Olsen (2004) in their assessment of students’ transition from middle to high school argue that students’ sense of connectedness to teachers was significant as “perceived change in support from teachers significantly predicted a change in a range of [student] outcomes” (p 22). Benner (2011) found that students who were at risk of disengaging from school found teachers in secondary schools to be less supportive than teachers in middle school (p. 314). Knesting, *et al.* (2008) and Maras and Aveling (2006) examined the transition of SEN students and argue that for this cohort of students, support is critical during transition because of the special challenges their disabilities present.

Within this literature review, the concept of transition has been discussed within many theoretical frameworks including:

* The stage-environment fit theory: its proponents argue individuals do better in environments that fit their needs. From this perspective it is suggested that the needs of early adolescent students are not readily met in the opportunities provided in the traditional secondary school contributing to academic decline (Eccles *et al.,* 1993).
* The life course framework: views lives as constantly developing and unfolding in social contexts and argues that transitions are opportunities that help to structure life and shape outcomes (Benner, 2011).
* The developmental systems model: demonstrates the interaction between different systems/environments within which a child interacts with others and how these affect academic, social and emotional outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).
* The sociocultural framework: presents transition as involving negotiations between the individual and the social context with which they engage. This perspective argues individuals change or adapt to new social and cultural experiences (Craft and Mauder, 2012).

Each of the theories above has tried to describe the complexities of transition and its impact on students as they move from primary to secondary school. My stance in relation to these theories is an eclectic one that brings together aspects of each theory and revisits them in light of disability and education. Regardless of one’s positionality, transition is generally agreed to involve change and discontinuity and presents challenge and opportunities for students in both the short and long terms.

*Challenges to Transition*

School transitions are complex phenomena and it is not surprising that they present challenges for many students. The transition from primary to secondary school can be particularly challenging as students move from the security of an environment they have inhabited for most of the first decade of their lives to the more unfamiliar environment of secondary school that will shape the second decade of their lives. Some students find this transition to be mostly positive (Waters *et al.* 2012; and Akos and Galassi, 2004) and these positive experiences are likely attributed to students having protective internal and external factors. These internal and external factors include high self-esteem, and self-confidence and strong family or community supports (Jindal-Snape and Miller, 2008).

A review of the literature on transition suggests that for most students transitioning has a psychological impact presented as a mixture of anticipation, anxiety and stress (Mackenzie *et al.,* 2012; Benner, 2011 and Topping, 2011). Transitioning from primary to secondary school can be particularly difficult as this impact coincides with pubertal changes forcing students to face developmental, emotional, social, curriculum and peer challenges at the same time (Ganeson and Ehrich, 2009).

The challenges associated with school transitions can be amplified for students with disabilities (Knesting *et al.,* 2008). For these students transition can be described as the complex inter- weaving of the normal challenges of adolescence, the discontinuities associated with transition and the academic, social and organizational challenges characteristic of their disability. Transition outcomes for students with disabilities are likely to be negative if these students do not receive the level and type of supports they need. These supports can be informational, tangible, emotional and social (Kurita and Janzen, 1996 cited by Anderson *et al.,* 2000 p. 331).

Students who are unable to fit in and who struggle academically are likely to feel marginalized, may gradually disengage from school and eventually drop out. The rate at which students with disabilities drop out is approximately twice that of the general education students (Thurlow *et al.,* 2002, p.1). With the move towards inclusion, increasing numbers of children with disabilities are transitioning into general education classrooms and for these children successful transitioning is important in determining their school experiences and outcomes. Students transitioning from primary to secondary school experience tensions in *being*, *belonging* and *becoming*; terms used by Tilleczek (2008) to describe the adolescent struggle of being who they are, and needing places to belong while they become young adults. These tensions unfold during transition and can influence how students perceive their experiences of transitioning.

The challenges students experience with school transition can be categorized into three areas: academic, procedural and social (Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006; and Akos and Galassi, 2004). Academic concerns include getting harder work and more homework, getting lower grades and succeeding academically (Rice *et al.,* 2011; Topping, 2011; Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006; and Maras and Aveling, 2006). Procedural concerns include learning the rules and knowing the consequences, learning new routines, getting to class on time and meeting the expectations of different teachers as well as concerns about getting lost (Rice *et al.,* 2011; Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006; Akos, 2002 and Anderson *et al.,* 2000). Social concerns include losing friends, making new friends, fitting in, connectedness and having a sense of belonging and fear of being bullied (Mackenzie *et al.,* 2012; Waters *et al.,* 2012 and Rice *et al.,* 2011).

Less academically able students are more likely to struggle with new routines and higher academic demands (Anderson *et al.,* 2000). In addition, students who struggle to adjust to the challenges of secondary school are at an increased risk of becoming demotivated, experiencing academic decline, and disengaging from school (Rice *et al.,* 2011; and Eccles *et al.,* 1993).

As previously discussed, Eccles et al. (1993) examined why transitioning to secondary school presents challenges to young adolescents by comparing the environments of the primary schools with those of secondary schools. They argue that secondary school environments are not a good fit for many young adolescents as they do not support the developmental needs of young adolescents because of how they are structured and organized. For example, teachers are generally less accessible, schools are larger and expectations are different than in primary school, resulting in some students feeling isolated and lonely. Mackenzie *et al.* (2012) also makes this comparison and argues that there are significant differences between primary school environments and secondary school environments. They propose secondary schools are more competitive, place more value on ability over effort and pressure students to achieve academically. Students also have to interact with and understand different teachers with different teaching styles as well as learn new subject material. The secondary environment is likely to be larger and less welcoming than the primary environment and young adolescents may feel anonymous, insignificant and threatened.

One area of concern that has been extensively investigated by researchers is the achievement loss that tends to follow transition. Alspaugh (1998) investigated this phenomenon as it applied to middle and high school transitions in America and found that students experienced academic decline after transitioning to middle school as well as after transitioning to high school. The students who experienced two transitions, that is at grade six and then at grade nine, experienced greater academic loss and were at increased risk for dropping out of school than students who made only one transition (p.24).

Maurice (2002) argues the academic decline that follows transition is often related to the fact that some students are not adequately prepared for the academic demands of middle school. Other researches associate this decline with the difference in the environments and the organization of primary and secondary schools (Cauley and Jovanovich, 2006; and Eccles *et al.,* 1993). The *fresh-start* approach used in secondary schools is based on a curriculum that begins in grade seven (in the Jamaican context) and generally is disconnected from the curriculum used in the primary schools. This can creates stress for students (Jindal-Snape and Miller, 2008) and may also contribute to academic decline as it creates discontinuity between learning in the primary school and the secondary school. Academic decline is likely to be a combination of the factors mentioned above: inadequate preparation for secondary school, differences in school environments and the discontinuities experienced academically and socially. For students with disabilities, the levels and types of supports provided are also critical in helping to prevent academic decline after transitioning.

Research by Akos and Galassi (2004), show that while teachers are concerned with academic challenges, parents and students are more concerned with social challenges (Akos and Galassi, 2004). Although students desire academic success, Topping (2011), found students were significantly concerned about establishing and maintaining peer relationships and building social networks. He posits peer mentoring relationships encourage pupil confidence, and built self-esteem and motivation to learn and support successful transition. However, peer relationships can be perceived as a positive or a negative factor for transition outcomes as positive peer networks can act as a buffer that help students to be resilient and to cope with the changes involved in transitioning (Jindal-Snape and Miller, 2008); while negative peer relationships have been associated with disengagement from school, academic decline and poor transition (Waters *et al,* 2012, p. 192).

Children experience transition as a part of normal development as they grow into adulthood. The transition from primary to secondary school can be both a time of anxiety and anticipation and the experiences students have as they navigate their new environments can direct the pathways and trajectories that can determine their academic, social and emotional outcomes across the lifespan. To facilitate successful transitions, students need to be prepared for transition and receive support before, during and after transition (Anderson *et al.,* 2000).

*Disability and Impairment*

The terms impairment, disability and handicap have been redefined over the years. WHO (1980) in *The International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicaps (ICIDH)* defines impairment as any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function. Disability is defined as any restriction of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being while the term handicap is defined as a disadvantage for a given individual that limits or prevents fulfilment of a role that is normal (Handicap International, 2008). According to these definitions, impairments occur at the organic level resulting from structural or functional abnormality of the body; disability is the functional consequence of the impairment and handicap is the resultant social restrictions the individual experiences as a result of impairment and disability.

Disability can be viewed through many lenses but the two main lenses through which disability is viewed are the medical model and the social model. The medical model of disability presents disability as a medical problem that resides in the individual. The individual is disabled because of disease, accidents or genetics and disability is presented as an abnormality that should be treated or cured (Goodley 2011, p.7). The social model of disability presents disability as the result of social barriers and attitudes that create hassles and limitations that deny access to and full participation in society for individuals with impairments. Disability is presented as a social construct and can be addressed through the removal of social and environmental barriers. How disability is perceived is likely to influence the transition experiences of children identified as having disabilities. It can be argued that the medical model is likely to be more exclusionary requiring students to change in order to fit in, while the social model is likely to be more inclusive requiring schools to be more accommodating so that students can fit in.

WHO in 2002 in the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF) presents a definition for disability that attempts to bridge the medical and social models. Disability is presented as a complex system with elements occurring on the individual body level in combination with the structures of society. This definition attempts to unite biological, the individual and social perspectives. (WHO 2002, p.10 cited by Handicap International, 2008.) Impairment is subsumed within this new concept of disability and the term handicap is not used.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) does not explicitly define the term disability but states disability is an evolving concept and presents disability as interrelated with social participation:

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder the full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006)

The goal of the Convention as presented in Article 1 supports the social model of disability as it proposed to:

Promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. (Article 1 – Purpose of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006)

In Britain, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) defines disability and impairment as one and the same, arguing that impairments create disabilities. “Hence, impairment and disability are collapsed together as synonymous concepts” (Goodley 2011, p.5).

Disability has traditionally been seen as either a moral condition (caused by ‘sin’) or a medical condition (a defect or abnormality of the body) (Goodley, 2011, p.8). Both these concepts present disability as a tragedy that is experienced within the perimeters of the individual. This perception sees disability as a problem that lies with the individual and it lets society off the hook.

*Reflexivity*

The medical model focuses on identifying and attaching diagnostic labels to individuals. Although labelling is a controversial concept, involving access versus privacy, labels are important in special education as students need to be classified in order to access supports and benefits. In reflecting on the use of labels in special education I recognize the concept of labelling individuals although controversial is a natural phenomenon. I say this because although many people believe we should not label individuals, there seems to be a natural tendency for humans to put others into categories in an effort to better describe or understand them. Children are often labelled as being smart, pretty, athletic, artistic, shy, slow, messy, challenging, talented etc. These labels are applied by parents, teachers, peers and may even be self-imposed by the children themselves. Some labels carry negative connotations and these can be damaging to a child’s self-esteem and confidence. For example, the label ‘disabled’ implies one is not able to do something that ‘normal’ people can do. It can be argued that the concept of disabled cannot be appreciated without a concept of normality as it is a lack of the latter that is often used to define the former.

In thinking about labelling I believe that one’s impressions are impacted by one’s perspectives on disability. If disability is seen within the context of the social model, then labels may be perceived as oppressive, restrictive, negative and unnecessary. From this perspective, an accommodating and socially just society allows all its citizens the right to access opportunities without the need to be classified or labelled. The social model is likely to down-play the need for labels. The social model ‘turned attention away from the preoccupation with impairment to a focus on exclusion’ (Goodley 2011, p. 11) so classification would be seen as unimportant because disability is viewed as an issue of social barriers rather than being created by an impairment.

The Nordic relational model, sees disability as the result of a person-environment mismatch; it is situational or contextual and relative (Goodley 2011, p. 16). The Nordic philosophy of normalization argues that all persons with disabilities, even the most severely disabled individual, should experience life as normally as possible (Hallahan *et al*. 2009, p.47). Normalization, supports the Scandinavian’s welfare view, and supports the argument of self-advocacy, equality for all, and full participation. The provision of supports and services is seen as part of social policy (Goodley, 2011). When disability is viewed from the relational perspective, labels lose their significance because all citizens are entitled to support and services that would help them experience equal participation in society and therefore there is no need to distinguish one individual from another.

When disability is viewed from the perspective of the medical model, then the focus is on the individual; their lack, and their need for supports and services. Labelling from this view point may be perceived as a necessary way to classify individuals in order to provide the necessary and appropriate supports and services needed. The medical model has been criticised for categorizing individuals into different disability groups. Gillman *et al.* (2000, p.390) see this as stigmatising individuals which can lead to the exclusion of some individuals from mainstream society.

In the United States of America and in Jamaica, labels are important because access, supports and services are tied to identification and classification. Individuals cannot receive special supports or services without first having been documented as having a disability.

I believe some labels limit students when their use results in lowered expectations and exclusionary practices; as some teachers expect less from students who have certain labels. Research supports the findings that when teachers hold low expectations of students; students perform at lower rates (Rubie-Davis et al. 2006, p. 430). Teachers need to have high expectations for all their students and understand that labels are gateways through which some students are able to access the kinds of the supports and services they need to support learning. Educators need to remember that a label cannot define a person in their totality; it can only attempt to describe a small part of who that person is.

There are many arguments against the labelling of children and for each there can be a counter argument. For example, it can be argued that children do not need to be labels in order to have their different learning needs met. This argument proposes teachers should be able to meet the needs of different learners through differentiating their instruction and therefore there is no need to label any child. This argument presumes that all teachers are qualified to differentiate their instruction and are sensitive to the different learning needs in the classroom.

In first world countries where there are likely to be more resources, and significant supports available; it is likely that highly trained teachers are able to address differences in students learning needs without necessarily having the special education labels attached to certain students. However, I believe that in a third world country such as Jamaica, labels are important and can even be beneficial to teachers and students. Labels can help teachers understand the particular learning needs students may have and a student may be relieved to discover he or she has a learning disability and is not stupid; a thought that may have been haunting the student for a long time and which may have been reinforced by comments made by teachers, peers and family members.

In my personal experience having a label on which to hang my daughter’s learning challenges presented a sense of relief; at last there was a reason for her learning challenges and we could focus our attention on helping her cope with the challenges dyslexia and ADHD presented for her. Prior to this, we felt like we were groping in the dark trying to understand why learning to read was so difficult for her.

Labels are important in the Jamaican context because few teachers are trained in special education, and many teachers are unable to identify the special learning needs that certain students may have. For example, one of my daughter’s teachers felt she just needed to be disciplined; a few ‘smacks’ would set her right. Teachers may suspect a child has a problem but because they do not know what the problem is, they do not know how to address the situation. It can be argued that a teacher knowing a label does not necessarily mean he/she will know what to do, however I believe that knowing a label is one step closer to understanding the problem and in this age of technology teachers can research the label and be informed about certain accommodations that can be implemented in their classrooms. Dixon and Matalon (2003) argue when special needs students are not identified and given extra consideration in the regular classroom, learning problems can mushroom and lead to other problems that might have been avoided (p. 1).

Additionally, in Jamaica, the general education classes are large; assistant teacher to support the class teacher and students may be unaffordable, and schools have very limited resources and supports. In light of these realities and limitations, many teachers teach from a perspective of ‘one size fits all’ because they feel unable to address individual learning needs.

When a teacher knows that a student is identified as having a disability, they are likely to have a better understanding of why certain students are having difficulties learning. Labels can also help teachers to have realistic expectations of students. Labels can protect students with special learning needs; as when these needs are identified, certain interventions can be implemented (Lauchlan and Boyle 2007, p. 36) and prevent students falling through the cracks. Without children being identified as having a disability, teachers are unlikely to go the extra mile, or do something different for one, when they are responsible for teaching forty or more students in a class with little or no resources.

In Jamaica, it is important to identify students with special education needs particularly if students need certain concessions in class or for examinations. Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) cite Sutcliffe and Simon (1993) as stating “the acquisition of a label can open gates to resources and other forms of support that are not generally available” (p.36).

Labels allow students to be able to access supports and services such as extra time to complete assignments; or to do examinations. It also allows students to have access to a reader or scribe. Providing supports and services can be costly, and Jamaica like other third world countries has limited resources. Labels provide a gateway to access, allowing the limited supports and services available to be allocated to those students who need them.

Although I believe labels are important, I also believe that professionals need to be careful when attaching labels to students. This is because sometimes labels can be inaccurate and labels can stick with an individual for many years. This could result in some students being socially ostracized and bullied because of labels

In reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of labelling, I believe that in the Jamaican context, labelling is important and necessary if we hope to improve the educational experiences of students identified as having special needs. I believe that what is significant in any reflection on labelling is that all actions are guided by social justice and ethical considerations. Professionals must always consider the best interest of the student when making decisions about using labels.

*Special Education*

Special education can be a legal, administrative, educational and descriptive term depending on the context in which it is used (Roaf and Bines 1989, p.18). Used here, it is the educational term used to define “specially designed instruction that meets the unusual needs of students identified as exceptional” (Hallahan *et al.* 2009, p. 12). The term ‘exceptional’ includes children with disabilities as well as children identified as being gifted. Special education could be perceived as supporting the medical model because of its focus on the individual and its support for segregating some students in special schools and self-contained classes rather than including them in the general education classroom. Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) argue this perception of special education is based in a “simplistic conceptualization of educational justice, fairness and equality” (p. 379).

Since the 1970s, the social model in disability studies has received increasing support as disability is argued as the consequence of exclusion and social oppression. Various forms of social oppression disable people and the social model of disability drove disability studies in Britain during the 1990s (Goodley 2011). This move grew out of the work done by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) (1976). They made the following distinction between impairment and disability:

Impairment – lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb organism or mechanism of the body. Disability – the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream social activities. (UPIAS, 1976 as cited in Gooley 2011, p.8)

This definition of disability as a social construct made disability a political issue and it was embraced by disability studies in Britain and contributed to the analysis of disabling barriers (Goodley, 2011). The social model presents disability as a socially constructed phenomenon in which social, cultural, political, economic and psychological barriers prevent individuals with disabilities from fully participating in life opportunities. The social model of disability is not focused on impairments but rather on how disabilities are created by exclusionary practices enforced on persons with impairments (Goodley and Roets, 2008).

Whereas disability studies in Britain were based on the social barriers approach, in North America, disability studies were driven by the minority group model. This model argues that people with disabilities constitute an oppressed minority in society. Individuals with disabilities benefited from the civil rights movement and queer politics of the 1960s and 1970s (Wilson, 2011) and after the signing of the Rehabilitation Act (1975), disability advocates became more empowered and joined the bandwagon to fight against discrimination and demand “civil rights, equal access and protection” (Goodley 2011, p. 13).

The term ‘minority’ usually refer to racial or ethnic groups within a larger dominant group who share life experiences characterised by “economic and social handicaps resulting from a history of unfair discrimination by the majority” (Mpofu and Conyers 2004, p.143). These authors argue, numerical underrepresentation does not of itself reflect minority status since underrepresentation does not always lead to restricted access to resources (p.143) as was the case with white South Africans in South Africa under the system of Apartheid. Mpofu and Conyers (2004) examine disability through the lens of representational theories to evaluate whether or not individuals with disabilities satisfy the requirement for minority status. Representational theories use three criteria to define minority status. These are: economic opportunities, communicative self-representation (the right to refer to the self in preferred terms) and preferred lifestyle (Mopfu and Conyers, 2004). These authors conclude individuals with disabilities “share a history of being denied access to resources and privileges such as economic opportunities, communicative self-representation and preferred lifestyle” (p. 143) and therefore the concept of disability as a minority group is applicable.

Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) warn the social model of disability has become the “new orthodoxy” (p.368) and argue that the medical model has been unfairly criticized. The social model they posit is somewhat naïve and needs a more balanced view. They argue social disability theorists, such as Vic Finkelstein and Michael Oliver, see disability as socially constructed and refuse to acknowledge the reality of disability at the personal level, denying the role of biology. This type of thinking contributes to the “zealous pursuit of inclusion at the expense of effective instruction” (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2011, p. 368). They conclude that social constructionists, such as Tregaskis, seem to believe that in the absence of social barriers disabilities would not exist presenting a utopian “barrier-free world” (p. 377). The social constructionist model of disability sees disability as the product of societal development within a specific cultural context and Tregaskis somewhat naïvely argues disability could be eradicated if society was organized to take the needs of all its citizens into account (Tregaskis 2004a, cited by Reindal, 2008). The social model sees disability as the product of discriminatory, exclusionary and oppressive practices of society. Oliver (1996) declared “the social model is not an attempt to deal with the personal restrictions of impairment but the social barriers of disability” (p.38).

Reindal (2008) critiques the social model for not giving credence to the personal restrictions of impairment by its focus on social barriers (p.141). He proposes disability should be understood within a social relational framework. Within this framework, impairment is recognised as causing reduced function that affects the individual on both a personal and social level but whether or not this reduced function becomes a disability, depends on how it is viewed by society and the restrictions imposed at various macro levels of society. (p. 144)

Matthews (2009) argues the social model demands educational environments be restructured so that “all kinds of students can flourish in them not be disabled by them” (p.231). Matthews further proposes that attending to the social model encourages teachers to modify their teaching environment so that it is as inclusive as possible. This would likely support positive transition experiences for students who are identified as having disabilities.

Ho (2004) reiterates the arguments presented by other proponents of the social model that is, the medical model of disability frames disability as a ‘person problem’; the fault lies in the individual, as it is directly caused by the individual’s mental or physical impairment (p.88). This framework invites the idea that persons with disabilities are somehow inferior or lacking in comparison to persons without disabilities. This shifts the responsibility away from society.

Ho (2004) cautions that the categorization of individuals as occurs with the medical model can be flawed. For example, a diagnosis of learning disability is inferred by a process of elimination when no other cause is found for learning challenges; brain dysfunction is not actually proven only inferred (p.88). “Diagnoses are often based on biased or erroneous assumptions that all children learn the same things at the same pace” (Ho 2004, p.89). This Ho claims is reflected in the wide use of standardized tests in schools.

Ho (2004) further argues that the social model of disability encourages the presumption that all children learn in unique ways, and shifts the focus from disability to the ways in which social institutions facilitate the learning of all. This perception of schooling calls into focus concepts of just schooling. Gale and Densmore (2000), quotes Justinian from the sixth century as defining justice as “the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone their due” (p.10). It could be argued that the social theory of disability attempts to do just this although determining what is due to everyone and how this should be rendered goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

*Specific Learning Disabilities*

The label specific learning disability has been contested, and in some cases deconstructed by some of the literature on disability studies. I acknowledge these critiques but in this literature review I will be summarising the way educational, psychological and medical discourses have understood, defined and categorised these labels.

There is no, one, agreed on, definition for specific learning disabilities (LD) because the term covers a wide range of learning difficulties. However, a commonly used definition is found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) passed by the Federal government of the United States of America:

A specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. The disorder includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The disorder does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (Federal definition 1975, cited in Hallahan *et al.* 2009, p.187)

The federal definition has for decades been used as the framework within which to understanding what a specific learning disability is. However, in reading this definition what is clear is that it is very vague and generalised. The definition as stated could conceivably include everyone at one point or other in their life. The definition attempts to define a specific learning disability by stating what it is not but fails to present a clear picture of exactly what it is. This vagueness makes the definition open to multiple interpretations and a high level of subjectivity as there are no precise statements on the characteristics of a specific learning disability. For example, what criterion is used to decide that an individual’s listening, thinking, speaking, reading abilities are imperfect? At what point does imperfection become perfection? What precisely constitutes a disorder in the basic psychological processes? If sensory, economic, cultural, emotional problems are not primarily contributors to a specific learning disability can they be considered secondary contributors? The vagueness of this definition is its main weakness as it presents a very imprecise description of a specific learning disability (Kavale and Forness, 2000; and Lyon1996). Specific learning disability is the largest disability area receiving special education support. It is reported that at least 4%-7% of school age children have a specific learning disability (Büttner and Hasselhorn, 2011). It could be argued that this high prevalence rate may be the result of subjective interpretations of the federal definition.

This definition as well as all those that follow in this chapter supports the medical model as this model is “the platform for the classification system used in special education” (Reindal 2008, p. 135). As a result, concepts of disability and impairment are often based on a medical understanding.

LD’s are language based disorders and affect how well the brain receives, processes, stores and retrieves information. Language is integral to learning; therefore having a learning disability is likely to affect a child’s academic outcomes and has been associated with placing children at-risk for negative life outcomes (Firth *et al.* 2010, p.77).

In the United Stated, Canada and Jamaica the terms ‘learning disability’ or ‘specific learning disability’ are used interchangeably to refer to students who have normal intelligence but experience difficulties in some areas of academic life. These difficulties are not the result of sensory loss, environmental or social disadvantage, or emotional, physical or cognitive challenges (Federal definition, cited in Hallahan *et al.*2009, p.187). Rather than using these terms interchangeably, I will be using the term learning disability [LD] to aid clarification. It is this paradox of normal intelligence and inconsistent performance that traditionally has been used to suggest the existence of a LD, as these children usually have “uneven patterns of strengths and weaknesses that affect learning” [National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities 2011, p.3].

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) (2004) has proposed a revision to the definition for LD for the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* V [DSM-5]. This version reiterates the core concept of LD as “an academic disorder originating in the central nervous system” and maintains “intelligence must be at least in the average range” (Scanlon 2013, p. 27). However, the APA’s proposes the removal of the aptitude-achievement discrepancy from the identification criteria.

Scanlon (2013) argues the removal of the aptitude achievement discrepancy is the most significant change proposed in the new definition. This discrepancy has been criticized as being an ineffective measure for identifying children with LD (Büttner and Hasselhorn 2011, p.76) as some children who did not meet this requirement but who had LD were excluded and therefore denied special education service. Removing this requirement is likely to increase the number of students who are identified as having LD.

As an academic disability, the new definition focuses on problems in reading, writing and mathematics. Although these skills are fundamental to school, work and for everyday literacy Scanlon (2013) cautions that defining LD as a purely academic disability does not provide a complete picture of this disability because individuals with LD also have difficulty with non-academic tasks such as “planning, managing time, remembering details and tasks, expressing themselves and or organizing” (p.28). He proposes that the revised definition be more comprehensive in order to provide a more useful and accurate description of LD (Scanlon, 2013, p.29).

The medical model of disability perceives these challenges as directly related to impairment. The social model argues these challenges are external to the individual and are created by an unaccommodating society presenting barriers that effectively exclude these individuals from full participation.

Learning disabilities represent the largest single category of students who receive special education in most countries with 4%-7% of school-age children identified as having LD (Büttner and Hasselhorn, 2011). In the United States, for the year 2009-2010, of 6,481 students who received special education services, the U.S. Department of Education reported approximately 4.9% were from the category of learning disabilities (National Center for Educational Statistics 2012). In Jamaica, there are no recent figures for the number of students with learning disabilities.

In Dixon and Matalon (2009, p.13) research done by the government in the 1970s showed that approximately 7% of school age students in Jamaica have LD. The Jamaican government recognizes that a large number of students with LD are part of the general education population and are undiagnosed and unsupported (Thwaites 2013, p.11 and Vision 2030 Jamaica (2009) – Education Sector Plan p. 26). The three main types of LD are considered to be dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia; these affect the academic areas of reading, math and writing respectively (The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (2011).

*Dyslexia*

The majority of children with LD have dyslexia. Dyslexia can be defined as a persistent difficulty in reading especially as it relates to word recognition, spelling and phonological awareness skills and has traditionally been described as a discrepancy between reading age and mental age (Tunmer and Greaney, 2010). LDA, Minnesota (2010) defines dyslexia as a “brain-based, often inherited disorder that impairs a person’s ability to read”. Most students with dyslexia are not identified until after they have been receiving reading instruction for some time (Tunmer and Greaney 2010, p.231). Identification at this stage can contribute to the *Matthew effect*, a term related to the concept of accumulative advantage, as the child by then has become accustomed to failure and has likely developed a strong dislike for reading. This results in reduced engagement in reading and reduced rates of academic success.

For many students with dyslexia repeated failure leads to the development of negative self-perceptions of their ability (Tunmer and Greaney 2010, p.231). These authors posit that dyslexia is a learning difficulty that persists regardless of exposure to quality instruction and results from serious impairment in phonological processing skills (p.239). They argue students with dyslexia need more intensive instruction for longer periods of time. Perhaps the most thorough definition of dyslexia is provided by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) (2002):

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (The International Dyslexia Association, 2002)

During the 1970s and 1980s it was widely believed that dyslexia was the result of a visual processing problems (Büttner and Hasselhorn, 2011); that words jump around on the page creating reading difficulties. Recent studies have contradicted this argument as the role phonological awareness plays in reading became more clearly understood. Büttner and Hasselhorn (2011) argue “reading disabilities are not caused by visual processing problems but by cognitive deficits in phonological coding, auditory processing and semantic and syntactic skills” (p.79). Uhry (1999) posit children with dyslexia have poor phonological awareness and other phonological processing skills such as difficulty with rapid serial naming, verbal short-term memory and articulation speed (pp.66-67). Dyslexia is a specific language disability and as such is neurological in nature and language based. These two factors affect how words are perceived by a person with dyslexia. The problem lies with auditory processing and memory rather than with visual acuity, so learners have difficulty remembering words not because of faulty vision but because of problems with processing and remembering at the phoneme level.

*Dyscalculia*

Dyscalculia is a learning disability that is characterized by difficulties in learning mathematics in individuals with average or above average intelligence. Michaelson (2007) defines dyscalculia as “a debilitating disorder that affects a person’s ability to conceptualize the operations and processes of fundamental mathematics” (p.21). Dyscalculia is also defined as a neurologically based disorder of mathematical abilities (Wadlington and Wadlington, 2008) and affects at least 6% of the school-age population (Wadlington and Wadlington, 2008; Michaelson, 2007; and LDA, Minnesota, 2005). There is also some evidence that dyscalculia like dyslexia is hereditary as it is often found among siblings and other family members. In a study done by Shalev, *et al.,* (2001) the majority of families with children with dyscalculia had at least one other family member with the disorder and their findings suggested a prevalence rate that was almost ten times higher than the general population (p. 62).

For the past four decades, researchers have been dissecting dyscalculia into categories in an attempt to understand how this complex disability works. Wadlington and Wadlington (2008) present their understanding of dyscalculia by arguing that dyscalculia can be divided into three subtypes. These subtypes are characterized by memory problems related to semantic memory, procedural memory and visuospatial memory (Wadlington and Wadlington, 2008). These authors argue that problems with semantic memory result in difficulty in retrieving arithmetic facts, difficulty with procedural memory results in problems understanding and following procedures and visuospatial difficulties create problems in understanding spatial representation of numerical information (p. 3). These behaviours are common characteristic of individuals who have dyscalculia.

Research shows that mathematical problems can also be caused by other factors such as math anxiety, lack of motivation and poor instruction (Wadlington and Wadlington, 2008 and Hughes and Kolstad, 1994) making it difficult to identify and treat children who have dyscalculia. It could be argued that these factors may also contribute to dyscalculia receiving less attention than language based disorders such as dyslexia as mathematical difficulties may be attributed to lack of effort, math phobia, or ineffective pedagogy (Hughes and Kolstad, 1994).

*Dysgraphia*

Dysgraphia is a writing disorder seen in children of at least average intelligence and has no distinct neurological cause (Hamstra- Bletz and Blӧte, 1993). It is characterized by illegible handwriting, poor letter formation, irregular word spacing, slow rate of writing, and incorrect grammar or word use (LDA Minnesota, 2005). Dysgraphia has also been described as having difficulty in “automatically remembering and mastering the sequence of muscle motor movements needed in writing” (Wagmeister and Shifrin 2000, p. 45).

Writing is a complex skill and individuals with dysgraphia have problems not only with the physical task of writing but also with spelling words and constructing, sequencing, organizing and expressing ideas in writing (LDA Minnesota, 2005). Children with dysgraphia are likely to experience academic challenges related to their writing difficulties and may experience frustration, loss of motivation, low self-esteem, challenges to their self-confidence and over time, may try to avoid activities involving writing (LDA Minnesota, 2005). Today, with easier access to computers, the benefits of spell-check and assistive technology, writing and spelling should present minimal challenges.

The fact that dysgraphia continues to present major challenges to students illuminates the resistance to accommodation evident in some schools and supports the claims of the social model. Society’s unwillingness to adequately address the needs of persons with disabilities contributes to challenges many persons with disabilities face. Oliver (1996) argues:

It is not individual limitations of whatever kind that causes the problem but society’s failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organization (p. 32).

Dysgraphia may be manifested in one or more of the following areas: poor penmanship, and difficulty with syntax and semantics (Lie *et al.,* 2000). Hamstra- Bletz and Blӧte (1993) argue dysgraphic writers have poor fine-motor skills which make it difficult to carry out or complete written tasks. They found writers with dysgraphia show less stylistic preference than peers without dysgraphia (p. 695). This may suggests children with dysgraphia find writing stressful as they may be focused on producing an acceptable script and therefore are not concerned with presenting a particular style of writing.

Dysgraphia may occur alone or with dyslexia and/or dyscalculia compounding the academic difficulties a child can have. A large number of children who have LD also have Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). Having more than one disability occurring at the same time is referred to as comorbidity. In this paper the term co-occurrence is used instead of comorbidity. Investigating the co-occurrence of ADHD and reading disability (RD) de Jong *et al.* (2006) found these two disabilities occurred together more often than would be expected by chance and this they argue is supported by twin studies which indicate genetic origins. Their study used the term reading disability (RD) instead of the term dyslexia de Jong *et al.* (2006) found that some subtypes of ADHD and RD have the same genetic origin. The co-occurrence rate of ADHD and RD is estimated to be 40% (de Jong *et al.* 2006, p. 178) and both ADHD and RD were associated with dyscalculia as 26% of children with dyscalculia also had ADHD and 17% of children with dyscalculia also have dyslexia (de Jong *et al.* 2006, p.188). Büttner and Hasselhorn (2011) found co-occurrence for both dyscalculia and dyslexia with ADHD at a rate of 26% and 33% respectively (p.83). Czamara *et al.* (2013) investigated co-occurrence between ADHD and reading/spelling and math difficulties and argue children with ADHD appear to have a higher risk for reading/spelling and math difficulties than did children without ADHD (p.7).

*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)*

In chapter one, the controversy surrounding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ADHD was presented. In this chapter, the literature that recognises ADHD as a valid disability is discussed. ADHD is considered to occur world-wide in approximately 5.3% of school age children (Czamara *et al.,* 2013). ADHD is characterized by severe and pervasive symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsiveness (Daley and Birchwood, 2010) and is divided into three sub categories: predominantly inattentive (PI), predominantly hyperactive/impulsive (PH) and combined (C) (Coghill and Seth, 2011). To be diagnosed with ADHD the individual must display some of these symptoms in at least two settings (e.g. home, school, work, other) for at least six months and these symptoms must have been present before the age of seven and significantly impacting daily functioning (DSM-4 criteria) according to the American Paediatric Association (APA) (1994) cited by Daley and Birchwood, (2010). The APA is proposing changes to current diagnosis criteria for the updated DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*-*5* ) including raising the age of onset from seven to twelve, expanding the symptoms of hyperactivity/impulsivity and reformulating the ADHD subtypes (Sibley *et al.,* 2013; and Coghill and Seth, 2011). It is argued that these changes will not significantly change the diagnosis for children but will help to improve the detection of adolescent and adult patients who may have ADHD (Sibley *et al.,* 2013). Some individuals with ADHD do not show symptoms until after age seven as protective factors such as high intelligence and a strong support system could mask ADHD symptoms resulting in some individuals being excluded from diagnosis based on the diagnostic criteria under DSM-4 (Sibley *et al.* 2013, p. 35).

For years ADHD was believed to be a disability restricted to children. Recent research however indicates that the majority of children diagnosed with ADHD continue to experience symptoms into adulthood, making ADHD a chronic lifetime disability. Daley and Birchwood (2010) posit ADHD extends beyond childhood as “between 11%-40% of childhood cases continue to meet the criteria for the disorder in adulthood” (p.457). Frazer *et al.* (2007) presents research on a group of children with ADHD who were followed for 10 -25 years and found two thirds of them continued to manifest at least one of the symptoms of ADHD (p.50). It is estimated that 2%-4% of adults in the UK and worldwide have ADHD (Matheson *et al.,* 2013).

Academic achievement and ADHD has been extensively researched. However, most of this research has focused on school-age children at the elementary level (Daley and Birchwood, 2010). Academic achievement in adolescents with ADHD has not been as extensively investigated possibly because ADHD had until recent times been considered a childhood disability (Matheson *et al.,* 2013). Research now indicates that ADHD in adolescents contributes to academic underachievement (Ek *et al.,* 2011 and Frazer *et al.,* 2007) and the impact that ADHD symptoms have on academic achievement has been found to affect children, adolescents and adults (Daley and Birchwood, 2010).

Daley and Birchwood (2010) explain ADHD has two components: behavioural symptoms (inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity), and cognitive or executive function deficits (response inhibition and working memory). The latter has not received as much attention in research on ADHD and academic performance. However, in investigating the possible reasons for academic underachievement in students with ADHD, it was found that academic problems for students with ADHD were associated with inattentive symptoms and executive function deficits (Ek *et al.* 2011, p.402; and Daley and Birchwood 2010, p.461).

The academic requirements of school become compounded when placed against the backdrop of ADHD behavioural symptoms and, executive function deficits, as well as other disorders that may co-occur with ADHD; creating a likely prescription for academic challenges to be experienced across the lifespan of individuals with ADHD. The challenges experienced by students with ADHD are likely to be compounded by schools not adjusting to different learning styles in students. Acknowledging this does not ignore the real difficulties that these students experience but rather supports the claims that many challenges are externally imposed by a less accepting society.

I hope this thesis will draw attention to the need for schools to be places where all students feel a sense of belonging. Additionally, the pedagogical practices and culture of secondary schools need to recognise and values student differences; and not exclude non-normative students through promoting curricula and expectations “that some students with (or without) impairments will never reach” (Goodley 2007, p. 319). It can be argued that belonging, just pedagogy and a positive and accepting school culture are key ingredients for students with disabilities when they transition to secondary school.

The theories of social capital and sense of belonging are considered to be central issues in this research, as they help to shape the framework of the research. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will discuss the literature that relates to these theoretical concepts and their impact on the following factors: social networks, school culture and climate, disability and pedagogy. These factors are likely to influence how students experience school. Turning my focus towards social capital and theories of belonging allows me to move away from a pathological focus on disability and be able to interrogate the ways in which education, pedagogy and culture respond to diversity amongst the student population.

*Social Capital and Social Networks*

The concept of social capital has been extensively investigated in recent years by researchers in a variety of fields and is understood in many different ways (Gewirtz *et al.,* 2005). However it is generally agreed to involve relationships within social networks that are mutually beneficial and based on trust, reciprocity and cooperation (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004; and Kilpatrick *et al.,* 2003). Putnam (2000) states “the core idea of social capital is that social networks have value” (p.19) and the literature on social capital indicate that this value is both to the individual and the group; that is, the transactions that occur between individuals and their networks provide internal and external benefits.

The concept of social capital has been around for a long time and, the main theorists associated with the concept are Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam. These will be looked at in greater detail in chapter three when the theoretical framework for this research is presented. Within this chapter, it is sufficient to state Bourdieu (1986), sees social capital as the resources an individual has or has the potential to have based on membership in a group. He argues social capital benefits the individual and works together with cultural capital to maintain and perpetuate the status quo and preserve the position of the dominant group thereby supporting cultural reproduction (Dika and Singh, 2002; Bourdieu, 1986).

Coleman (1988) argues social capital is defined by its function and consists of social structures; and the ability to facilitate certain actions for actors within these structures (S98). Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) argues Coleman views social capital as existing within family systems, which provide financial, human and social capital for its members. Parents act as transmitters of capital to their children. Coleman argues the family system provides the environment in which basic rules and norms can be learnt, and fosters a sense of obligation and responsibility toward family members and members of the social network. Coleman claims “social capital is extremely important in school settings” (Schaefer-McDaniel 2004, p.3) and can be used to enhance students’ academic achievement. As a result, Coleman’s perspective of social capital is often used to “highlight the social context of education” (Putnam 2000, p. 20) and provides a useful framework within which many researchers conduct educational research.

Putnam (2000) posits social capital is the “connections among individuals and the reciprocity and trustworthiness that arises from them” encouraging the development of “*civic virtue*” (p.19). Social capital he argues can be expressed as *bridging* capital which is inclusive, or outward looking and *bonding* capital which is exclusive or inward looking (p. 22). He explains that the latter allows an individual to get by while the former allows the individual to get ahead. Putnam focuses on the impact of social capital on communities and argues that trust and reciprocity must be mutual among community members if the community is to be strong. He argues, communities that are close have greater levels of social capital, and can accrue greater benefits on the community. Social capital is therefore perceived as a public good. Putnam’s work has influenced education policy in England in recent years and is reflected in the Government’s efforts to raise educational achievement by building the social capital of families and communities (Gewirtz *et al.* 2005, p. 652).

Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) presents a synopsis of social capital as argued by Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam and makes the important point that the majority of research that investigates social capital and youth are focused on the perspectives of adults who speak on behalf of the youth. She presents the concept of social capital among young people as including Bourdieu’s *sociability* that is, the ability to sustain and use one’s social network and argue that children are capable of sustaining and utilizing their social networks when necessary. She draws on Coleman’s and Putnam’s concepts of trust and reciprocity arguing that in order to utilize networks a level of trust must exist. Schaefer-McDaniel adds to her concept of the social capital of youth, the significance of belonging as young people need a place of attachment in which to develop social networks, experience trust and develop the willingness to reciprocate.

Dika and Singh (2002) present a critique of the literature on social capital with a particular focus on Bourdieu and Coleman and then examines whether social capital is positively linked to educational and psychosocial outcomes. They argue that Coleman’s theory of social capital is too vague and that both Coleman and Bourdieu present “a fuzzy concept” of social capital (p.44) Dink and Singh (2002) literature review on social capital supports a positive link between social capital, educational attainment, achievement scores and psychosocial factors.

Bates and Davis (2004) investigate the role social capital plays in the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities and posit social inclusion and social capital be examined in tandem. They argue that social inclusion demands full participation for persons with disabilities thus providing access to jobs, friendships and other social benefits. However these benefits are impacted by social capital which the authors have failed to give equal representation. It can be argued that persons with disability may be viewed differently from non-disabled persons and may be perceived as less trustworthy. Trust according to Putnam (2000) is an integral factor in the development of social capital as it is necessary for reciprocity. It can further be argued that a lack of trust is likely to place individuals with disability at a disadvantage reducing for them opportunities to build social capital and social networks. This article could be critiqued as being imbalanced as the authors argue for greater social inclusion for persons with disabilities without giving equal attention to the importance of developing social capital for persons with disabilities. It is possible that this action could result in greater placement options but not necessarily greater access and opportunities for reciprocation and the building of social capital.

Kang and Glassman (2010) interlock the concepts of social and cultural capital with moral action and moral thought. These authors present the argument that just as social capital and cultural capital are different but related and at times dependent concepts so too are the concepts of moral action and moral thought. They posit moral action is a form of social capital and moral thought a form of cultural capital. This perspective of moral thought relates to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital as that which is embodied (Bourdieu, 1986) and represents the “stable internalized signs that validates one as a member of a particular social group”. Moral action is related to social capital as it is “based in levels of trust and reciprocity in carrying out community-oriented goals” (Kang and Glassman 2010, p.22). These authors argue morality serves the function of social action because both the individual and the community are affected by the choices and actions individuals make. This argument is supported by Putnam’s perspective of social capital as having both a private and a public good (Putnam 2000, p.20) although Putnam emphasises the benefits are greater when the community is well-connected.

Boeck (2007) investigates social capital in relation to its effect on young people and their transition experiences. Boeck argues “young adults are agents in their transition experience but there are many boundaries and barriers that sometimes impede their expression of agency” (p.5). This is presented as grounds on which to examine young people’s level of social capital. Boeck posit young people tend to engage with peers similar to themselves in their social networks and these networks provide a sense of belonging, emotional support and opportunities for choice and power. When social networks provide young people with diverse social capital, they are better able to navigate their way through transition. Boeck refers to Putnam’s concept of *bridging capital* and *bonding capital* which were previously mentioned but Boeck also examines *linking capital* and explains that this refers to social capital that provides access to influential others and power structures (p. 8). This type of social capital can make transition less stressful for young people.

Weller (2007) also investigated social capital and youth by examining children’s perspectives. She argued children’s social networks are often under-researched and the limited research tends to focus on the negative aspects of peer relationships.

Weller (2007) posits children’s social networks provide important avenues of learning for children and argue they can provide emotional, cognitive and social resources for children (p.340). Weller explains that friendships can provide openings for children to expand their social network as they become friends of friends, thus *bonding social capital* supports *bridging social capital* thereby providing greater benefits to the child. She refers to past research that supports the finding that when children experience peer acceptance (in social networks) they tend to do better in school and beyond (p.339).

Weller (2007) cautions school policies have the potential to “aid or constrain the development of children’s social capital” (p 345). It can be argued that this is likely to occur when schools decide either to implement policies that are likely to build social networks, or choose to follow policies that contribute to discontinuities in friendships. Policies developed by schools and nationally should minimize differences between children by fostering the development of social networks as adolescents want to fit in; not be made to feel different from their peers (Brewin and Statham 2011).

These theories of social capital are useful in understanding how students can use social capital to create and maintain social networks. These theories also help us understand how students can use social networks to provide academic, social and emotional support in high school.

*School Culture and School Climate*

The terms school culture and school climate are not inter-changeable terms. A school’s culture is likely to involve the core beliefs, norms, values and attitudes a school believes is central to its ethos and tries to pass on to its students. Sergiovanni (1991) defines school culture as the “reflection of the shared values, beliefs and commitments of school members across an array of dimensions” (p.3). School culture tends to reflect the culture of the dominant group and can be the vehicle through which knowledge that is valued is passed on and according to Bourdieu (1986) cultural capital is reproduced. School culture is highly likely to shape school climate.

School climate can be described as the atmosphere or the ‘feel’ of the school. It is the intangible pulse of the school and is reflected in the relationships in the school as well as, the sense of connectedness, security and wellbeing experienced by individuals in the school. School climate reflects the socio-emotional barometer of the school and is likely to significantly influence an individual’s perceptions of their sense of belonging. School climate reflects the feelings and attitudes that are created by a school’s environment (Loukas, 2007).

In recent years school climate has been extensively researched and connected to a wide range of topics. The impact of school climate on students’ academic attainment and self-esteem was investigated by Jia *et al.* (2009) in their study of Chinese and American students. They found that positive perceptions of teacher support, student to student support and autonomy in the classroom (three areas of school climate) were strongly associated with increased grade point average (GPA) and improved self-esteem. Ruus *et al.* (2007) conducted a survey of students in grades seven, nine and twelve in Estonian classrooms and found students perceptions of teachers’ attitudes as well as school values influenced their psychological wellbeing and academic success.

School climate and students’ motivation for learning were investigated by Eccles *et al.* (1993) who argued the impact of school climate on motivation and academic outcomes for students transitioning from primary to secondary school. Stornes *et al.* (2008) examined the impact of relationships in the classroom on motivation for learning and found students’ perceptions of social interactions (teacher to student and student to student) influenced motivation for learning.

Fan *et al.* (2011) investigated school climate and social and emotional wellbeing and examined students perceptions of school climate in relation to three aspects of school climate (1) order, safety and discipline, (2) teacher and student relationships and (3) fairness and clarity of rules. They found that students’ perceptions varied significantly due to independent characteristics such as race, gender, and social and academic skills.

Wang and Dishion, (2012) investigated the role school climate plays in students’ transition to middle school. Using Bronfenbrenner’s framework to understand adolescents’ perception of school climate and adolescent developmental needs, these researchers found negative perceptions of school climate corresponded with increased behavioural problems and academic decline.

Bullying has increasingly become a concern for schools and the spat of teen suicides associated with extreme cases of bullying has encouraged some researchers to investigate how school climate can create safer and more accepting environments for all children. Pack *et al.* (2011) investigated a programme that changes the climate of schools that allows bullying to occur by giving students more autonomy and using the social power of selected students to influence their peers to refrain from violent and hurtful acts.

Mitchell *et al.* (2010) investigated the different perceptions of school climate between students and teachers and found that teachers’ perceptions were focused on classroom factors such as management and discipline while students’ perceptions focused on school level factors such as teacher–student relationships. School climate has been used to investigate several other topics including identity development (Nassar-McMillian *et al.,* 2009), safety (Bosworth *et al.,* 2011), and the impact of school climate of students’ sense of belonging (Thapa *et al.,* 2012; Rovai *et al.,* 2005; Ma, 2003; and Booker, 2004).

The findings from the plethora of research on school climate supports a correlation between school climate and many of the areas investigated, suggesting that positive perceptions of school climate are associated with improved academic outcomes, positive relationships, decreased behavioural problems, increased socio-emotional health, and reduced involvement in risky behaviours and bullying. A positive school climate has been found to significantly impact a students’ sense of belonging, increase self-esteem and promote students’ ability to learn (Thapa *et al.,* 2012).

*Social Capital and Disability*

As previously stated social capital can be said to be the sum of capital that an individual has or has access to through their membership in social networks (Bourdieu, 1986). It is built through establishing relationships with others, in which trust and reciprocity can be experienced (Putnam, 2000) and is controlled by accepted norms and sanctions (Coleman, 1988).

Bourdieu and Coleman propose that children benefit from their parents’ social capital as wealth, values and knowledge are passed down. I argue disability is likely to impact the quality and quantity of an individual’s social capital by separating those individuals with disabilities from their sources of social capital through physical and social factors. For example living in a special facility or attending a segregated special school can separate individuals from family and the wider society restricting their access to the social capital available in families and the community.

Society can also create boundaries and obstacles that can make it difficult for individuals with disabilities to access and to build social capital thereby ensuring some persons remain excluded from some benefits. Riddell *et al.* (1999) argue the perception of social competence involves the ability to conform to social norms and when individuals do not conform, they are likely to be excluded thereby diminishing their social capital.

Oliver (1996) points out that there is a close relationship between disability and poverty and argues disability exacerbates poverty by increasing isolation and economic strain (p. 115). It is estimated by the World Bank that disabled people make up 15- 20% of people in developing countries (Braithwaite and Mont 2008, p.1). For these individuals, it may be difficult to access social capital because they are unlikely to be trusted to reciprocate favours and to be able to contribute to the social network.

Potts (2005) suggests having a low level of social capital is a significant factor in the employment problems of persons with disabilities because employment opportunities are often identified through social contacts in social networks. Additionally, the job pool may be smaller for persons with disabilities. Having the right contacts to access job opportunities is critical to employment success (Potts 2005, p. 22).

Gotto *et al.* (2010) investigated the implications of social capital for persons with disabilities and posit social capital helps to develop self-determination skills, and build relationships. This in turn reduces that sense of isolation and gives direction to their lives. This is important for persons with disabilities as developing self-determination skills helps them to have greater freedom of choice and empowers them to be more adversarial. It also helps them to demand that their voices be heard on issues that matter to them. Gotto *et al.* (2010) also claimed a lack of social capital is associated with negative transition outcomes.

It can be argued that disability can allow access to a different type of social capital; that is *disability related social capital*, such as the type of economic, social and emotional support a deaf person may receive from being a member of the deaf community and participating in deaf culture. Special education can be argued to be a type of capital through the support and knowledge it provides for persons with disabilities; disability related supports, services and advocacy groups can also be sources of social capital for the disabled.

Although disability may have its own type of social capital, access to this type of capital can also be restricted in societies were disability is not fully accepted and where economic constraints limit provisions for persons with disabilities as may be the case in many third world countries. Remembering Putnam’s concept of social capital as existing in communities, it can be argued that disability communities can be sources of social capital for persons with disabilities. However, the resources of disability communities are often constrained by the different meanings the wider society applies to terms such as *needs, rights* and *opportunities.* I argue that unless persons with disabilities are perceived to be equal citizens, these terms may be experienced as more exclusionary rather than inclusive, consequently limiting access to the social capital within the community that persons with disabilities are able to benefit from. Oliver (1996) argues the poor and the disabled are often excluded from enjoying the full rights of citizenship (p. 46). This is likely to have repercussions on their ability to meet obligations, develop trust and enjoy the benefits of social networks.

How disability is perceived by society is therefore likely to impact the social capital that persons with disabilities are able to access. If disability is perceived as a deficiency and persons with disabilities are believed to be lacking in some way or incompetent, then society may impose limitations on the social interaction of persons with disabilities and make it difficult for them to access social capital. The extent to which disability is likely to impact social capital is determined by many factors including: the perception of disability, the level of competence that individuals with disabilities are perceived to have and the nature of the social networks the individual with a disability is able to access.

Knowledge is crucial to the development of self-determination and to the creation of social capital as it can be a source of empowerment that ignites individuals to demand their political and civil rights. Knowledge can be a form of social support that can be exchanged through an individual’s social networks. Social networks can provide social supports for persons with disabilities that are likely to increase their quality of life. Being a part of a social network encourages a sense of belonging and enhances children’s self-worth (Hean, 2013). For these reasons it is important for persons with disabilities to develop their social capital and for the education system to increase opportunities for students with disabilities to be able to participate in network building.

Belonging and social capital are included in this chapter because of their centrality in relation to the literature on transition and disability. I will return to these concepts and discuss them in more detail in chapter three.

*Sense of Belonging*

According to Aristotle man is a social creature by nature and as such has a natural need for belonging which is as important as the need for food and shelter. Most individuals have a need to be liked, accepted and respected by others and to experience a sense of belonging. Maslow (1962) explains until the fundamental need of belonging is met, other needs go unsatisfied.

In the school environment a sense of belonging refers to students’ feeling that they are important and respected members of their school (Booker, 2004). It has also been defined as a students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and supported in the school environment and feeling important to the life of the class/school (Goodenow1993, p.25). Having a sense of belonging leads to feeling of social connectedness and is associated with better academic outcomes (Thapa *et al.,* 2012 and Edwards and Mullis, 2001).

Edwards and Mullis (2001) argue incidence of school violence can be linked to students who lack a sense of belonging and instead experience isolation and alienation. They argue “if students do not feel important and significant in positive ways, they will often look for significance in negative ways” (p.197). This argument could be used to explain the actions of many students who have been involved in the recent history of school shootings that have occurred in North America. The concept of a sense of belonging has also been the subject of much research and has been examined in relation to adolescent experiences such as school safety, academic outcomes, peer group affiliations, gender effects, self-esteem, and inclusion to name a few.

Edwards and Mullis (2001) investigated how to build safe schools by examining the importance of students having a sense of belonging. They argue schools need to be supportive environments that foster acceptance and respect. They criticise the knee-jerk reactions schools often respond with when dealing with incidence of school violence. They propose the ‘no tolerance’ stance and other punitive and coercive measures as likely perpetuating feelings of alienation among at-risk students and suggest that schools should engage in programmes that allow students to make positive connections with teachers and peers, recognize students skills and abilities and encourage students to participate in and give back to the school community. Such programmes they posit would build a sense of belonging among students as they are given “many opportunities to get to know one another and to work with a shared sense of purpose” (p. 200).

Peer groups provide opportunities for adolescents to experience acceptance and a sense of belonging. Faircloth and Hamm (2011) investigated the impact of peer networks on the sense of belonging of a group of African American and White students in mathematical classrooms. They found that although many peer groups were fluid in nature, the change in membership did not negatively impact students’ sense of belonging and argued schools could harness adolescent social networks to provide greater social connectedness and to support a sense of belonging among students. Booker (2004) argues that particularly for minority students a school climate that encourages connections between teachers and students has a positive impact on minority students’ academic achievement. Booker (2004) posits that when students sensed they were accepted and felt a strong social connection (between teachers and peers) they experience higher levels of belonging and performed better academically (p. 133).

Ma (2003) posits students’ sense of belonging or lack of it has social consequences as the degree to which a student feels a sense of belonging directly affects the school drop-out rate. Ma (2003) further argues that it is the school climate that makes students feel cared for, safe and treated fairly and it fosters a sense of belonging. This is an important ingredient in any educational program for students at risk of academic failure (p. 341).

Research done by Brutsaert and Houtte (2002) investigates the relationship between gender and sense of belonging. They found that girls felt safer, better integrated and experienced a greater sense of belonging in single-sex schools. It appears that the school environment or climate has greater social significance for girls than for boys as all-girl schools appear to provide a basis of social solidarity (connectedness) around a shared gender identity (Brutsaert and Houtte, 2002).

A sense of belonging is also implicated in students’ self-esteem. LaBarbera (2008) investigated this in relation to students with learning disabilities and presents research that shows children with LD are more likely to develop negative self-perceptions that their peers without LD. LaBarbera (2008) argues students with LD need social support from others (teachers, peers and family) in order to develop more positive self-perceptions and build their self-esteem. Social support is argued as positively impacting adolescents at-risk of school failure and La Barbera (2008) posits the lack of adequate social support has detrimental effects on self-esteem (p.34). Positive school climates support student learning and build students’ self-esteem through providing opportunity for cooperative learning and group cohesion, respect and mutual trust (Thapa *et al,* 2012).

Nutbrown and Clough (2009) argue children are social agents and should be included in decisions that affect their learning environment. They look at the concept of inclusion and respecting children’s voices within the framework of belonging. Inclusion is presented as the maximum participation in school and it could be argued that children who feel a sense of belonging feel included. These researchers argue that exclusionary practices contribute to lower educational attainment (p.194) particularly for children who are considered to be at-risk. Nutbrown and Clough (2009) posit identity and self-esteem must be addressed in school curriculums and positively reflected in school climate if children are to experience inclusion and a sense of belonging.

Having a sense of belonging is especially important when considering children with disabilities. This is because many children with disabilities risk being excluded with the resultant experience of dis-belonging. A sense of belonging can be affected for children who have labels placed on them [such as students with disabilities] as they may be excluded from class activities and experience lower levels of interaction with non-disabled peers (Ma 2003, p. 341and Messiou 2006, p.41).

School need to ensure they provide learning environment that create a sense of belonging for students. Schools also need a supportive classroom atmosphere that create places where students feel accepted, respected, connected and ultimately a sense of belonging.

*Pedagogy*

I decided to include a review of some of the literature on pedagogy as the participants in this research spoke often of being disengaged and unmotivated by the pedagogical practices of their teachers. I believe it is important to understand what the literature says in order to be better able to place the students’ experiences in perspective.

There is a proliferation of terms involving pedagogy including critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, socially just pedagogy, bilingual pedagogy, cultural pedagogy, folk pedagogy, pedagogy of the poor, and pedagogy of hope to list a few. I will not attempt to discuss the different types of pedagogy although the tenets of critical pedagogy bodes well with the flavour of this research in the focus it places on the relationship between knowledge and power, the importance of agency and the role of the hidden curriculum as “an apparatus for indoctrinating students through the routines of and unspoken norms in daily school life and practices” (Cho 2010, p. 312). Cho further states that critical pedagogy asks the questions: whose knowledge?; for whose benefit?; and at whose expense? Critical pedagogy can be said to have an agenda of social justice as it seeks to push for equal access and equal rights.

In presenting different perspectives on pedagogy Thiessen *et al.* (2013, p. 5) cites Breault who sees teaching as an art and pedagogy as goal-directed, “consciousness, intentionality, refinement and belief are critical elements in any pedagogy” (Donna Adair Breault 2011, p. 634). The term pedagogy is often used as a synonym for teaching however, Loughran (2013) argues pedagogy is more than this. It is a complex process involving the relationship between teaching and learning (p. 118). Loughran speaks of constructivist teaching as the other side of constructivist learning. The latter can only occur if teacher create a context in which students can learn by doing, and come to create their own meanings. Teaching is “dynamic and demanding because it must be responsive to the varied learning demands inherent in the situation” (Loughran 2013, p. 120). Teachers continually make judgments about what to teach and how to teach it. When teachers view pedagogy as merely presenting information they are likely to run the risk of disengaging students because effective pedagogy is a two way relationship between the teacher and the learner as teaching influences learning and learning influences teaching.

There are many types of pedagogy and there are many definitions of pedagogy. The traditional definition of pedagogy is presented as the art and science of educating children. This implies teaching involves knowing what to teach, that is, having a comprehensive knowledge of the content to be taught (science) and knowing how to teach, that is, knowing how to present the content in the most effective and appropriate way for the learner to understand (art). This concept of pedagogy shows teaching and learning exist together and that teaching is purposeful because it influences learning (Loughran, 2013).

Schools are given the mandate to shape young people into productive citizens for society through engaging in effective pedagogical practices. The literature on pedagogy suggests pedagogy is not neutral. There is an agenda intended to be transmitted through the pedagogy schools implement. This could imply “something worthwhile is being intentionally transmitted and something valuable is being attempted” (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p.71). What is intentionally presented goes back to the questions Cho (2010) asks: whose knowledge?; for whose benefit?; and at whose expense? I believe these questions are relevant to my arguments about social capital and belonging for two reasons; schools are likely to present the knowledge valued by those with power and large amounts of social capital, and the information presented can impact students’ sense of belonging. The latter is especially so if the pedagogy implemented is at their expense and does not respond to their learning needs. These questions are also relevant in a post-colonial educational system where Western knowledge is still privileged over indigenous knowledge. Additionally, in a globalized world, schools may implement a curriculum that places emphasis on building human capital to benefit the global economy at the expense of other types of capital (Lingard and Pierre 2006, p.296).

To reiterate, teaching and learning are interactive experiences. Positive interactions with peers and teachers through effective pedagogical practices are associated with students feeling a greater sense of belonging to their school community, achieving better academic outcomes and experiencing fewer behavioural problems (Thapa *et al*., 2012). Research investigating teaching and learning indicates students learn best in an atmosphere that is non-threatening (Booker, 2004), motivational (Willms *et al.,* 2009; and Quay and Quaglia, 2004), and supportive (LaBarbera, 2008).

Quay and Quaglia (2004) argue classroom culture plays a significant role in learning. They support a cultural pedagogy where schools are culturally sensitive and diversity is respected and valued. Quay and Quaglia suggests teachers include the following conditions among their pedagogical arsenal to increase students’ motivation for learning: (1) creating a warm inclusive classroom where all students can experience participation and a sense of belonging (2) recognizing students effort through various means and not just grades achieved; this is particularly important for students who have learning challenges or who are at risk of school failure, (3) make learning fun as this will engage students, (4) encourage creativity and curiosity as this shows a respect for students’ knowledge, (5) encourage risk-taking; students who know they are accepted and have a sense of belonging are more likely to be willing to take risks in learning and (6) provide opportunities for students to make choices and develop autonomy as this makes learning more memorable.

Riera (2010) reflecting on his own experience as a teachers and student reminds teachers, “the status quo for less effective learning environments can become rote memorization and disengagement” (p.19). Teachers need to be careful they do not encourage students to simply regurgitate information because memorization is not a reliable indicator that learning has occurred. Pedagogy needs to be relevant, connected to the real world, and require students to think deeply, and be engage in intellectual vigour and substantive conversations (Willms *et al.* 2009, p.34). The students in this research shared stories that suggest this type of pedagogy is important in engaging students in learning and in fostering a sense of belonging. The significance of relevant, connected and engaging pedagogy is revisited and discussed in greater detail in chapter five.

*Conclusion*

The aim of this research is to understand the transition experiences of students with LD and ADHD as they transition to high school. I am interested in finding out how social capital and a sense of belonging may influence their experiences of school. With this in mind, the literature review conducted in this chapter discussed the significant works on the issues that I believe are critical to the research aims and questions.

The literature on transition presents transition as a time of challenge for students as they experience “transfer paradox” (Jindal-Snape and Foggie, 2008). These challenges are compounded by developmental changes that coincide with transitioning from primary to secondary school and are related to academic, procedural and social difficulties. Different theoretical perspectives on transition were discussed such as the stage environment fit, the life course framework, the developmental systems model and the social cultural framework.

The terms LD and ADHD were defined and the medical and social models of disability were discussed. The medical model is focused on deficits and the social model on oppression. Social capital is defined as all the benefits that an individual has or has the potential to access due to membership in social networks. These benefits are based on trust, reciprocity and cooperation. The main theorists of social capital are Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam and their perspectives of social capital were discussed. Bourdieu argue social capital produces individual benefits and maintains the status quo, Coleman relates it to family and the development of human capital. He sees norms and sanctions as important ingredients in preserving social capital and Putnam speaks of trust, reciprocity, individual and community benefits and civic virtue.

The literature on school climate and culture are briefly discussed and it is argued they impact students’ sense of belonging and academic achievement. The impact of disability on social capital is presented. The literature suggests disability can restrict access to social capital for various reasons including how disability is perceived and the ability to reciprocate benefits. It is also argued that disability may allow access to different types of social capital such as special services and supports.

The literature on the concept of a sense of belonging argues belonging is integral to the human experience and can impact an individual’s self-esteem and levels of motivation. The literature suggests having a sense of belonging is likely to significantly influence how students’ perceive their transition experiences.

Finally literature on pedagogy was presented. There is no single definition for pedagogy perhaps because there are so many types of pedagogy. However, the various works presented suggests pedagogy is focused on the art and science of teaching. The literature supports the point that pedagogy is goal-oriented and relational in that teaching does not occur in a vacuum, but rather it influences learning, and learning in turn influences teaching. The following chapter will discuss in greater depth the theoretical framework for this research.

**CHAPTER THREE**

#### Theoretical Framework

*Introduction*

The theories of social capital and sense of belonging help to form the main theoretical framework within which this research can be understood. Much of the research on social capital investigates this topic in relation to adults. This research however, investigates the social capital of children and how this may impact their experiences of transitioning to high school.

One’s social capital is likely to be affected by one’s sense of belonging as belonging augments connectedness and connectedness is a key ingredient in social capital theories. It is through making connections that relationships are established and maintained, and social capital is able to be transacted and accumulated. Without a sense of belonging, one is likely to feel alienated, disconnected or excluded from the group. This is likely to limit ones access to the social capital within the group.

The concepts of social capital and sense of belonging are closely interrelated and are therefore appropriate concepts to consider in investigating students’ perceptions of their transition experiences. I believe theories of social capital are significant to this research because social capital, embodied in students’ social networks, allows students to achieve things that without it, they are unlikely to have achieved. For example, the knowledge and skills that are available in student’s social networks, when shared, are likely to enable students to more successfully navigate high school and cope with the challenges of transition.

*Social Capital*

Social capital is a sociological concept that in the past twenty years has become popular among many disciplines. There is no single definition for social capital as different schools of thought present their own definition. Most definitions however, appear to agree that social capital involves connectedness through social interaction and productive benefits. In the education arena, the main theorists on social capita are Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam.

*Pierre Bourdieu and Social Capital*

Pierre Bourdieu (1986), a French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, speaks of capital as accumulated labour (material or embodied). When capital is taken by a private agent or agents, it allows them access to ‘social energy’ that can be used immediately or converted for use, when needed. Bourdieu argues that capital represents power and can exist in three forms *economic*, *cultural* and *social*.

Economic capital is simply capital that can be converted into money or exists as property and tends to be monopolized by the dominant class or the privileged. Cultural capital, on the other hand, is more complex and is argued to represent things that a society values; such as innate qualities like intellect and physical appearance, as well as, inherited assets such as knowledge and values. Finally, social capital is abstract, as it exists within relationships in one’s social networks and possesses the potential to produce benefits and reproduce itself.

Bourdieu argues cultural capital can be *embodied, objectified* or *institutionalized.* When embodied, it is closely linked to the individual’s character, values and beliefs and ‘declines and dies with its bearer’ (Bourdieu, 1986, n.p.). When objectified, it is represented in material objects such as books, paintings, machines, artefacts etc. Objectified capital is likely to represent status and can be used to separate one class from another. Institutionalized capital is represented by educational qualifications and titles and can be used to perpetuate the status quo. It is likely to be found mainly among the middle and upper classes of society. Jamaica, like many other post-colonial countries puts great value on the acquisition of institutionalized capital as it is perceived to be the ticket out of poverty, as well as a means of improving one’s status on the social ladder and as a path to economic prosperity.

Jamaica’s colonial history resulted in the creation of a dual education system characterised by high schools and tertiary level education for the children of the elite and an elementary level education for the children of ex-slaves; the latter were to take their places in society as labourers in a highly stratified society (Evans 2001, p.11). The legacy of colonialism still overshadows education today and is reflected in the inequality in educational provision at the secondary level and “the persistence of Eurocentric values” (Evans 2001, p. 19) where power issues such as whose knowledge, language and culture are important, are still unresolved. Although the dual system of education has been abolished, the playing field is not yet levelled for all students.

Bourdieu’s position is that cultural and social capital serves the individual. He argues it is the individual who benefits from the acquisition of capital. Capital provides power that allows the individual to protect his position in society and secure its legacy. Bourdieu therefore sees social capital as a tool for the social reproduction of the dominant class (Dika and Singh 2002, p. 34). Basically, he sees capital as providing the means whereby the privileged help the privileged to get ahead and maintain their status in society. Bourdieu’s perspective of capital suggests social capital impacts one’s ability to accumulate both cultural and economic capital.

Bourdieu argues social capital is the total of all the resources an individual actually possesses as well as all the resources they have the potential to possess through their social connections. Bourdieu therefore presents an understanding of social capital as intrapersonal capital augmented and empowered by interpersonal capital. The latter is provided through the individual’s social networks that provide resources to the individual by virtue of membership. For example, privileged students who possess the language, knowledge and skills valued by the elite; are likely to gain entry to the top tertiary institutions. By virtue of membership, they are likely to have access to the kinds of knowledge and social contacts that can secure future employment and secure their economic and social status.

The volume of social capital an individual can mobilize depends on the size of the network connections and the amount of capital deposited within the network (Bourdieu 1986, p. 249). Large social networks that are closely connected have the potential to provide a large pool of resources to its members. It can be argued that Bourdieu’s concept of social capital is somewhat sceptical as it implies *who you know* can be more significant than *what you know.* Additionally, it is likely to impact the amount of capital you have and determine your position and possibilities in society (Siisiäinen, 2000). Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural capital has been used in education to explain differential experiences in schools among students from different races, gender, class, ethnicity (Dika and Singh 2002, p.35), and I would add, ability.

Schools tend to favour certain attributes that are not equally available to all students such as social, cultural and economic attributes and tend to reward students who possess these attributes. Gale and Densmore (2000) argue, “Schooling empowers certain groups of students by making what they already possess that which is necessary for success” (p. 109). For example, linguistic capital is highly valued in schools but some students stand on unequal playing fields because of language deficits. Students for whom English is not their first language, or students who may have difficulty understanding and effectively using language because of language based deficits due to a learning disability, would fall in this category. Gale and Densmore (2000) agree with Bourdieu that schools tend to perpetuate the status quo through promoting social stratification and inequality rather than acting as instruments for social advancement (p.109). Tomlinson (1982) argues educational advancement is based on testing that often demands social competence that some students do not possess thereby disadvantaging certain students and perpetuating the advancement of other students supporting Bourdieu’s criticism of the education system.

*James Coleman and Social Capital*

The American sociologist, theorist and empirical researcher, James Coleman presents social capital as a kind of resource that is available to an actor for use or action (Coleman 1988, S98). He argues social capital is productive because it allows an individual to achieve certain things that he or she would not have been able to achieve without it. Social capital he posits is an intangible asset existing in the relationships between and among individuals. It is not located in individuals intrinsically but rather in and through their relationships. Its value is in what it allows individuals to be able to do as a result of the nature of the relationships the individuals share.

Social capital demands that trust and a sense of obligation be vibrant features of the relationship that exists between and among group members. This is important in order to fulfil its potential to accrue both economic and non-economic benefits to members of the group. Social capital allows some businesses to function and to prosper because of the level of trustworthiness that exists between and among business associates and some students to be able to access certain types of educational opportunities. Coleman (1988) presents the working of the wholesale diamond market in New York (S98) as an example of how trust and reciprocity allows this particular business to thrive. Diamonds in the wholesale market in New York are exchanged among the diamond merchants for inspection and these may be kept for extended periods without concern for their safety. These transactions are made possible because of the level of trust and interconnections that exist between and among the members of the diamond exchange.

A similar level of trust and interconnectedness exists in neighbourhood day-care facilities and in school systems that provide services for after school care. Trust undergirds these systems, and allows many parents to go to work knowing their children are safe and protected. Social capital provides piece of mind for these families. It builds relationships based on a foundation of trust and holds them together through the ethos of reciprocity.

Coleman (1988) argues social capital can take three forms: (1) obligations, expectations and trustworthiness, (2) information channels and (3) social norms (S 95). Social capital exists in the relationships people have with each other and it can develop through reciprocal actions when people do things for each other. These acts usually are occasions for creating credit. For example, if Ann does something for Barb, then Ann can expect Barb to do something for her at a later date. Ann’s actions provide for Ann ‘credit notes’ that Ann can cash in when she needs a favour done. Ann believes her credit is good because Ann trusts that one day Barb will reciprocate the favour as Ann believes Barb to be trustworthy. This system is likely to work because in receiving support or services from Ann, Barb is in her debt and is likely to feel obligated to return the favour. This interaction between individuals allows social capital to be built up and maintained, as obligations; expectations and trustworthiness become intangible cords that bind individuals together. The level of trustworthiness an individual possesses can determine the level of credit the individual can build up or the amount of obligations owed to him/her. When an individual has high levels of obligations outstanding, he/she has high levels of social capital on which to draw on when needed (S103).

Disability can impact an individual’s social capital when needs, rights and opportunity are considered. These individuals may need more capital than they can reciprocate (Riddell *et al.,* 1999) and are likely to have smaller and more restricted social networks that they can mobilize resulting in a modicum of social capital. Society’s perception of disability can impact social inclusion and opportunities to build social capital for persons with disabilities (Bates and Davis, 2004). Rights and opportunities are experienced in relation to the level of restrictions and oppression imposed by society, particularly for individuals who are poor and disabled.

Wealth is likely to buffer the impact of external oppression in the absence of a socially just society. Coleman explains wealthy families are able to accrue extensive credits, because their wealth allows them to be able to do a lot within a wide social network, and in return they are able to demand a lot and to call in their credit at any time.

Coleman (1988) contends information is a type of social capital as it provides opportunities for action and supports the adage *knowledge is power*. Information can be acquired through social relationships and therefore social relations are a form of social capital because they provide access to information and can facilitate action. For example, a student may be absent from class but is still able to pass exams because the information covered in class can be obtained from classmates and friends in their social networks. Passing these exams can be the determining factor for grade advancement or for access to tertiary education. Coleman explains that this type of relationship (information sharing) is valuable not because of obligations but because of the opportunity it provides to access valuable information (S104). Inclusive education with its goal of ‘broadening the options available to a variety of learners’ (Goodley 2011, p. 141) could be seen as a source of power for students with disabilities by providing opportunities to access knowledge not readily available in segregated schools.

Coleman (1988) posits social norms are a form of social capital and can be considered a source of power because of what they can allow individuals to do. Social norms are the accepted ways of behaving. They represent behaviours that are accepted as ‘normal’ within a certain group or society. Social norms can be seen as a source of social capital because they can be used to control an individual’s actions. They are supported by what Coleman calls *closure* (S105). These are actions that provide role models, sanctions and supports for the norms that are valued. Closure allows norms to be protected and perpetuated from generation to generation within a family or within a closely connected community. When a student engages in undesirable behaviour such as using drugs in school, sanctions are applied that will either remove the offender from the school or force the offender to change in order to remain in the school. Social norms are measures that encourage positive actions and limit negative actions (Coleman 1988, S105).

Persons who consistently behave in socially acceptable ways are likely to have more opportunities open to them, than are persons who act outside the accepted norms. Social norms therefore are a source of capital because they provide access to opportunities, and allow individuals to achieve certain actions that without these norms, they would more than likely not have been able to achieve. Social norms can be compared to Bourdieu’s social capital since both allow individuals opportunities to get ahead by knowing the rules of the game. Disability may disrupt social norms as social norms may dictate that students are ‘able’ while disability presents difference and demands that society be more accommodating of a disabled identity.

Social norms can also be considered a source of power in terms of how Foucault perceives power. Foucault argues that power should not be seen as fundamentally repressive because sometimes power can be positive; for example, the power embodied in the choice to do good. Foucault posits power can be found everywhere and is embedded in individuals. Power could be described as a latent source as it “exists only in action” (Tremain 2008, p.4). Foucault sees accepted forms of knowledge and social norms as one way that power is embodied and states “power functions best when it is exercised through productive constraints, that is, when it enables subjects to act in order to constrain them” (Tremain 2008, p.4). Knowledge can incite resistance and encourage individuals with disabilities to demand their rights and resist restrictions that are imposed on them. For example, the deaf community in Jamaica fought a thirty year campaign demanding the right to be issued driver’s licences. This right was granted in 2011(Williams, 2013).

Coleman believes that increasing social capital in schools will increase academic achievement (Schaefer-McDaniel 2004, p.156) and he sees this as occurring through increasing the social capital parents have in schools which in turn is likely to benefit their children. Coleman believes that when parents are informed and involved, they can band together with other parents and teachers and provide a stronger force for students. When parents, teachers and students form networks between and among themselves, they can facilitate the academic and non-academic goals of the school. There is much research that supports this, as levels of parental involvement has been shown to have significant positive benefits on children’s academic and non-academic achievements (Kazmi *et al.,* 2011; DePlanty *et al.,* 2007; Macron, 1999; and Luchuck, 1998).

Coleman’s view of social capital is that relationships occur at many different levels and communities that are able to connect these various levels of relationships are likely to possess large amounts of social capital. Disability may complicate this view as social ties may be more difficult to create and social capital more difficult to mobilize.

Schools assume their norms are “right and good” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p.116) and these norms usually reflect the norms of the dominant culture. The students who get ahead are those who are likely to share and perpetuate the norms of the dominant culture.

“Effective norms can constitute a powerful form of social capital” (Coleman 1988, S105) as they can both facilitate action and constrain action. Effective norms depend on closure as closure provides the safeguards that ensure norms are upheld by providing sanctions and social supports. The family impose norms that set behavioural expectations for the children. These norms are protected by *intergenerational closure* (Coleman 1988, S107). Intergenerational closure represents the relationship between parents, their children and relations outside the family such as the relationship between parents and the parents of their children’s friends. When both sets of parents are in agreement and when trust is established among both sets of parents then both sets of children can be monitored and their behaviours controlled and kept within the norms of the family.

Coleman also argues social capital is integral to the building up of human capital. When individuals acquire new skills, capabilities and knowledge, they are building human capital (Coleman, 1988). Coleman sees the family as instrumental in the creation of human capital as children benefit from the knowledge and skills of their parents. Parents also provide social capital for their children by providing access to their social networks, thereby creating opportunities for their children as they venture out in the world beyond the home. Parents also teach their children “how to use and create their own social capital” (Morrow 1999, p. 751).

Schools build human capital through enacting both the formal and hidden curriculums and through the activities in which students are privileged to access and participate. Unfortunately many students who have disabilities such as a learning disability may have restricted access to opportunities to build human capital. This is because they may not be allowed to take certain academic courses or engage in certain activities that teachers may perceive to be beyond the student’s ability and this “narrowness of curricula means exclusion for many non-normative children” (Goodley 2011, p. 142).

The patronizing position that schools may take in relation to students with special learning needs are likely to result in students receiving less challenging and different types of work than their peers. This effectively results in schools deciding on the life trajectories of students and them differentially preparing “students for different niches in the occupational hierarchy” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 112). In Jamaica, most adults with disabilities experience difficulty in finding gainful employment (Vision 2030, Persons with Disability, 2009) or are employed in low level jobs. This is likely related to the lower levels of educational attainment and experience, discrimination and negative societal attitude toward individuals with disabilities, and low levels of social capital that limits their ability to access what jobs may be available within the restrictive pool of jobs available to persons with disabilities.

*Robert Putnam and Social Capital*

Robert Putnam is an American political scientist and professor of public policy. Putnam (2000) views social capital similarly to Coleman as existing in the relationships between and among individuals in their social networks. He argues social networks are maintained through norms of reciprocity and trust and he introduces the concept that social networks involve both bonding and bridging capital.

Bonding social capital he argues provides the links between individuals, their family members and intimate friends and as such, is exclusive. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is inclusive and links individual to networks beyond their immediate circle of contacts thereby creating opportunities to access wider social networks and greater volumes of assets. Putnam (2000) describes the benefits of bridging capital as those ties that link an individual “to distant acquaintances who move in different circles” from the individual, thereby “generating broader identities and reciprocity” for members in the social network (p. 23). He explains, bonding social capital acts as a sort of glue that holds relationships together while bridging social capital acts as the lubricant that allows the efficient movement of assets between and among network members so that the group can have greater reach and accomplish more. “Bridging and bonding social capitals are not interchangeable” (Putnam 2000, p. 24) as each allows access to specific types of benefits.

Putnam’s contribution to the concept of social capital includes the belief that social capital encourages civic responsibilities, has a “strong community identity” and serves a public good (Morrow 1999, p.745). Perceptions of disability and the level of social inclusion persons with disability experience are likely to affect community engagement, community identity and civic responsibility and are therefore likely to impact their social capital.

Putnam’s concept of bonding and bridging social capital supports his position that social capital serves both individual and public good. The ability to access capital through close and distant relationships benefits both the individual and the group as each benefit from the resources of the other. For example, education is perceived as benefiting the individual as it can build human capital but it also benefits the community by providing the necessary skills and knowledge essential for economic growth.

Many post-colonial countries view education as an equalizer, and it is perceived as being both a private and a public good (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010); as a private good, education makes individuals more competitive in the market place and as a public good, it contributes to the economic and social development of the community (p.78). Putnam (2000) argues “given that social capital benefits the individual, it is perhaps no surprise that it can also help neighbourhoods” (p.322). This argument assumes that the benefits that accrue to the individual are likely to spill over as benefits to the community as the communities that are closely knitted are likely to support vibrant and active reciprocity among its members. Putnam claims “if our networks of reciprocity deepen we all benefit and if they atrophy, we all pay dearly” (Putnam 2000, p.325).

Rizvi and Lingard (2010) contend however, that the consequences of colonialism on many post-colonial countries has resulted in a focus on developing human capital for global economic competitiveness with less attention paid to the effects on social and cultural capital (p. 113).

Putnam argues social connections, available through social networks, enhances social capital and can affect one’s life chances as individuals who have a lot of social capital, are usually richer and better educated than individuals with weak social capital and the former group is likely to call on and use their social connections to advance their position (Putnam 2000, p. 319).

The main theorists of social capital suggest that children are the benefactors of their parents’ social capital and it is therefore logical to assume that children from high socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have access to greater levels of social capital than their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Putnam (2000) argues children from well-to-do families have economically valuable social ties because of the family’s connections (p. 319). Coleman (1998) sees social capital in the family as the relationship between children and their parents (S110) and therefore social capital is large in families that are closely knitted. Bourdieu’s position is that economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital. This implies that capital lies within the jurisdiction of adults since children rarely possess significant amounts of economic capital.

*Children and Social Capital*

As previously indicated, most of the research on social capital supports the position of Bourdieu’s, Coleman’s and Putnam’s that social capital is an adult phenomenon. Children, as creators, managers and users of their own social capital have largely been ignored and underestimated and as a result, the benefits that are deposited in children’s social capital have been largely unappreciated. Children as social agents are capable of understanding and acting upon their world (Morrow, 1999; Kirk, 2007; and Boeck, 2007). They can create their own social and cultural worlds and shape their social environments (Offer and Schnieder 2007, p.1129). Through negotiating and interacting with their environment, children can construct networks that can be sources of social, emotional and academic support.

Children are capable of creating large social networks through establishing links beyond their immediate family relationships. These extended relationships may include friends both in and outside of school, friends of friends, and other young people in clubs, social activities and extra-curricular activities. This network of relationships can provide benefits to the child directly as well as to their families and so children’s social networks can also strengthen their parents’ social networks (Offer and Schneider, 2007) by allowing their parents to access other groups of people to whom they may otherwise have not had access. Children, as active social motivators of network building, play a role in generating social capital for their families (Offer and Schneider 2007, p. 1125).

The hectic pace of life today can make it difficult for working parents to establish social relationships with the community; child related activities such as PTA and other school programmes can provide a framework within which parents can connect with other parents in the community and form social ties (Offer and Schneider, 2007). Children’s social and cultural worlds can act as a catalyst to parents connecting through social networks.

Weller (2007) argues children are able to develop and maintain friendships (p. 349) and in so doing they develop their social capital. Friendships can provide access to a wider social network such as access to friends of friends. Through bonding and bridging social capital, children are able to increase the size of their personal social capital and this can provide a buffer during transitions and help children develop resilience and cope better with stress.

Bonding social capital can help children develop a sense of belonging and security (Boeck, 2007, p.13) as this type of social capital can encourage friendships. Bridging social capital can provide more opportunities for children through access to a wider cross-section of relationships and helps in building networks. For example, internet use among children has made it possible for children to expand their social networks exponentially through social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter and Instagram* where nearly everyone is referred to as a ‘friend’. However, cyberspace may be best at providing quantity rather than quality social networks.

Trust is a key ingredient in social networks but cyber networks are likely to be spaces where trustworthiness is not guaranteed and a sense of obligation and reciprocity cannot be assured. Boeck (2007) argues children and young people use cyberspace to maintain their social networks and some may also use it to bridge across to adult populations (p.19) and connect with adult social networks. This can pose potential problems for children and so the benefits that can be accrued from internet use need to be balanced against the possible dangers that lurk in cyberspace as some children can become victims of cyber bullying and other types of abuse.

Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) argues that from as early as grade four, children develop stable friendships and these friendships form “active social networks that children can utilize whenever they deem necessary” (p. 162). Children are active agents and competent actors (Fernqvist, 2010; Offer and Schneider, 2007; Kirk, 2007 and Morrow, 1999) and as such they are able to establish enduring friendships and build social networks that provide social supports that can be mutually beneficial. Friendships create social networks that are bonded together in mutual levels of trust and reciprocity. Weller (2007) posits children can benefit from three types of resources through their friendships. These are emotional, cognitive and social resources (p. 340).

Social networks, in particular positive peer groups, can be sources of information that can help students to access academic information, persevere through challenges and develop resilience, and they have been found to be positively correlated with academic achievement and students’ self-esteem (LaBarbera 2008, p.34). Non- normative children may have limited opportunities to build these types of relationships due to exclusionary practices.

Having access to social networks such as a peer group, provides opportunities for children to increase the size of their social capital and can help children as they transition from primary to secondary school. School policies however, do have the potential to either aid or restrict children’s abilities to build their social capital (Weller 2007, p. 345). For example, separating friends by placing them in different classes can weaken the bonds of friendships and dislocate children’s social networks. Children purposely build relationships with others because of the benefits they receive from these relationships. When these relationships are broken as may occur during transitions, children are likely to feel disconnected and will be forced to make new connections in order to re-establish social links. Coleman (1988) argues individuals build their social capital when they purposely establish relationships and maintain them in order to benefit from them (S105).

*Comparing the Theorists*

Sociability or the ability to sustain and utilize one’s social network (Shaefer-McDaniel, 2004, p.161) is a common ground on which the theorists of social capital stand. Their main point of diversion is on who benefits from the social capital that exists within social networks.

Bourdieu and Coleman see social capital as mainly providing private benefits while Putnam believes that social capital serves both a private and a public good. Putnam explains, “Some of the benefits from an investment in social capital go to bystanders while some rebound to the immediate interest of the person making the investment” (p.20). For example, if a high school student’s social network values positive academic behaviour, the student is likely to engage in activities that are likely to produce academic success. The spin-off benefits include the student having a greater likelihood of increased access to choice universities, and the school is likely to be perceived as an institution associated with academic success, a perception that is likely to enhance the school’s prestige. In relation to education, Putnam claims “Social capital can keep bad things from happening to good kids” (p. 296); and he claims that in America, high levels of social capital are highly correlated with positive child development which has significant impact on children’s lives.

Coleman sees social capital as building human capital and this occurs chiefly through family structures. Putnam agrees with Colman in relation to the positive impact parents’ social capital can have on their off-spring as a strong social network provides supports for the children of the parents in that network. These children are less likely to drop out of school, become teenage mothers, and engage in risky behaviours. Informal social capital is created when individuals in a community connect with each other frequently; this is more likely to occur in small, private or religious schools, as opportunities for parents, teachers and students to interact are usually greater. This type of social capital has also been found to be a strong predictor of student academic achievement (Putnam 2000, p.300).

In investigating the low drop-out rates at Catholic and other religious based high schools in America, Coleman found that parents of students in Catholic schools were connected at multiple levels; as members of the same church, as friends and as parents of children who attend the same school (Putnam 2000, p. 302). This interweaving of connections creates a strong social network and strong support system for the students at these schools. Putnam and Coleman agree that Catholic schools do better than public schools because Catholic schools “benefit from a network of social relations, characterized by trust, that constitute a form of social capital” (p. 304).

Bourdieu’s theory on cultural and social capital presents the argument that certain types of capital are valued by society and individuals try to access and accumulate these types of capital through forging relationships with persons who already have these types of capital. Through knowing the ‘right people’ one is able to acquire the type of capital that is valued.

Bourdieu (1986) claims capital in all its forms, economic, cultural and social, adds to an individual’s wealth, status and power. In order to protect it, Bourdieu posits the dominant group in society ensures that schools are structured in ways that ensure capital that is valued remains in their hands. This creates the scenario where “the attributes that schools favour are not equally available to all students” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 109) and this argument can be used to support discourses of deficit, disadvantage and difference, issues argued by Gale and Densmore (2000, pp.111-124). Deficit, disadvantage and difference are all perceived as negative attributes when viewed from the perspective of the medical model of disability. All three attributes are seen as problems within the individual not the community, and therefore it is the individual that is required to change. For example, schools may have lower expectations of students who are perceived as having lower ability due to the presence of a disability, the disability is perceived as a deficit. The school sees the problem as related to the child and may not feel obliged to make significant changes to the school’s organization or curriculum; the child must fit in as best as he/she can “with minimal disruption to the institutional arrangements” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 113).

Students who are seen as disadvantaged are usually from marginalized groups. They are less likely to be able to access the types of capital that are valued by schools. Schools traditionally pursue measures aimed at helping these students behave and perform according to middle-class norms. This is because historically schools have been responsible for “socializing the young into the dominant culture and norms of appropriate behaviour” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 117).

Students who are perceived as being different may be subjected to exclusionary practices or forced to adapt and be like everyone else. Devlin and Pothier (2006) contend, “We live in a world relentlessly orientated to the able-bodied” (p. 13) and ableist beliefs create obstacles for students with disabilities rendering unequal opportunities and perpetuating exclusionary practices. These practices ensure the values of the dominant culture remain intact.

*Social Capital, Sense of Belonging and Disability*

Concepts of disability can affect social capital and sense of belonging. These concepts are interrelated and need to be considered simultaneously and I argue, they are significant in relation to this research. I suggest that when young people do not possess the right type or high level of social capital, their feelings of belonging may be threatened and this is likely to influence how they perceive their school experiences.

As suggested in the previous chapter, disability can limit one’s ability to access social capital through exclusionary and oppressive practices imposed on persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities may have more limited social contacts and ability to build social networks resulting in lower levels of social capital. I also argue that this scenario is likely to be related to how disability is perceived. If disability is perceived through the medical model then the individual is likely to be seen as inadequate, limited, weak, incapable and dependant. This negative stereotyping of disability can limit social access. It has also been argued that disability may also present a different type of social capital; the latter related to the benefits, supports and knowledge that are related to disability. It can be argued that social capital is of worth only when it is valued by the community in which it exists. For students to experience schools as places where they belong, they need to possess or have access to the types of social capital that is valued in schools.

Disability can also be viewed through the perspective of the social or minority models. From these perspectives, persons with disabilities experience marginalization as well as, exclusionary and oppressive practices imposed from a socially unjust society. Individuals with disability experience discrimination and restrictions on their civil rights. The school environment, that is, its culture and climate must be perceived as a place where all students feel welcomed and have equal rights and access. The school must exude an accepting culture if students are to feel a sense of belonging. Having a sense of belonging implies students feel they are important and respected members of the school (Booker 2004, p.131). Booker argues “when students experience positive and encouraging interactions with peers and teachers they report higher levels of belongingness to the school community” (p. 132).

When students do not feel that they are respected, understood or supported in schools they are likely to feel marginalized and excluded and may disengage from academic activities (Roffey, 2013; Ma, 2003; Pavri and Monda-Amaya, 2001; and Beck and Malley, 1998). A sense of belonging is critical to one’s ability to connect with the environments within which one exists and has been associated with academic achievement, academic attainment, motivation, and students’ ability to be resilient (Roffey, 2013; Ma, 2003; and Beck and Malley, 1998).

Belonging is a natural human instinct and “we live, work, and interact in groups and, through this, are collective architects of the social world we inhabit” (Haslam *et al.,* 2012). Groups provide places for individuals to belong and it can be argued that groups help to shape an individual’s sense of self or identity. Group membership, sense of belonging and identity are therefore closely interwoven. Turner *et al.* (1979) collaborated on the development of the social identity theory in which they argue individuals create a sense of who they are through their association with a particular group. The group gives the individual a sense of social identity and individuals align themselves with groups through the processes of categorization, identification and comparison (McLeod, 2008).

McLeod (2008) explains categorizing involves creating in-groups and out-groups or ‘us and them’ categories; identification on the other hand, involves taking on the identity of the group for example behaving, dressing and speaking like other members of the group; and comparison involves favouring the in-group over the out-group. This comparison enhances the individual’s self-esteem (Turner and Oakes 1986, p. 240).

Social identity theory makes the important connection between group membership and social life (Haslam *et al,* 2012) as it is through groups that social activity occurs. Identity and the development of self-concept are discussed in Dunlop and Fabian (2007) as being constructed through interactions with others. Dunlop and Fabian argue individuals create a sense of self or who they are, based on their perceptions of how they believe others view them (p.48).

The transition experience has the potential to threaten a child’s sense of belonging as he/she must redefine themselves in relation to their new setting. During adolescence, young people often develop their sense of identity through greater involvement with and dependence on peers; and their perceptions of self-concept and self-esteem are held in balance alongside positive comparisons between themselves and peers (Berry and Hardman, 1998). Adolescent social networks are likely to be significant sources in the formation of sense of identity, perceptions of self-esteem and self-worth, and feelings of belonging.

Children’s social networks can provide a “sense of emotional connection, shared values and inter-dependence” (Roffey, 2013, p. 40) and these ingredients are associated with enhancing emotional and social well-being (Pavi and Monda-Amaya, 2001). Additionally, these ingredients are integral to the development of feelings of belonging or rootedness. Roffey (2013) also argues that when schools encourage connectedness, shared values and interdependence, they are likely to be reservoirs of high levels of social capital.

A sense of belonging involves having a sense of membership and influence or believing one is significant to the group (Schaefer-McDaniel 2004, p.163). Students who feel as if they belong are more likely to interact with peers and form social networks and in so doing they create opportunities to build their social capital. Social networks can provide benefits to students that may include helping students to be more resilient, as they can provide academic and social supports that help students to achieve academic and social competences. Belonging or not belonging can impact students’ ability to build social networks and therefore has the potential to enhance or diminish children’s social capital.

To reiterate there is a strong interrelationship between social capital, sense of belonging and disability. I suggest it is important to feel a sense of belonging in order to make social connections that can be mutually beneficial, the latter a key factor in social capital theory. However, belonging can be complicated by perceptions of disability and this can impact the level and type of social capital students with disabilities is able to access.

As previously stated, schools need to be perceived as accepting places. Schools that do not make reasonable accommodations for students can present an ethos that normality is superior and the unspoken expectation is for students with disabilities to do what they must to fit-in. Schools may be unyielding because they presume their pursuit of “an academic curriculum, [based on normality] is the best way to prepare youth for future leadership” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 77). This subliminal message can be perceived as exclusionary and some students may feel disconnected and come to believe they do not really belong at their school.

Exclusionary ableist practices can make it difficult for students to form positive social networks that they can use to access the type of social capital that schools value and to help them navigate high school successfully. Raffo and Reeves (2000) argues, “young people develop their social capital through trustworthy reciprocal social relationships within their individual networks” (p. 151). These networks provide young people with information, and a place where they can model behaviour and confirm decisions with peers (Raffo and Reeves, 2000). However, schools can either promote or stifle students’ ability to form social networks by the culture they promote. Some schools may need to change their ethos in order to be perceived as more welcoming places particularly for students with disabilities, as all students should feel respected and “accepted for who they are, not what society thinks they should be” (Oliver, 1996, p.37).

Children, like adults, build social networks based on trust and reciprocity. I suggest having a sense of belonging is a perquisite for participating in social networks and being able to participate in the social capital they can provide. Understanding social capital as presented by Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam can help to shed light on how students make connections that are mutually beneficial and can illuminate how social capital can be used to support them in school. I believe that belonging is the conduit that makes this system work.

Bourdieu’s concept of how social networks are constructed and the benefits they can provide in terms of tangible and symbolic capital helps focus the impact of family connections on students’ academic opportunities. Children, whose parents are members of closely connected social networks, are likely to have access to the large pool of resources available in these networks. This is likely to impact the type of transition experiences these children may have as they benefit from the protection and supports their parents’ social networks provide.

Coleman’s focus on norms and closure helps in understanding how some students are held to certain expectations, and benefit from certain types of sanctions. These norms and expectations as well as, closure and sanctions are likely to impact students’ academic outcomes.

Putnam’s argument about bonding and bridging capitals is significant in the creation of feelings of belonging. It also supports the concept of children being able to increase their social capital through establishing social networks in school and beyond. Bonding capital helps students to become members of peer groups and these can be sources of information and supports for children. Additionally, bonding capital is associated with helping in the transition to high school as peer groups may act as sources of information and a protective buffer during the disruptions that usually accompany transitions.

This research seeks to understand students’ perspective of the transition process to high school. However, it is recognized that their perspectives are likely to be informed by their social capital which can either support or constrain their actions and outcomes (Raffo and Reeves, 2000). Remembering Coleman’s (1988) argument that social capital allows certain actions and makes possible achievements that in its absence would not have been possible (S98), I believe it is important to understand how young people build and use their social capital and how the benefits they receive from their social capital influence their impressions of school. Social capital holds great political potential. It can shift the focus on disability from deficit to exclusion; making disability a social, relational and cultural concern rather than an individual lack.

*Conclusion*

In this chapter, the thematic framework of social capital and belonging were presented and the main theorists, on social capital, and their points of views were discussed and compared. Having a sense of belonging was argued as integral to feelings of school connectedness and the ability to form positive social networks which are a type of social capital. Roffe and Reeves (2000) argued social capital can both support and constrain an individual’s actions and I suggest schools have the power to promote or stifle students’ abilities to create and sustain social networks and by extension their social capital by the climate and culture they embrace and by the policies they pursue.

The aim of this research was to understand the transition experiences of students’ with LD and ADHD. It has been argued that students who have high levels of social capital are likely to have more positive experiences of school. However the amount of social capital students may enjoy is influenced by their sense of belonging and society’s perceptions of disability.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Methodology, Methods, Analytical Framework and Ethical Issues**

*Introduction*

The aim of this research was to have a deeper understanding of how students with LD and ADHD perceive their experiences of transitioning from primary to secondary school. The qualitative approach was decided to be most appropriate for this research because qualitative research attempts to understand human experiences through the meanings people attach to their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, p. 3). Qualitative research allows the world of the other to be examined close up and provides an insider view of the topic being researched. Through conversations, observations, pictures, writings and other methods, the researcher may have an authentic view of the participants’ experiences. A qualitative approach allowed me to capture young people’s voices and gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives.

Social capital has been defined by Bourdieu (1986) as the total of one’s actual and potential resources available through one’s networks. Network building can be described as a purposeful activity as relationships are established and maintained for their benefits (social, emotional, economic, cultural or symbolic) or for what they are perceived to offer. Social capital can be capsulated as what you know and who you know and how these impact what you are able to do. Social capital can be captured by listening to participants’ voices, in interviews and reading their writings. These qualitative methods can reveal how participants perceive themselves and their relationships with others, as well as, how they perceive their life experiences.

This research is a qualitative insider research with an ethnographic attitude. It uses qualitative methodology such as in-depth interviews to obtain thick descriptions of students’ experiences of transitioning to traditional high schools. My aim was to gain access to students’ perspectives of their experiences through listening to their voices. Children are active agents in the creation of their social worlds and are likely to have different experiences and knowledge to adults (Kirk, 2007). It is therefore important to hear directly from children about issues that affect their lives. “Gaining the views of young people is crucial for understanding issues that affect their lives” (Shah 2006, p.208 cites Morris, 1998b) and although adults have traditionally spoken for children, Kirk (2007) warns “adult proxies cannot give valid accounts of children’s social worlds” (p. 1252).

This research provided opportunities for children to exercise their agency and to speak about their own experiences and share their perspectives. As insiders, students can share their experiences of school as they perceive it. By listening to children tell their stories, I am able to gain entry into this aspect of their lives and have a better understanding of their experiences.

The insider perspective is likely to reveal a more authentic view of students’ transition experiences than views presented by adults. Oliver (1996), a sociologist with a disability, argues that when non-disabled persons write about disability what results is an inaccurate and distorted account of the experiences of disabled persons (p. 9). However, it can be argued that when researchers provide opportunities for insiders to share perspectives on their experiences and when these perspectives are re-presented, it allows the insiders’ voices to be heard and allows outsiders to have a better understanding of the issues.

Insiders have privileged access to knowledge of their own experiences (Tangen 2008, p.159) and children, as insiders of their social world, are most capable of providing authentic knowledge of their world as they experience it. Adults have often underestimated how perceptive children can be, and how much they understand their world. Children, like adults, can give authentic accounts of their life experiences based on their perceptions of these experiences (Kirk 2007, p. 1251).

This research can be considered to present an insider perspective for two reasons. Firstly, it presents the perspectives of those directly involved, namely, the student. Secondly, it is impacted by my personal position as a special educator and a parent of a child who has been identified as having LD and ADHD. This is likely to give me “epistemological privilege” (Shah 2006, p. 210) by virtue of being personally aware of some of the challenges these students may experience in transitioning to secondary school.

*Methodology*

Ethnographic research is a type of qualitative research. It studies social phenomena, and can provide insight into people’s perceptions about their lived experiences. The main aim of ethnographic research is to “provide a rich, holistic insight into people’s views and actions, as well as the nature of the location they inhabit” (Reeves 2008, p.512). Ethnographic research is well suited to the investigation of this research topic as the focus of the research is on understanding children’s experiences and their perspectives of these experiences.

Ethnography is commonly used in the social sciences and in educational research and utilizes many different methods including: interviews, questionnaires, participatory observations, narratives, pictures, writings, documents and other means to gain access to a detailed and rich description of the phenomenon being investigated. In ethnography, no one method is better than another; what is important is that the method(s) selected are those that can best provide the type of information being sought.

Ethnography allows researchers to inquire into the lives of others. It gives credence to the value of personal experience and seeks to understand “how ordinary people in particular settings make sense of experiences in their everyday lives” (Wolcott 1997, p. 158). This research involved the use of interviews and students’ writings to gain access to transition experiences of school of a group of young adolescents and to get an insider view of how these participants perceive transitioning to high school. The research provided opportunities for the voices of children who are seldom heard, in particular children with disabilities, to be heard.

The reconceptualising of children as active agents rather than as objects to be researched (Kirk, 2007) has reframed the social status of children and has propelled the involvement of children in research. This renewed concept of children as active rather than passive individuals has positioned children as competent and capable to engage in research. It has also provided greater opportunities for researchers to engage in more child centred research and to access authentic first-hand accounts of children’s lived experiences. Ethnographic research is appropriate for working with children as it provides opportunities for them to exercise their rights as social agents and to speak about their perceptions and experiences, in this case, as it relates to school.

*Methods*

Increasingly, research is recognizing the value of accepting young people’s views in understanding issues that affect their lives (Shah, 2006) and this has propelled the use of interviews with children as a means of giving them the opportunity to have their voices heard.Interviews have been demonstrated as being an effective method for collecting information and are commonly used in the social sciences. Interviews provide opportunities for talking and listening. Drew *et al.* (2006) consider interviews to be “instances of social interaction” (p. 28) as they provide opportunities for conversations and the sharing of information which are social activities. The verbal reports offered in interviews provide the information that directs the focus of much of the research done in the social sciences and in education (Doody and Noonan, 2013). There are four main types of interviews and the type chosen depends on the purpose for its use. There are structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and group interviews.

Structured interviews are similar to questionnaires as they present the same questions in the same order to the interviewees and tend to be more formal. The questions are often designed so that the responses are more focused and contained and often the responses are factual statements. This type of interview makes it easy to compare responses among participants.

The semi-structured interview is less formal and questions are open-ended allowing the respondent to talk more freely and to share their points of view or opinions. These types of interviews also allow the interviewer to ask questions in the order that is more fitting to the situation or to rephrase questions if necessary. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to “pursue themes which may emerge during the interview” (Drew *et al.* 2006, p. 29) by probing and eliciting deeper responses. For example, if in responding to a question the interviewee may say something that the interviewer perceives could be important, the interviewer can ask the interviewee to explain further or can ask additional questions to get a more complete picture of what the interviewee has shared. Semi-structured interviews offer opportunities for extended conversations because there is more opportunity for the respondents to participate and can provide vast amount of information which can later be analysed for possible themes that may emerge from the stories that have been shared. Stories can provide a rich description of personal experiences and themes can emerge from them that provide a deeper understanding of these experiences (Yu *et al.,* 2011 and DeGraff and Glover, 2003).

The third type of interview is the unstructured interview. This type of interview is used to explore themes that are of interest to the researcher. The researcher has certain issues he or she would like to discuss with the interviewee and there is little structure to the interview. This type of interview usually require a substantial amount of time because it encourages the respondents to speak at length about their experiences, and narratives, anecdotes and stories may be shared. The aim is to access great amounts of information and personal insights into the respondents’ experiences. All interviews are likely to offer information that ethnographers are interested in but the unstructured interview is likely to offer a richer and more holistic insight into participants’ life experiences because it presents few boundaries to the participants’ talk (McCann and Clark, 2005; and Gibson, 1998).

Group interviews, sometimes called focus groups, may be semi-structured or unstructured and provide opportunities for a small number of people to get together to talk about commonly shared issues. These types of interviews may look like conversations as the participants talk about mutual experiences and issues of interest. These interview groups provide opportunities for informal group discussions and allow the researcher to collect the opinions of several people at one time (Drew *et al.* 2006, p.32).

The dynamics of a group interview include the likelihood of participants sharing their experiences and being willing to disclose information in the group because of the sense of comradeship that is perceived among the group members. There is the assumption that the members can relate to each other because they have similar experiences that they can share and compare (Baker-Henningham, 2011).

When using group interviews, some participants may be unwilling to share certain types of information because of the presence of others (Drew *et al*., 2006). This is a possible challenge researchers should address prior to using group interviews, in order to minimize the likelihood of this occurring. Group interviews are probably not well suited for talking about issues that may be perceived as being too sensitive.

Telephone interviews can be structured and semi-structured, however using telephone interviews as a means of collecting information can be controversial. It can be argued that it robs the researcher of the ability to observe the non-verbal cues in communication. Non-verbal communication, such as body language and facial expressions may be significant cues that can be seen in a face-to-face interview and can indicate the need to probe more deeply, change the way a question is asked or end an interview.

Research has been done that compared using telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews and the findings suggest telephone interviews can be an acceptable and valuable method of data collection (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, p. 110; James and Busher 2006, p. 405; and Stephens 2007, p. 211). Telephone interviews offer many benefits including: they are cost–effective; allow access across time and geography; can be quicker to conduct; provide greater anonymity; may make it easier for sensitive subjects to be discussed; and can be convenient. Telephone interviews can be recorded using a telephone recording device and later transcribed.

In this research, face-to-face structured and semi-structured interviews, a group interview and telephone interviews were used to access information from the students. I believe these types of interviews provided adequate access to the topic being investigated. Unstructured interviews were not used because of the amount of time they require. The participants’ time was limited due to the demands of homework and extra-curricular activities.

The use of interviews in this research provided a straightforward method of hearing directly from the students about their perspectives and feelings about going to high school. The participants said they understood the question/response pattern of the interview protocol and were familiar with the interview method. Interviews allowed the students to tell their experiences, express their opinions and provide a rich account of their high school lives.

It was not my original intention to use a telephone interview in this research. However, it proved to be an appropriate and acceptable method to use in order to ‘fill in the gaps’ in information collected from the other interviews. The telephone interview allowed quick and easy access to the participants and it had the additional benefit of presenting a familiar and comfortable medium for communication.

The students in this research, like many children today, are technologically savvy and spend extended periods of time talking on their cell phones or sending text messages. The students and I had been in contact for ten months prior to the telephone interview and had developed a good rapport. The telephone interview was the last interview conducted with the students and was used to clarify and confirm some themes that were emerging from information collected in the face-to-face interviews. These interviews were approximately half an hour long and the questions were more structured. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) suggest telephone interviews are appropriate for short, structured interviews (p. 108).

In using the telephone interview, I had to be sensitive to verbal cues such as hesitancy, sighs and long pauses. Verbal cues are significant in the absence of non-verbal cues as they can indicate the possibility that the student is uncomfortable talking about the issue, is unsure, tired, distracted or perhaps bored.

I was unable to have access to a telephone recorder and so the children’s accounts had to be typed as they spoke. This necessitated rereading and editing the children’s accounts immediately after the interviews, in order to ensure accuracy, while the interview material was still fresh in my mind. The students had been informed that their responses were being typed and they accommodated this by pausing after answering a question. These pauses may have provided space for the students to think through their responses. Occasionally the researcher repeated the response to the student to ensure what was heard was what the student actually said. This reduced the likelihood for misunderstanding. The lack of a recorder presented a challenge but it did not appear to significantly impact the information that was collected.

*The Participants*

Initially there were seven participants in this study, four girls and three boys. They attend five traditional high schools in Jamaica. These high schools included three single sex schools, two for girls and one for boys and two co-education schools. The schools have religious affiliations and included two Catholic schools and two Anglican schools all of which are grant aided (receive some government support) and one private school affiliated with another religion. One student changed his mind about participating in the research, resulting in the final group of participants consisting of the four girls and two boys with one of the co-educational schools being excluded.

The participants at the time of the interviews were thirteen to fifteen years of age and were in grades eight and nine. All the participants have been identified as having LD and or ADHD with 50 % having LD, approximately 33% having both LD and ADHD and approximately 17% having ADHD only. The participants were selected based on them being identified with having LD and or ADHD and were accessed through their schools and their parents. The participants come from middle to upper middle class backgrounds and live with both their parents. Their level of social capital is likely to be high as they are likely to benefit from their parents’ social capital as well as having their own social capital. All the participants sat the GSAT examination at the end of grade six and were placed by the Ministry of Education in secondary schools. Only one participant was placed in his first choice school, however all the students had been transferred from their school of placement to the schools they presently attend. Obtaining a transfer from a school of placement to another school can be a difficult and complicated process and it is likely that parental social capital was instrumental in making these transfers possible. As mentioned in chapter one, there are different types of secondary schools in Jamaica, Evans (2001) explains “there are variations in access to different types of secondary schools for different social classes” (p. 4).

*Procedure*

Prior to beginning this research, ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. Once ethical clearance was received five traditional high schools in Jamaica were selected as possible sources for gaining access to participants for this research. These schools were selected because of their academic achievement, their location and because they are often considered ‘first-choice’ schools by students and their parents.

I visited these schools in November 2012 and I met with the schools principals or vice principals. The purpose of the face to face meeting was to introduce myself to these gate keepers, inform them of the research and its purpose and ask if they would be interested in having their students participate in the research. I felt that meeting the principals in a face-to face setting would increase the likelihood that they would listen to what I had to say as it is easier for individuals to delete an email or decline to speak on the telephone to someone they do not know.

The principals and vice principals were asked if they could identify students who they believed would be suitable participants. The principals or their school’s counsellor would contact the parents of these students, tell them about the research and give them the information letters and consent forms which I had prepared. These would be returned to the school if the parents and children were interested in participating in the research. The information letters and consent forms for parents and the student were left with the principals and vice principals with an agreement to collect the responses in two weeks.

After explaining the purpose of the research, two of the principals were immediately interested and agreed to identify students for the researcher. These students were already known to these principals either because they were having academic challenges or were identified as having a disability. The principal of one of the schools stated there were no students in her school with a disability and she could not accommodate my request without me first getting permission from the Ministry of Education. Two other principals said they would consider my request and get back in touch with me. Only one responded and agreed to support the researcher in any way she could.

Of the five schools visited only one provided a student for the research. In order to access more participants I made telephone contact withseven parents of children I had previously known through working with the children when they attended preparatory school. I was conscious of the implications that could arise from this previously established relationship and these concerns are discussed later under ethical considerations.

I informed the parents of the research and its purpose and asked them to consider whether or not they would be willing to allow their child to participate in the research. I made it clear that confidentiality would be maintained and that the interviews would be conducted either at their child’s school or at their home, depending on convenience and parents’ willingness for me to use their home environment to conduct the interviews. It was explained that the children needed to agree to participate freely and willingly and should not be pushed into participating if they did not want to do so. From this initial contact, all the parents were willing to give their consent for their child to participate in the research. Two students were eliminated because they were older than the age group being investigated and were about to exit high school.

I informed the parents that they would receive letters containing detailed information about the research as well as a consent form and they were told that they could contact me if they had any questions they would like answered. I delivered a copy of the information letter and consent form for the parents and for the child. The information letter for the children was in simpler language to insure that they could understand what the research was about and why their participation would be important to the research. I also wanted them to understand clearly that there were no consequences attached to non-participation; they were free to participate or not.

It was agreed that the responses would be collected in two weeks. This allowed adequate time for the parents and the child to read and discuss the information and think about what was being asked of them so that they could give their informed consent.

Eventually the group of participants numbered six. Of these, five were accessed through contacting parents and one was accessed through her school. To ensure anonymity the participants chose pseudonyms. One participant did not want to use a pseudonym so I decided to use a name that related to the participant’s real name. Before beginning the first interviews I again explained to the participants the purpose of the research and the significance of their participating in the research.

Face–to-face individual interviews were conducted between December 2012 and March 2013 and were conducted at the participants’ homes. One participant was also interviewed at her school. The interview schedule was organized so that I could hear from each participant at least once during each of the three school terms. As a result the interviews in December were at the end of the first term of school. In January and February, they were at the beginning and middle of the second term. In March, they were at the end of the second term of school.

Each interview lasted between forty minutes to one hour and was recorded. The first two interviews conducted in December were short and conducted over two sessions as the participants appeared to be distracted. They indicated they were having difficulty in focusing on the interview so I decided to shorten the interview and to continue at a later date. A few days later, I conduct the interviews and both participants appeared to be more relaxed and comfortable, they spoke freely and responded in depth to the questions asked.

In March, after the individual interviews were completed the participants were asked if they would be willing to write about their experience of transitioning to high school. Five of the participants agreed and they each wrote short accounts of how they perceived high school. I collected these written accounts from the students to analyse later with the interview transcripts.

The group interview was conducted in April, the beginning of the third term in school, and lasted two hours. The group interview was conducted at my home as it was a central location for all the participants. The parents brought the children to this interview and later collected them. The interview space was semi-private. Pizza and drink were provided to create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere and to encourage participants to feel free to talk. The students sat in a circle and this facilitated an informal discussion of the questions. The reason for the group interview was to provide an opportunity for the participants to meet each other and to talk about common issues. It was felt that because they had all been engaged with the research for several months and shared similar experiences coming together as a group could provide an opportunity for them to compare their experiences. It was also possible that information that may not have been shared in the individual interviews may be shared in the group.

The participants listened to each other and responded to what was shared; sometimes agreeing and sometimes disagreeing with something that was said. The participants appeared to be relaxed and talked and laughed as if they knew each other well. The group interview lasted two hours and provided a lot of rich information. All their conversations were recorded and later transcribed. After the interview I thanked all the participants for participating in the research.

As the information collected was being analysed some gaps in information became apparent particularly in relation to friendships and peer groups, as a result I needed to contact the students again but due to the students’ time constraints, this proved difficult so I decided to conduct a short telephone interview with the students to fill in the gaps in information collected from the other interviews.

The telephone interviews were conducted in early October 2013 but only four of the participants were interviewed using this method as I was unable to successfully contact the other two participants. The phone interviews lasted approximately half an hour.

I was unable to access a telephone recorder so the responses to the telephone interviews were typed as the children gave their accounts. Some responses were occasionally checked for accuracy by repeating to the participant what was heard to substantiate the content of the responses. I used a quick ‘short-hand’ method (word abbreviations and symbols) to record the responses. This helped to minimize long pauses in the conversation that could interrupt the flow of the conversation and could possibly be distracting. Immediately following the telephone interviews, the accounts were properly transcribed to ensure the participant’s responses were correctly documented.

The interviews that were conducted with the students yielded approximately 24 hours of conversations. These conversations were examined for commonalities, differences, and possible themes using thematic analysis. The themes that emerged were used to help understand the data that had been collected.

*Analytical Approach*

The information that was collected from the students through the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is commonly used in ethnographic research to understand text (Aronson, 1994) and is appropriate for understanding the transcribed conversations collected from ethnographic interviews.

Thematic analysis can be used to describe how people feel and think about their experiences and helps in understanding these feelings and experiences through focusing on identifiable patterns or themes that emerge from the textual data (Aronson, 1994). Interpretation is integral to the use of thematic analysis as the researcher has to interpret the talk in order to identify fragments of ideas or experiences that can be pieced together to form a comprehensive picture or theme (Aronson, 1994). Thematic analysis allowed me to reduce the data and to examine it in a controlled manner so that I could better understand the ideas that were embedded in the conversations as well as see how these ideas may link to theoretical models (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

I analysed the data both inductively and deductively as I identified specific themes in the data and then related them to more general themes. I concluded that the general themes were supported by theories of social capital and belonging. These theories allowed me to understand more clearly the ideas within the data. The analysis took on a cyclical nature as the data led to theory and theory to the data as figure 1 illustrates.

Figure 1 The relationship between data and theories

Data Theories



*Analysis of the data*

The thematic approach is helpful in identifying and understanding themes in conversations. In conducting the analysis, I first, transcribed the recorded conversations from the interviews, and then checked it against the tape recordings for accuracy. Next, I read and re-read the conversations to become familiar with the information. Then I carefully examined the text for words or phrases that I believed were important to the research. I also identified words or phrases that were repeatedly used by the participants and looked for any commonalities and differences in the participants’ comments.

I colour coded these comments (important words, repeated words, commonalities and differences) as markers of possible significance. Colour coding made it easier to locate these points of reference and to compare the responses. The colour coded selections were inductively and deductively analysed to see if I could identify specific themes in the text. Themes are patterns of references that are repeated, they are “topics that occur and re-occur” (Ryan and Bernard, 2003, p.89) in the conversations and are likely to captures salient points that participants made in their comments. A theme can also be responses that are significant to the research questions (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

I re-read the text to identify specific themes. Eventually nine specific themes were identified from the students’ comments. These were comments about: teachers, teaching and learning, perceptions of self, perceptions of school, friendships, belonging, supports, note taking, and homework. The identification of specific themes reduced the volume of the data and made it more manageable for further analysis.

I re-examined the specific themes, looking for a common thread or for differences among them. I decided these themes related to broader themes which I called general themes. The general themes were (1) pedagogy (2) ableism (3) the hidden curriculum and (4) social networks. For example, the specific themes of friendships, belonging, perception of self, note taking all related to the general theme of social networks. Some specific themes were linked to more than one general theme. For example, teaching and learning related to pedagogy when teaching methodology was considered but certain unspoken expectations and assumptions also made it suitable for placement under the hidden curriculum. This showed there was an interrelationship between the themes. Through further examination of the general themes, I deduced that my understanding of the concepts of social capital and sense of belonging, made them applicable as theoretical themes or anchors that can be useful in explaining the students’ experiences of high school. These theoretical themes seem to both support the general themes and help to explain the specific themes.

Social capital is supported by social networks so students who have well-functioning social networks are likely to have large sources of social capital that is likely to impact their experiences of school. Social capital supports the hidden curriculum by allowing students to recognize what are the expected and often taken for granted behaviours valued in the traditional high school. Gale and Densmore (2000) argue “schools promote students who bring to school those attributes that schools reward… such as linguistic capital” (p. 109). Social capital can also influence curricula content by determining what kinds of knowledge is important for schools to transmit to students.

A sense of belonging can be affected by the amount of social capital students have. The hidden curriculum, ableist assumptions, social networks and pedagogy can all impact students’ sense of belonging and ultimately their perceptions of school. Children feel they belong when they “feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported in the school environment” (Ma 2003, p. 340). However, ableist assumptions, unwelcoming school climate and pedagogy that do not reflect students’ culture, needs or interests are likely to threaten their sense of belonging.

Based on the information collected from the students it would appear that having access to social capital and having a sense of belonging can help students in navigating their high school experiences. It would also appear that both these can support a smoother transition experience.

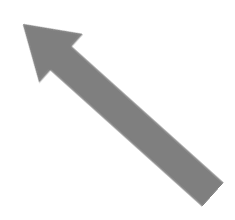
Figure 2, illustrates how specific themes pointed to general themes, and how general themes related to theories. The theories act as over-arching themes or anchors that support the general themes and provide a framework through which the specific themes can be more deeply understood. Chapter five takes each general theme in turn, returning at times to the specific themes, as I consider issues of significance to young people, transition and education.

Figure 2 The relationship between theories and the themes

**THEORIES**

Social Capital

Sense of Belonging

**SPECIFIC THEMES**

1. Teachers
2. Teaching and learning
3. Perceptions of self
4. Perceptions of school
5. Friendships
6. Support
7. Belonging
8. Note taking
9. Homework

**GENERAL THEMES**

1. Pedagogy
2. Ableism
3. Hidden Curriculum
4. Social Network

*Ethical Issues*

When researchers use children in their research, there are several ethical issues that can present challenges. However, the children’s rights must always be protected. When the participants are children with disabilities, there are likely to be additional ethical issues to consider such as gaining access and their ability to provide informed consent. In this research, the ethical issues that were addressed included: access, power, language, authenticity, informed consent, confidentiality, safety and issues related to disability.

1. *Gaining Access*

A major ethical consideration for this research involved accessing the participants. Prior to doing this research I discovered that neither the agency nor the government clinics that were responsible for identifying children with learning disabilities knew how many children with learning disabilities and or ADHD were in the school system. As a result I decided early on that these sources would not be helpful in accessing possible participants. I then decided to select specific schools and later parents of children who had been identified as having LD or ADHD as the gatekeepers through which access might be obtained.

Ethically, the issue of me using parents and children that I already knew had to be addressed as this had the potential to affect consent and the children’s responses. My prior relationship with these families could make these families feel a sense of obligation to participate in my research. This could result in parents pressuring their children into participating. This would affect the children’s ability to exercise their choice to participate or to dissent, and could ultimately affect the quality of the information that would be collected. In order to address this issue, parents were told they were under no obligation to say yes, and it was important for their child to freely choose to participate. The parents were told not to pressure the children into giving consent.

1. *Power Imbalance*

The power relationship between the adult researcher and child participant cannot be ignore as the disparity of power influences the way adults view children and children view adults. The adult’s view of children can affect their attitude toward children and inadvertently influence the type of information that is collected as well as how the information is interpreted. Children’s view of adults as having control over their lives can influence the quality of the responses children give, as they may feel the need to please the adult, or they may feel pressured to participate in the research. Children may also be confused by the adult researcher’s attempts to treat them as an equal in the research process (Punch, 2002).

Issues of power must be recognized and requires the researcher to be reflexive and to critically reflect on how being in a position of power may impact the way children’s voices are interpreted and how children are perceived. Punch (2002) argues “children are often marginalized in adult-centred society… and much of their lives is controlled and limited by adults” (p. 323). Children may not be given credence for what they know and understand, and they may be perceived as inexperienced and vulnerable.

The researcher must ensure that child participants receive the same level of respect as adult participants and are not manipulated in the research process. Children are usually subordinate to adults because of age, social status and position of power (Morrow, 2011) and are perceived as possessing different competencies and abilities to adults. Morrow argues that children’s competencies are different rather than lesser than adults (p. 10) and ethically, their views and opinions need to be respected because they have a right to express their own points of view (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 12). I addressed this issue by explaining to the children the research was about them and their experiences therefore what they had to say was very important to the research.

1. *Language Proficiency*

Closely related to power was the issue of language. Language is a sort of power as it can enable a person to engage in social interactions that make it possible for mutually beneficial transactions to occur. In ethnographic research, such as this one, language is crucial to understanding the experiences being investigated. Among ethnographers, “language enjoys a position of unrivalled theoretical interest” (Drew *et al.* 2006, p.105) as it is central to the dialogues and narratives that are studied. It is the vehicle participants use to share rich information about their lived experiences.

When working with children in research, it must be recognized that they are likely to have more restricted vocabularies than adults or may use language adults do not understand (Punch 2002, p.328). As such, it is imperative that the researcher uses language that is unambiguous and easily understood by children and that children are given opportunities to clearly explain what they want to say. For example, the language used in the introductory letter and consent form must be clear and simple so that children can easily understand what is stated. Children cannot give informed consent if they do not have a full understanding of what the research is about and what is being asked of them.

Language is the essence of the interviews as the children share their lives through their accounts and stories. The type of data collected is determined by how the interview questions are understood and the participants’ linguistic ability to fully express their feelings, share their experiences and points of view. In relation to this research, some participants sometimes had some difficulty expressing their thoughts effectively. For example, participants were heard to say “How do I say this?” or “I don’t know how to explain it”. The ethical challenge here was helping the participants to find the words to express their thoughts and feelings without ‘putting words in their mouths’ and leading them to say what I think they wanted to say rather than what they actually wanted to say.

1. *Authenticity*

Power and language issues can impact the authenticity of the information that is collected and analysed. As the examples above shows, unequal language proficiency can result in the adult researcher projecting their own voice and interpretations in the research rather than projecting the voices and understandings of the children. Central to authenticity is the question of whose voice carries greater value. Although children are seen as competent, often their voices do not carry equal weight.

From an ethical position the researcher must be willing to accept what children have said and resist the temptation to change words as this is likely to diminish authenticity. Punch (2002) warns adults must put aside assumptions that adult knowledge is superior to that of children (p. 325). If the purpose of the research is to capture children’s voices on their experiences then these voices must be maintained, valued and held as credible sources of information on children’s experiences. Fernqvist’s (2010) comments is worth repeating here, “Being positioned as a child should not disqualify an individual as being competent enough to interpret situations as framed” (p.1314).

1. *Informed Consent*

As previously stated, informed consent implied full understanding and involves “voluntarily agreeing to participate based on full disclosure of pertinent information”(Morrow 2011, p.5). Prior to being able to give consent children, as minors, must first receive consent from their adult gatekeepers such as their parents or school personnel who have control over their lives.

It is the responsibility of the adult gatekeepers to provide access as well as to help children understand the purpose of the research, and what is being asked of them should they decide to participate. Children, like adults, should be provided with all the information they need to make an informed decision to consent or to dissent. I provided parents and the children with information letters about the research and with forms to sign giving their consent if they agreed to participate.

1. *Confidentiality*

Although children should be entitled to the same level of confidentiality as adults (Morrow, 2011; and Baker and Weller, 2003) ethically it may be difficult to offer children full confidentiality. This is because children are likely to be more vulnerable, and more open to manipulation than adults. In order to protect children, it may be necessary to disclose information that has been shared if it is believed to be in the best interest of the child. In this research, the children were informed of this possibility in the information letters they received.

Confidentiality and safety issues were considered in deciding to use the telephone interviews.

In order to address the issue of an adult having a private telephone conversation with a child, I decided to first speak with their parents. I explained the purpose of the telephone interview, and asked for their permission to speak with their child. We agreed on a time that was convenient to call and conduct the interview. I decided I would not speak with the students on their cell phones as their home phones ensured our conversation would likely be semi-private and this ensured a level of security for the child and for me.

1. *Safety*

Safety had to be addressed particularly in terms of places to conduct the interviews as children need to feel physically and emotionally safe. Much has been written about the space where interviews are conducted as space holds meaning and can influence the interviewee’s perceptions and responses. For instance, children may perceive the school space to be associated with discipline, control and power and may act in ways they believe is in keeping with the school environment. Baker and Weller (2003) contend space has the potential to impact the research process and the data produced and they argue “schools are spaces over which children have little or no control” (p. 211).

Some children may not perceive the school environment as an emotionally safe space. For these reasons, the researcher should ensure that the school spaces are perceived as positive spaces where children like to be. If the participant is uncomfortable in their school environment, the quality of the information they present may be affected. Conducting interviews with children at school, an environment that is usually associated with adult control, may result in children responding in ways they perceive as appropriate for the school environment. For example, children may be unwilling to disagree with the adult interviewer or to ask questions for clarification fearing they may be perceived as foolish or disrespectful.

The interview’s space at one of the schools was the computer room which was in a building toward the back of the school. Interviews were conducted after school and during the interviews it was only the participant and my-self in the room which indicated a high level of trust on the part of the school. This space offered privacy for talking but it was not a comfortable space since the interview had to be conducted within small cubicle spaces created for desk top computers. I had to find ways of securing the recorder between the cubicles so that the conversations could be recorded. In spite of the confinement of the space, the participant did not appear to be distressed in any way and willingly responded to the interview questions. This participant was interviewed once at her home during the Christmas break and in comparing both settings, the home offered greater comfort for talking but also presented more distractions as a younger sibling was constantly trying to be present during the interview and the participant had to stop twice to attend to her sibling.

Baker and Weller (2003) caution parents may find interviews at home to be intrusive of their privacy (p.212) and Punch (2002) argues children may prefer not to have their private space invaded (p. 328). This was not my experience as the parents were willing to provide a comfortable space within their homes for the interviews to be conducted and the children were welcoming. These interview spaces were quiet and were semi-private which offered the participants and my-self a measure of security.

It was generally much easier and less complicated to gain access to both the participants and to interview spaces through the parents than through the schools. Schools as institutions offered a lot more ‘red tape’.

Research involving children must ensure that children are not placed at risk whether physically or emotionally. To reiterate, the spaces used for interviewing children must be both physically and emotionally safe spaces. The researcher must be sensitive to questions that could cause emotional distress to participants and accept that some questions may only receive a partial response or a part-truth. Hesitancy to divulge some information should not be perceived as a reason to press or push for a more detailed response if the participant is uncomfortable speaking about the issue.

Tracy (2010) reminds researchers to reflect on, critique and question their actions, and ethics demands that researchers ask the question, “Do the means justify the ends?” (p.847).The central principle of seeking to do no harm, must guide the decision as to when to stop and when to probe in an interview. When conducting research with children, the safety of both the children and the researcher must be considered. Baker and Weller (2003) recommend researchers adopt cautionary practice (p. 214) so that children’s safety is not called into question. In this research conducting the interviews in a semi-private space provided a measure of safety for both parties.

1. *Perceptions of Disability*

Disability may create additional ethical issues such as:

(1) The perception that children with disabilities are weak, vulnerable and more easily manipulated. Researchers must therefore ensure that all children involved in research are protected from harm and are not manipulated because of their naiveté.

(2) The perception that children with disabilities are incompetent. Children with disabilities, including children who are not severely intellectually disabled, are competent to speak on issues that affect their lives; and social disability theorists would argue that persons with disabilities are made incompetent by the actions of ablists and by obstacles presented by society. Children’s competencies are “different rather than lesser” than adults’ competencies (Waksler 1991, cited by Marrow 2011, p.10). Children are considered to be competent as long as they are able to understand what is proposed and are able to make a wise choice in their own interest (Morrow 2011, p.5).

Children with disabilities have rarely had the opportunity to speak for themselves in research (Baker and Weller, 2003) because adult proxies have traditionally spoken on their behalf. Kirk (2007) posits adult researchers cannot understand the world from a child’s point of view and Oliver (1996) encourage disabled people to speak for themselves and give their accounts of their lives if they want an accurately account of their life as they experience it.

(3) The perception that disability is a personal tragedy. This perception sees the child as damaged in some way, and may encourage gatekeepers to keep a tighter control over the lives of children with disabilities. Gatekeepers are likely to perceive children with disabilities as being in greater need of protection and care. It may be difficult to gain access to children with disabilities and to gain consent if the gate keepers believe that by relinquishing their control they may expose the child to some sort of harm.

There must be a high level of trust between the researcher and the gatekeepers in order to gain access to the children under their control. There is also the possibility that gatekeepers could deny access and by so doing deny children the opportunity to have their voices heard (Kirk, 2007).

(4) The perception that children with disabilities are unable to exercise control over their lives. This perception can result in children with disabilities developing weak self-determination skills as they do not get many opportunities to make independent decisions because adults are the decision makers in their lives. As a result, these children may have difficulty in making the decision to consent or they may not feel free to dissent because they are accustomed to doing what adults tell them to do. This could affect the nature of the information collected as the children’s responses may be based on compliance or pleasing adults who they perceive have control over their lives.

*Reflexivity*

It was my aim in this research to hear from students’ with LD and ADHD about their experiences of transitioning to high school in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that impact these students at the secondary level. Using an ethnographic approach in this research allowed me to capture the voices of the children and to gain access to their accounts of school. This was central to this research as it was through the children’s voices that I identified the themes that emerged from this research.

Thematic analysis demanded many readings of the transcripts and this helped me to become sensitive to the patterns in the students’ stories. I may have overlooked some important points had I not used the thematic approach. Traditionally, thematic analysis demands inductive analysis as the researcher should not approach the text with preconceived ideas. In reality however, I found this very difficult because invariably I was called on to make judgements as to what information to include and what to exclude and in so doing I used deductive skills. I believe both inductive and deductive analyses are needed to reflect honesty and authenticity and so I used both to identify the themes that emerged as significant in understand how students’ make sense of their school experiences.

Social capital theory helped to inform my analysis of the themes because social capital considers what and who an individual knows, as well as, how these can be of benefit to the individual. Social capital theory can therefore be used to explain the values and knowledge students bring to school; what knowledge is valued; the types of friendships students establish; the perceptions students may have about themselves and others; and perceptions of how others see them. These can help in understanding how the hidden curriculum works, the importance of peer networks and how ableist assumptions can affect students’ perception of school.

Pedagogy is important in students’ experiences of school. The students in this research flagged pedagogy as a central concern for them. I believe when pedagogical practices are highly teacher centred and focused on the pursuit of a narrow academic curriculum, as indicated by the students’ stories; they are likely to result in poor student/teacher relationships, disengagement and threaten feelings of belonging. I reiterate what Goodley (2001) stated “the narrowness of curricula means exclusion for many non-normative children” (p. 142). Chapter five looks at pedagogy in detail as it emerged as a dominant theme in the students’ accounts.

I believe students need to have a strong sense of belonging as belonging seems integral to students’ ability to engage in positive social networks. The latter can play a significant role in the students’ experiences of school. Belonging is also likely to influence how well students engage with the pedagogy that is presented in schools. The analysis of the findings from this research will be discussed in chapter six.

*Conclusion*

This research involved the use of ethnographic methodology and interviews were used as the main source of collecting information. The research process involved gaining access to participants through their schools. When this failed to provide an adequate pool of participants, I decided to directly contact parents to gain access to participants.

As with any research involving children, ethical challenges had to be considered and several ethical issues related to this research have been discussed. These issues were addressed prior to and during the research process and involved issues of access, power imbalance, informed consent, language, authenticity, confidentiality, safety and disability.

Power imbalance could not be entirely removed but did not appear to significantly affect the rapport that was established between the participants and myself. The issue of language competencies required that occasionally a question needed to be rephrased or participants needed to explain more clearly what they meant.

Confidentiality and safety were offered in the interview spaces provided as the children’s homes offered a fairly private and secure place for our conversations. The interview space at the school offered a high level of privacy but was not as comfortable as the home spaces. The use of pseudonyms offered safety and anonymity to the participants.

The students’ interviews were transcribed and the material was analysed using thematic analysis. From this analysis four general themes emerged. These were pedagogy, the hidden curriculum, ableist beliefs and social networks. It was argued that these themes could be placed under the theoretical concepts of social capital and sense of belonging as these theories could be used to help in understanding how students perceive their school transition experiences.

The following chapter will focus on the findings of this research. It will also present the analysis of the themes that emerged from the children’s accounts of their school experience.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**Presentation of Findings and Analysis**

*Introduction*

In order to provide the reader with a clearer picture of the participant, I have included pen portraits of each participant, as well as, a summary of the data collected from each.

Giselle – 14 years old and identified as having ADHD. She has an older sibling who attended the same school but is now in college. Her cousins also attend the same school. Giselle has a twin. Her twin does not have ADHD and attends a different school. She is a shy adolescent and seems to have low self-confidence and believes she is not very bright. She is perceptive and aware of the impact of ADHD on her school performance. She has problems with focusing, writing, organization skills and sometimes has difficulty explaining her thoughts. She often complains of being tired. She likes working with computers, cheer-leading and cooking. She likes the social aspect of school and has a few close friends. She would like to be a chef one day.

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| Page number | Statement |
| 135  138  140  142  143  144  145  146  150  151  155 | You just have to sit there and take notes and just listen.  The math teacher is really mean and he gets angry so I am afraid to ask questions. And some teachers …the way they speak to you makes you feel uneasy.  I like my school. All my family went there. If I went to another school I would feel like a traitor.  … if I had a choice I’d type notes instead of writing, I don’t like to take notes there is a lot of spelling and your hands hurt.  We don’t need homework… we get classwork why do we need homework?  When I ask the teachers, they say, we did that in class. You should remember, but I don’t.  I don’t focus well. My mom writes a letter…they don’t do anything about it…  I failed English, my own language I feel bad about that, writing essays is difficult.  The children say she is so bad at learning she has to go to her own room.  The cool people stay in a particular area… I sit near the back gate and no one troubles me  Friends help make high school better…so I can talk to somebody. |

Julianne – 14 years old and is identified as having a specific learning disability. She has problems with reading comprehension and remembering facts. She is the middle child of three children and her sisters attend the same school as she does. She has a very happy and bubbly personality and likes to help others. She is very positive in her outlook. She sometimes has difficulty explaining herself. She has problems taking notes in class. She likes netball and wants to play on the school team. She describes herself as being shy and she loves school and has many friends.

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| Page number | Statement |
| 135  135  139  140  143  144  152 | I get annoyed because I don’t understand…learning would be easier if the teacher used the computer more.  When the teacher is just talking…you get bored and you tend to sleep.  I cannot take notes in class…when I am writing I tend to slow down and I don’t really understand.  Some teachers are very harsh…does not even explain the notes.  I feel accepted at school like people understand me…I am happy I got the transfer to go there.  I wish it would leave…homework is like prison…most times its writing.  The teacher uses words she thinks the students understand but they really don’t.  High school is harder but fun…my friends…they notice if I am sad. |

Amelia –13 years old, she is very petite and conscious of her physical appearance. She is very shy and soft spoken. She seems to lack confidence and believes she is not bright. She has been identified as having a specific learning disability and needs extra time to process information. She also seems to have some problems with remembering information. Her challenge is in the area of language; essay writing and remembering the rules of grammar are difficult for her. She is afraid she will be asked to leave her school because of poor academic performance. She is the youngest of three girls and her siblings attend the same school as she does. She does not like schools, is a bit critical of herself and others and says she prefers her own company although she has a few close friends.

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| Page number | Statement |
| 135  139  140  142  143  144  145  146  148  149  153 | Some subjects seem pointless, not really relevant  Most teachers don’t listen to students and some teachers make students cry.  There is no other high school I want to go to, my sisters go here too.  I prefer hand-outs so I don’t have to write it … helps you to understand.  Having to do work at school is stressful…coming home to do more work I am not really into it.  The teacher assumes everyone understands and she moves ahead.  Sometimes my teacher does not accept that I don’t understand…I would prefer the teacher would explain to me what I don’t understand instead of punishing me.  I feel stressed because of work…I pretty much lie and say I understand it …  English is not my favourite subject…I don’t feel I am as smart as the others.  I don’t actually ask a lot of questions… look silly in front of my classmates.  … I have made some friends…they make me feel comfortable about myself…we are all equal. |

Megan - 15 years old, has been identified as having dyslexia and ADHD although both seemed to have presented greater problems when she was in primary school. She is very confident and articulate. She is poised and a bit shy but outspoken on issues she feels strongly about. She is the middle child of three girls and her younger sister attends the same school that she does. Her older sister attended the same school but is now in college. She has set high goals for herself and is very organized and motivated. She wants to do something in the medical field when she goes to college - she intends to get a scholarship to go to college.

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| Page number | Statement |
| 133  134  136  140  143  149  154 | Usually I make friends through my friends…  Learning is boring…it’s the same every day.  They could use different ways of teaching…more interactive  I feel more comfortable…it’s just the right school for me  I wish I had more time…there is too much homework  They think I am very silent and they are usually nicer to silent people…  Sometimes the teachers go too fast and you don’t get it all down by the end of the class so I have to go to my friends and borrow their books. |

Ben - 14 years old, has been identified as having dyslexia. He is the older of two boys. He seems mature for his age and is very confident, articulate and organized. He seems to have a good sense of his abilities and is self-motivated and organized. He has many friends, likes going to parties and plays football. He changed schools and likes the school he now attends. He wants to go to college and study business.

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| Page number | Statement |
| 134  138  139  142  144  147  154  156 | Learning is boring because of how teachers teach.  Where I am now the teachers are more enthusiastic…and so you will ask without fear.  There is no enthusiasm ….it never seemed as if they wanted the best for us  We get a lot of notes…it helps the information to stick.  I don’t mind getting homework- it allows you to stay on track.  They listen to what I have to say.  The students had friends outside of school and so there was always some social event happening and you’d know about it.  The students …There are cliques even in class the girls sit on one side and the boys sit on one side. |

Lee - 15 years old, has been identified as having a non-verbal learning disability and ADHD. He hates school and is very critical of his teachers and the students at his school. He is unmotivated and seems angry with his teachers. He does not see the relevance of the things he is being taught in school. He hates writing. He loves the computer and likes playing computer games. He often makes alarmist or dramatic statements. He is very perceptive and has a dry sense of humour. He is the younger of two boys. His older brother is in college and is a straight A student. He says he has many friends in his neighbourhood. He would like to create computer games.

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| Page number | Statement |
| 133  135  136  136  138  139  140  142  143  144  146  155 | I knew one or two before…I met other people who were their friends.  People say learning is a fun experience but school is a boring thing; it doesn’t really make sense.  I don’t really like school…teach things that you are going to actually need.  They could use electronic means…they could email the notes and you could get it at home.  I don’t really like school, the teachers don’t really help you…you try extremely hard but it doesn’t help because you are still not doing as well as the teacher wants.  I don’t like any of the teachers…and they don’t help anybody to learn.  I go to school because I am forced to. I don’t go by choice…I don’t care about belonging at…  I don’t like writing…teachers give a lot of notes  I don’t want to do homework…homework is annoying, time-consuming and boring.  They do not respond differently to children who have LD and this is bad…will probably need something to help them focus on the topic.  I write cursive and it’s difficult to read…I’m not good at spelling…I get distracted and I find it difficult to read old notes I have taken.  It’s nice to have other people around. |

As previously stated, this is a qualitative research with an ethnographic attitude. This research used interviewing methodology to investigate the perspectives of a group of students, who have been identified as having LD and or ADHD, on their experience of transitioning to high school. I was interested in understanding the students’ perspectives and feelings about high school in order to better understand the possible challenges (academic, emotional and social) these students may have in transitioning to a traditional high school. Having a LD and or ADHD has been associated with being at risk for poor academic performance (Ek *et al*., 2011; Firth *et al*., 2010; Daley and Birchwood, 2010 and Frazier *et al*., 2007) and lowered self-esteem (Roll-Pattersson and Mattson (2007).

The concept of social capital was discussed in chapter three and in relation to this research the perspectives of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam are presented as a framework through which social capital is considered. To reiterate, Bourdieu presents social capital as the aggregate of resources an individual has consisting of actual personal resources, and potential resources that can be accessed by membership in a group (Bourdieu 1986, n p.). Colman sees social capital as integral to the development of human capital and existing in the relationships among persons (Colman 1988, S100). Putnam sees social capital as having both personal and public benefits and existing in social networks, norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness (Putnam 2000, p. 19).

It has also been argued that children, like adults, access their social capital through social networks and relationships of trust and reciprocity. Children create their social network through interacting with individuals in their environment. The participants in this research forged their friendships through accessing bonding and bridging capital, a concept presented by Putnam and discussed in chapter three, as they extended their social networks by becoming friends with friends of their friends. Although the extracts from the children’s conversations will be analysed later in this chapter, I present the following two comments to demonstrate how children engage in network building through using bonding and bridging capital. [The comments in italics in the square brackets are my comments, and the number in the parentheses beside the student’s name represents the interview number].

Usually I make friends through my friends because we tend to be similar. We are in clubs together [*pause*] Key club [*then excitedly added*] we formed our own club GWAC … Girls with Attitude Club. We talk about problems girls have and we visit charities and homes. I went for a 5K walk this year with my friends from GWAC in aid of breast cancer (Megan, 1).

I knew one or two before so I talked to them and through them I met other people who were their friends (Lee, 1).

These comments show children as active agents who purposely construct, extend and invest in their social relationships as these purposeful actions build their social networks and social capital. Morrow (1999) argues children as social agents actively generate, draw on and negotiate their own social capital (p.751).

Social networks can become sources of social support that students use as buffers to help them navigate their high school experiences. Pavi and Monda-Amaya (2011) define social supports as “the process by which individuals feel valued, cared for and connected to a group of people” (p.391). This suggests social support can be a significant factor in helping students develop feelings of attachment or belonging as they can provide a place where students feel accepted and where their self-esteem seems to be protected. This argument is supported by a comment made about friends by one of the participant, “At first they did not seem like people I’d hang out with [*her friends’ friends*] but they make me feel comfortable about myself. They accept me- I feel a part of the group, we are all equal” (Amelia, 5).

*Analysis of Themes*

In the previous chapter, I explained how in examining the data, nine specific themes emerged from the children’s conversations. These led to four general themes that I believed presented the bigger picture. These general themes were: pedagogy, ableism, the hidden curriculum and social networks and I believe they can be more clearly understood through the theories of social capital and belonging. Each of these general themes will be discussed in the analysis that follows.

*Pedagogy*

There is much written about pedagogy and the different types of pedagogies such as critical pedagogy or pedagogy of the oppressed, folk pedagogy and social pedagogy (Smith, 2012). This research is not concerned with the various types of pedagogies. I consider pedagogy in terms of the following definition: pedagogy is the art and science of teaching. The art refers to the creative aspects of *how* teachers teach and the science refers to the research and the theoretical framework that supports *wha*t teachers teach. Based on the themes that have emerged from the data it appears that the science of teaching has been confined to a funnel presentation of the academic curriculum while the art of teaching has emerged as a teacher-centred, highly controlled use of traditional methods.

I included teachers in my consideration of pedagogy because I believe the teacher cannot be separated from the teaching as the latter is the product of the teacher’s knowledge, skills, beliefs and reflective attitude. Smith (2012) argues good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. The students in this research had strong feelings about what and how they were being taught and about their teachers. They shared that they thought school was boring and that teachers did the same things every day “Learning is boring because of the way things are taught – mostly through reading and writing - it’s the same every day” (Megan, 2). Ben shared similar feelings “Learning is boring because of how the teachers teach” (Ben, 3).

The students felt what they were learning was often irrelevant to their lives and their experiences. Students want their learning to be engaging and interesting and are motivated to learn when the pedagogy used involves their active participation. Booth (2011) found young adolescents value academic learning but want their learning to be interesting and engaging. The voices below show how student disengagement is related to the teacher’s methodology.

I get annoyed because I don’t understand and I think he [*the teacher*] is wasting my time so I stop writing and close my book…learning would be easier if the teacher used the computer more (Julianne, 2).

Some subjects seem pointless, not really relevant (Amelia, 4).

You just have to sit there and take notes and just listen (Giselle, 1).

People say learning is a fun experience but school is a boring thing; it doesn’t really make sense (Lee, 3).

In discussing teaching methodology, I believe the following sub-themes of pedagogy need to be considered. These include examining (1) how teachers have traditionally taught (2) how teaching methodology has kept pace with the technologies, which are transforming learning in the twenty first century (3) the impact teachers’ pedagogy is likely to have on a child’s sense of belonging and (4) possible pedagogical practices that children may perceive as oppressive. The children’s stories suggest these sub-themes are significant in their experiences of high school.

1. *Traditional Pedagogy*

The traditional lecture method used by many of the teachers was not engaging most of the students in this research. This is clearly echoed in Julianne’s comments “When the teacher is just talking and you are just listening you get bored and you tend to sleep” (Julianne, 1). It is possible that many teachers continue to use the lecture method in their classrooms because it provides structure, allows easy dissemination of information and supports a teacher centred approach to teaching and learning. This method however, encourages passive learning, and is associated with poor retention (Long, 2012) as well as, assumes a level of normalcy in student performance.

In order to retain what students hear in lectures, they usually take notes. Listening to lectures, identifying the important points, and recording the information in a legible form assumes a certain level of language competence. This may place students with language based disorders, such as LD, at a disadvantage. Julianne explains “I cannot take notes in class… I can’t catch the notes fast enough. I really don’t know why, but when I am focusing on one thing and listening, when I am writing I tend to slow down and I don’t really understand” (Julianne, 2).

Although language is essential to the teaching and learning process, the extensive use of the lecture method in the traditional high schools supports the idea that schools use language in a particular way to build cultural and linguistic capital. Cultural and linguistic capital is valued by the elite hence schools actually promote social stratification and inequality by marginalizing certain groups of students (Gale and Densmore, 2000). This supports a Bourdieusian view of schooling whereby students who possess the linguistic capital that schools value have an advantage over those who do not. Traditional pedagogy also supports the academic curriculum and values certain subjects over others; values certain knowledge over others; sees children as passive learners rather than as active actors who can think for themselves; and is designed to “prepare select youth for future leadership responsibilities” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p.77).

Most teachers know that in order to engage their students, they need to be creative, present pedagogy that is interesting, meaningful and relevant and foster creative thinking. The children’s stories seem to indicate that often this is not how they experience school. Lee’s comments reflect his frustration as he shares “I don’t really like school because it’s pretty boring – just writing on the board, having to take notes and doing tests… some subjects are irrelevant [*teachers should*] teach things that you are going to actually need” (Lee, 3).

Students need to be connected to what they are learning in order to remember and become engaged (Bauleke and Herrmann, 2010). In spite of this, many teachers hold on to the traditional methods of teaching, pursuing a curriculum that is valued by the dominant social group (Gale and Densmore, 2000).

1. *Pedagogy and the Age of Technology*

They could use different ways of teaching - make it more creative, use activities instead of just reading and writing - more interactive (Megan, 2).

They could use electronic means - they prefer markers and white boards but a power point would be better because we could go back and check the notes. This is good for students who can’t write fast. They could email the notes and you could get it at home (Lee, 2).

Today’s generation of students are born into technology and from a very young age most are familiar with computers and are technologically savvy. They spend large quantities of their time and energy engaged in using some sort of technological gadget. They have grown up with PC’s, the internet, smart phones, texting, iPads, MP3 players, numerous gaming systems, electronic gadgets and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others. As children become increasingly competent in their use of computers to access all sorts of information, entertainment and social networks; classrooms without access to popular technology are likely to increase the gap between what happens inside school and students’ life experience outside of school.

Main and O’Rourke (2011) have argued “using technology in the classroom in measured and thoughtful ways is likely to provide a stimulating environment for today’s students” (p. 45). For many students, using information and communication technology (ICT) is their preferred learning style. However, the traditional curriculum and pedagogy framework often discounts or denies the authenticity of this style of learning in the classroom (Downes, 2002, p. 31). “Educators need to recognise the discontinuity that exists between the learning affordances of the computer and the traditional pedagogies of classrooms” (Downes, 2002, p.31-32) and find ways to engage students in learning through more effective use of computers in the classroom.

Today, technology is considered to be an important part of a high quality education and the conditions for successful technological integration in the curriculum are encouraged (Ertmer, 2005). This demands greater access to the internet, and increasing teachers’ competence in the use of computers. Government policies also support the increased use of technology in the curriculum as they are concerned about schools being able to produce students who are relevant in an increasingly technical global economy.

In spite of the favourable environment for computer use, many teachers remain reluctant to integrate computer use in the curriculum, restricting its use to research via the internet. Ertmer (2005) argues teachers’ reluctance to change their pedagogical practices is likely linked to their beliefs, as teachers beliefs are reflected in their classroom practices. Ertmer (2005) also argues low-level computer use tend to be associated with teacher centred practices and high-level computer use with student-centred practices.

O’Brian *et al.* (2007) found students who use digital tools to learn literacy, found learning more engaging than learning that was based on traditional methods and these non-traditional methods were also found to enhance the students’ self-esteem (p. 69). Johnson and Gooliaff (2013) argue traditional teaching methods have often failed to engage male students in learning. They propose teachers should provide more opportunities for children to utilize their technological skills and engage in authentic learning as this is likely to be more effective than a lecture or a teacher driven approach (p.5).

Daniels (2011) suggests teachers need to listen to what students say about their motivation to achieve so that they can create motivating learning environments. For this to occur, teachers need to be willing to try new ways of seeing and doing things in order to engage students in learning (Ertmer, 2005). A lack of engagement with learning tasks is identified with poor student performance and when students are not engaged, it is unlikely they will make the classroom gains expected of them (Main and O’Rourke 2011, p. 43). As children become increasingly more computer savvy, they develop skills, dispositions and ways of learning that are likely to widen the gap between learning with technology and learning at school (Downes 2002, p.32).

1. *Teachers, Pedagogy and Belonging*

As previously indicated I chose to place teachers under the category of pedagogy because I believe who a teachers is, is reflected in what and how he or she teaches as well as in their relationships with their students. The latter is especially important in students’ perception about their sense of belonging.

The students mostly shared negative feelings about their teachers and those who had the strongest negative impressions of teachers also seemed to have greater challenges in school and a stronger ambiguity about their sense of belonging. “I don’t really like school, the teachers don’t really help you so you just have to take a lot more effort and it’s hard because you try extremely hard but it doesn’t help because you are still not doing as well as the teacher wants”(Lee, 1). The practices of some teachers can alienate some students as Giselle’s experience seems to illustrate “the math teacher is really mean and he gets angry so I am afraid to ask questions. And some teachers …the way they speak to you makes you feel uneasy” (Giselle, 2).

Teachers have a responsibility to create classroom relationships that serve students’ interests and they should provide emotionally safe spaces for students to learn. Ben’s experience at his new school was completely different to Giselle’s. “Where I am now, the teachers are more enthusiastic and will go out of their reach to help you. They are eager to help you and so you will ask [*questions*] without fear” (Ben, 1). This suggests, teachers at Ben’s school are perceived to be more interested in students and this increases students’ motivation to learn. Roffey (2013) argues when students feel connected to school they are likely to engage in healthy behaviours and succeed academically (p. 43).

In chapter three, I discussed sense of belonging and its significant impact on group membership and social identity. It is revisited here to show its importance in the classroom and its impact on learning as positive teacher /student relationships have been associated with increased sense of attachment or belonging (Edwards and Mullis, 2001). A sense of belonging enhances academic achievement and students’ mental health, self-esteem and self-concept (Rawatial and Petersen, 2012).

Students are unlikely to feel motivated to learn in an environment in which they feel alienated. Ma (2003) argues students’ sense of belonging to school has social consequences (p.340) while Edwards and Mullis (2001) contend belonging affects academic success because when students feel they belong they are more likely to perform proficiently, competently and responsibly (p. 197). The participants’ presented a picture of some teachers as harsh, unapproachable and uninterested. These perceptions are likely to affect teacher/student relationships, sense of belonging and motivation for learning. The following extracts suggest that some teachers’ actions in the classroom serve to confuse rather than support students, and this may cause students to question whether they belong in the class.

Some teachers are very harsh. There is one teacher who just puts the notes on the board and sits down. He does not even explain the notes (Julianne, 2).

Most teachers don’t listen to students and some teachers make students cry (Amelia, 1).

I don’t like any of the teachers. They give detentions and they give homework. The teacher don’t know how to do their job properly ‘cause they are supposed to answer the questions, that’s what they are supposed to do and they don’t help anybody learn [*seemed angry*] (Lee, 3).

There is no enthusiasm coming from the teacher [*referring to his previous school*] Teaching seemed like it was a bother, like they didn’t want to teach us. It never seemed as if they wanted the best for us. I didn’t like any of my teachers at … [*previous school*] (Ben, 1).

When students perceive teachers as helpful and as having their best interests at heart, this is likely to enhance their sense of belonging. This perception is supported by Ma (2003) who argues:

Students perceive teachers who are attentive, respectful and helpful as caring and concerned about their social and academic wellbeing, which gives students a sense of belonging and fosters their academic engagement (Ma 2003, p, 341).

Beck and Malley (1998) argue children are likely to fail in school when they feel alienated and isolated from others and from the educational process. In spite of distant relationships the students had with many of their teachers, most of the students in this research felt a sense of belonging to their school. It is likely that the children’s sense of belonging was protected by the quality of their social relationships and the family ties they had at school. This was an interesting insight since most of the literature on belonging focuses on the teacher’s role in establishing student’s sense of belonging. The perspectives shared by the students in this research indicate that friendships and family ties also appear to be significant factors in establishing feelings of belonging and may be particularly important when the teacher-student relationship is weak.

When social networks and student-teacher relationships are weak it is likely to result in strong anti-school sentiments. This seems to be Lee’s experience “I go to school because I am forced to. I don’t go by choice. I’d [*like to*] change school…and the teachers are dunce, they cannot teach up to an acceptable standard, I didn’t care about belonging at … [*school*]” (Lee, 3). However when students feel connected to school either through friendships, family ties or close teacher relationships, their perceptions of school are more positive as seen in the comments below.

I feel accepted at school like people understand me. I would say the whole school is my friend. I feel more comfortable socially. My sister goes there and I am happy I got the transfer to go there (Julianne, 5).

I like my school. All my family went there. If I went to another school I would feel like a traitor (Giselle, 2).

I feel more comfortable in the environment – I think it’s just the right school for me and my sisters go there (Megan, 1).

There is no other high school I want to go to, my sisters go here too (Amelia, 1).

Cheung (2011) looked at the impact of parents’ social capital on their children’s sense of belonging and argues the collaboration between parents and school enhances a child’s sense of belonging as it provides a crucial ecological niche for children. Parents know the capital schools value and they inculcate these values in their children thereby equipping them with skills that help them to fit-in. The students’ responses above supports this argument as their family ties and friendships create a strong bond with the students and their school and appear to act as a buffer to the challenges the students experience in the classroom.

1. *Pedagogy, Note Taking and Homework*

A large area of concern for the students was the volume of note taking demanded in their schools. The focus on taking large amounts of notes, often dictated, fits with the concept that children are containers waiting to be filled. It also fits with a teacher-centred pedagogy and a view that children are passive consumers rather than active, capable, thinking human beings (Gale and Densmore, 2000).

The academic curriculum encourages a teacher-centred pedagogy and focuses on delivering certain content and then testing to see whether it had been retained (Smith 2012). This type of methodology embraces pen and paper type of learning and for students who have challenges with writing this is likely to place them at a disadvantage. None of the participants had note-takers and so they had to write their own notes. The expectation that students are able to take useful notes on the content that has been delivered perpetuates ableist assumptions that all students should be able to write equally efficiently.

The students had mixed feelings about note taking. They could see the benefits of having notes but had different perspectives on how notes should be given (written on the board, hand outs, emailed or taped). The students’ comments reflect the lack of accommodations they receive in their classrooms and also indicated that they may lack strategic note taking skills which are essential if they are to be efficient and effective note takers.

Boyle (2011) argues that for the average middle schooler note taking during lectures can be a demanding process (p. 52). Effective note taking requires students to be able to listen attentively to the lecture, select the salient points, use appropriate abbreviations, rephrase information succinctly and record relevant information in an organized manner that can later be read for review or study purposes (Boyle, 2011). This can be particularly challenging for students identified as having ADHD as they are likely to have attention problems and may have difficulty dividing their attention between listening and writing. Students identified as having LD may have challenges with understanding, remembering, or processing what they hear or they may be unable to spell words correctly or write legibly.

Giselle clearly expresses her challenges in this area and her preference for teachers to write notes on the board, rather than dictate them, as this acts as a support for note taking and provides a visual aid to her learning “I would prefer if they wrote notes on the board. I like that so I can get all the notes, spell the words right and I don’t miss anything. If I had a choice, I’d type notes instead of writing. I don’t like to take notes there is a lot of spelling and your hands hurt” (Giselle, 2).

All the participants had strong and varied feelings about note-taking suggesting teachers could be more accommodating by providing easier access to notes possibly through providing hand-outs or emailing the notes.

I prefer hand-outs so I don’t have to write it. We get quite a bit of notes actually some of them I don’t think they help at all and it is tiring. [*Notes*] Helps me to remember information- as you write you are also reading so it helps you to understand (Amelia, 3).

We get a lot of notes. I really don’t like hand-outs. I use different coloured pens, it keeps the notes neat and while I’m writing I say in my mind so it helps to stick even more. I don’t have a problem with it. It helps the information to stick (Ben, 3).

I don’t like writing. I’d prefer to record the notes. It’s unnecessary and teachers give a lot of notes (Lee, 3).

I don’t mind taking notes… it helps me focus but my hands hurt (Julianne, 3).

The students also expressed their concerns about the amount of homework that was given. Kohn (2006) argues much of the homework given to children is unnecessary and perhaps harmful in some instances. He claims “research generally does not substantiate the belief that children need to do homework” (p 71) and includes in his arguments that teachers continue to give homework because they are reluctant to challenge common practices, have a fundamental misconception about the nature of learning and distrust children and how they choose to spend their time.

Kohn’s arguments may be controversial as he seems to suggest children should not get homework. I do not support this position because I believe homework can serve a positive purpose and extend learning. However, much of what is given as homework could be considered as busy work rather than productive work, and schools should consider their homework policies so that homework actually extends learning rather than frustrates students and discourage learning.

Xu (2005) investigated the reasons for doing homework and found the main reason most children did homework was to gain adult approval (p.47). The students in this research mostly had very strong negative feelings about the amount of homework they were given. Ben was the only student who had strong positive feelings about homework and this could possibly be related to the positive experiences he has had at his new school as these are likely to have increased his motivation for learning. The students mostly perceived homework as an intrusion on their private time and believed it added to their feelings of stress. This perception is supported by Megan’s comments as expressed below:

I wish I had more time, I feel disappointed that I don’t have more personal time, it’s work, work, work that’s the whole point of being a kid now. I think kids now are more busy because we have more subjects. Personal space seems like a distraction like if you don’t work the consequence is you get a detention or you will fail. There is too much homework (Megan, 2).

Most of the participants seemed to feel helpless and oppressed by the demands of homework and described homework as being in a prison, consuming their leisure time and often unnecessary. The feelings expressed by the participants indicate schools should re-examine homework policies, the nature of homework given and the reasons for prescribing homework. I found it interesting that the students who struggled the most in school, also had the strongest negative perceptions about homework.

I wish it would leave [*homework*]. It’s the worst thing God ever made. Homework is like prison. At times it’s boring. Most times it’s writing (Julianne, 1).

Sometimes I finish the homework and not understand it. Really, I don’t like homework at all. Having to do work at school is stressful enough so pretty much coming home to do more work I am not really into it (Amelia, 2).

We don’t need homework. In class the teacher can help you but at home if you don’t understand you don’t have anyone to ask. We get classwork why do we need homework? (Giselle, 2)

I don’t want to do work at home, when I come home I should be able to do other things. I don’t like it. I don’t think it is necessary and teachers should not give any. If you are being taught well in class there is no reason to have to go home and do it again. Homework is annoying, time-consuming and boring (Lee, 2).

Only one participant had a positive outlook on homework. He saw homework as helping to improve learning. “I don’t mind getting homework –it allows you to stay on track” (Ben, 1).

*Ableism*

Ableism is a concept that views individuals within a framework of normalcy. Smith *et al.* (2008) argues ableism is a form of discrimination against individuals with disabilities and believes disability represents abnormality or a deficit rather than a dimension of difference (p. 304). Ableism is not accommodating of disability and expects individuals with disabilities to do things in the way ‘normal’ people do.

Ableist views can influence how schools operate and how teachers teach, placing individuals with disabilities at a disadvantage. In this research, ableist pedagogical approaches create additional challenges for students. When teachers expect all students to learn the same things, in the same way, at the same time, they are practicing ableism. For example, participants shared their experiences with ableist assumptions when teachers fail to acknowledge their learning differences. Julianne explained “the teacher uses words she thinks the students understand but they really don’t” (Julianne, 2). Amelia’s comment supports the ableist assumption that one size fits all “the teacher assumes everyone understands and she moves ahead” (Amelia, 1). Giselle’s experience shows teachers lack of sensitivity to the fact that many students with LD and ADHD are likely to require more time to learn and remember information. “When I ask the teachers, they say, we did that in class. You should remember, but I don’t” (Giselle, 2).

Teachers practice ableist pedagogy when they pursue a one size fits all approach to teaching and are indifferent to, or make no concessions for student diversity. Both Lee and Giselle shared experiences that demonstrated teachers’ lack of accommodation for students with learning challenges. Lee seemed particularly perceptive to the need for differentiated instruction in order to meet the different learning needs students are likely to have. His comments suggest teachers ignore student differences.

They do not respond to children differently who have LD and this is bad because you can’t teach someone who like learns by listening, the same way like a student who can just write down notes and read it to themselves; and students who can’t focus well will probably need something to help them focus on the topic (Lee, 1).

Giselle’s experience demonstrates teachers’ unwillingness to change in spite of knowledge of the student’s learning challenges “I don’t focus well. My mom writes a letter every time I get a new teacher, but they don’t do anything about it, like giving me extra time” (Giselle, 2).

Teachers perform within an ablest philosophy when they impose requirements that demand students with disabilities behave and learn in the same ways that nondisabled students do. This places disabled children at a distinct disadvantage (Hehir, 2002). Teachers may practice ableism when they fail to recognise students’ learning differences resulting in some students being unfairly treated as reflected in the experience Amelia shared.

Sometimes my teacher does not accept that I don’t understand and she punishes me like [*demand that she*] write the same homework over or get lunch detention. This means the bell rings for lunch but I have to stay back, then the lines are longer [*when she goes out for lunch*] and there is less food and what is left is more expensive food. Sometimes I don’t eat and I feel sick and I get tired and can’t focus. I would prefer the teacher would explain to me what I don’t understand instead of punishing me (Amelia, 3).

Ableism is rooted in negative cultural assumptions about disability, and is influenced by the medical model of disability that tries to cure or fix disabled persons (Storey, 2007). Teachers who have ableist assumptions may be unaware of the impact their practices have on students with disabilities and this can prevent them from recognizing for example; that not allowing a student with dyslexia to use a computer is likely to greatly diminish the student’s ability to produce acceptable written work (Hehir 2007, p. 17).

Hehir (2007) explains that an unwillingness to be flexible in how students access and or present information can lead to children with LD experiencing lowered educational attainment. The students in this research spoke about their difficulty with taking dictated notes such as: speed of writing, spelling difficulties and focusing problems. Although this has resulted in gaps in their notes and in some cases notes that were unintelligible, teachers have failed to make accommodations within their pedagogy for these students.

Failing to grasp information quickly, and writing lengthy responses, were challenges some students had. These academic challenges were not accommodated, as students are expected to fit-in with the standards that have been defined as ‘normal’. Teachers who practice abliest beliefs are likely to contribute to students feeling badly about them-selves, and may contribute to these students experiencing lowered self-confidence and lowered self-efficacy. Giselle comments suggest her confidence in her own abilities is shaken, “I failed English, my own language I feel bad about that, writing essays is difficult” (Giselle, 2).

Lee is forced to write in spite of the challenges writing poses for him “My writing is difficult to read after a while. My writing is not as bad as before, but it’s still pretty difficult” (Lee, 1). Lee relies on his memory when reading his notes but has difficulty with reading and recalling notes he took weeks earlier. This ultimately affects his ability to study from his notes, He explains, “I write cursive and it’s difficult to read, I’m not good at spelling and my writing is not easy to read and sometimes I get distracted and I find it difficult to read old notes I have taken” (Lee, 1).

Other participants shared experiences that demonstrate ableist practices within the classroom. These include how teachers present information, and teachers’ expectations of students.

I would like it if the teacher could actually slow down or actually stop sometimes and give me the paper so I could get the notes to write, and they could continue to read from the paper while I am writing. Teachers [*should*] just put the notes up on a website and then I could go there and get them (Julianne, 1).

I feel stressed because of the work. I always feel like I am way behind in the class so I feel annoyed. I get really stressed… it takes longer for me to understand, the teachers just go on… and the teachers get annoyed or bothered when you don’t understand. I pretty much lie and say I understand it because I can tell they are getting annoyed (Amelia, 3).

Ableism focuses on the ‘ideal student’ who can handle whatever the curriculum throws at him or her. The question arises, which students are valued, and which are not? The students who are self-motivated, independent learners are likely to be at the top of the totem pole.

Ableist beliefs can be concealed in the curriculum and promote unjust and exclusionary practices. In the taught curriculum, students are expected to read grade level texts, produce assignments that emphasize their disability, and use language and questioning skills with the same dexterousness as everyone else. These practices are likely to be more exclusive than inclusive because students are likely to have difficulty accessing information that is presented in ways that disregard their disability.

Ableist beliefs can also be supported by the school’s culture. A school’s culture determines how the school performs and whose cultural capital is valued. If a school’s culture is influenced by ableist beliefs, students can be held to unfair expectations. Not all students are alike and as such some students are likely to need different treatment but ableist beliefs may cause teachers to treat all students in the same way. Teachers may even perceive this as being fair. I believe it is interesting to note that none of the students perceived fairness as treating all students the same way. Teachers are perceived to be fair when:

They listen to what I have to say (Ben, 3).

They try to ensure that you understand one way or another (Julianne, 3).

They don’t ignore you (Giselle, 3).

They look at different perspectives (Lee, 3).

Teachers who hold ableist beliefs are unlikely to practice pedagogy that is just; as their actions inadvertently sort students into different niches. Ableist beliefs hidden in a curriculum focused on the academics would support the channelling of certain students towards the natural sciences and humanities. It would also support directing students who are perceived to be of lesser ability towards subject options believed to be less mentally challenging. By so doing, teachers prevent some students from pursing subjects that prepare them for professions that are highly valued by the dominant groups in society. For example, Giselle does Math and English because they are compulsory subjects. She does Integrated Science because it is believed to be less challenging than Physics, Chemistry and Biology and she no longer has the option to study History, Literature, Geography and Spanish which she did in grade nine. This subject choice is likely to greatly narrow her options or may even prevent her from accessing tertiary level education.

I do less subjects now [*in Grade 10*] I do six. I do Electronic Document Preparation [*a business related course that teaches clerical skills*]Food and Nutrition, Math, English, Integrated Science and Theatre Arts [*Drama*] (Giselle, 5).

Ableism often results in limited or no accommodations for students with disabilities, contributing to lower academic achievement for these students. This may perpetuate prejudice against children with disabilities, as teachers relate poor performance to disability, rather than to lack of accommodations.

Lower levels of attainment restrict options for children with disabilities such as not being allowed to take more challenging academic subjects. Ableist beliefs cause teachers to see students with disabilities as less capable than their non-disabled peers. This narrow view results in many individuals with disabilities experiencing lower levels of education attainment and employment (Hehir, 2002).

*The Hidden Curriculum*

The hidden curriculum is defined as “the unintended knowledge, values and beliefs that are part of the learning process in schools” (Horn 2003, p. 298). The hidden curriculum transmits the unofficial messages about school and helps to support the academic and social agendas of schools (Ahwee *et al.* 2004, p. 26). This type of curriculum has not received as much attention as other types of curriculum such as the taught curriculum but it is important in shaping the beliefs, assumptions and behaviours of both teachers and students and it unobtrusively transmits the culture of the school and society. It is through the implied messages in the hidden curriculum that students come to understand issues of power, identity and efficacy (Horn, 2003).

Children learn from what they see, hear and experience and they come to understand who has power and who does not. They learn about identity; who people say they are and who they believe they are, and they come to an awareness of where they belong; and they learn about efficacy; who achieves goals that are valued and what needs to be done to achieve these goals (Horn 2003, p. 299). These lessons are not directly taught but students pick them up through their interactions with teachers, administration and other students.

The messages of intellectual competence sent through the hidden curriculum, can cause students to question their abilities and they may come to believe they are not smart enough because they don’t do things as quickly as other students, such as taking longer to understand concepts or to write notes. Amelia’s comments below suggest she believes she is not as smart as her classmates.

English is not my favourite subject. I don’t like grammar and essays. I can’t remember the rules and I can’t make sense of it. Sometimes it’s hard for me to remember things, it takes me a while to understand, and it takes me a longer time to think about things. I don’t feel I am as smart as the others (Amelia, 1).

There is also the unspoken message that learning is the student’s responsibility so students need to keep pace with the teacher. Giselle comments suggest that smart children are fast “My class is fast and so they are smartbut it is hard for me” (Giselle, 3). Both Giselle and Amelia seem to suggest they perceive themselves as not smart because of the messages and expectations sent through the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum also cues students on the dynamics of expected classroom behaviours and consequences as reflected in the following comments:

They [*teachers*] think I am very silent and they are usually nicer with the silent people because we don’t give them trouble (Megan, 3).

If you keep quiet it is not embarrassment, if you talk you can get embarrassed so I don’t talk in class (Giselle, 3).

In the hidden curriculum students are held to unspoken codes of behaviours. “The do’s and don’ts are not spelled out but everyone somehow knows them” (Myles and Simpson 2001, p. 280). Amelia has learned to be cautious in asking questions; a silly question is likely to elicit giggles from classmates. In order to protect her-self from the possibility of embarrassment she keeps quiet even if she does not understand.

I don’t actually ask a lot of questions because I don’t feel I am as smart as the others and maybe the answer is there but I really don’t see it so I feel afraid to ask in case I look silly in front of my classmates (Amelia, 3).

Intuition is integral to understanding the hidden curriculum (Redish, 2010) and social-cultural knowledge is likely to influence one’s intuition. Intuition made some students sensitive to the dynamics within their classrooms. For example, some students believed the smart students sit in a certain part of the classroom and ask smart questions. They also believed the teachers paid more attention to the smart students.

Teachers can send unintended messages to students because of the message they receive from the hidden curriculum. For example, the hidden curriculum could impress on teachers the importance of focusing on coverage of the content of the academic curriculum. The implication is; certain content must be covered by a certain time, regardless of students needs for more time or support. This can result in some students feeling their teachers do not care about helping them to understand, or do not have the time to give them extra attention. Giselle shared her frustration with accessing information from her teacher.

I take notes but it’s not effective. When I miss a paragraph the teacher won’t repeat. The math teacher… he says get it from your friends and this makes me feel angry because the teacher won’t give me the notes and it’s his job to give me the notes for me to learn. Sometimes I have gaps in my notes [*for another class*] because I don’t get it and the teacher says move on I’ll get it to you later but she never does (Giselle, 1).

The hidden curriculum sends many unintended messages such as: the message that students who go to the resource room are not smart. This perception is reflected in the comments made to Giselle’s by her classmates, “The children would say she is so bad at learning she has to go to her own room” (Giselle, 2).

The hidden curriculum when impacted by ableist views may support the belief that achievement is more important than effort. Students come to recognize what is expected, and where they stand when measured against these expectations. The hidden curriculum can send the message that students who do well academically are considered competent, and are popular in school. Giselle’s comments below suggest that although she believes she is a nice person “I am nice because I don’t hurt people’s feelings” (Giselle, 2); she does not believe she is popular among her classmates.

There is a good grade to me and there is a good grade to people. If I get fifty-nine that wouldn’t be great to the students but I think it’s good enough because you didn’t fail. Grades are more important than personality and the students only work with students who have good grades. This makes me feel mad and sometimes embarrassed (Giselle, 3).

She also believes that where students sit in the classroom suggests your importance in the classroom “There is a part of the classroom the teacher answers because they are smarter” [*implying she perceives herself as less smart and her questions are less likely to be addressed because she does not sit in that part of the classroom*] (Giselle, 3).

The hidden curriculum can also be reflected in the physical spaces of the school. For example in one school the resource room was located away from the classrooms and was situated near the sports centre toward the back of the school. This could give the impression that students do not do serious work there. This could also explain why the students visited the resource room during their lunch hour, in so doing they do not miss their serious classes. This demonstrates that exclusion occurs on many levels, socially, academically and geographically.

Some schools did not have a resource room or a similar support facility. The implication is that students who attend these schools do not need such support services; implying students who do need support are deficient in some way. The hidden curriculum implies children who attend these schools need to be able to function like everyone else. Non-classroom physical settings such as the canteen areas, bathrooms and walk ways also have hidden curricula and children learn who has dominance and power and who to avoid, who is accepted and who is rejected (Ahwee *et al.* 2004, p.28).

The cool people stay in a particular area near the sixth form block and they throw stuff at you if you go in that area. You know where I have lunch? - I sit near the back gate and no one troubles me (Giselle, 4).

Giselle’s experience seems to indicate that school geography can impact one’s sense of self and belonging and can result “in the construction of a geography of them and us” (Morgan 2000, p. 59). The hidden curriculum can transmit to students, messages about citizenship and dictates who belongs within formal boundaries, such as the sixth form block, and who has access to rights (Morgan, 2000). School geographies can promote inclusion or exclusion depending on where individuals perceive their position to be in the geographic space.

*Social Networks*

In relation to this research I consider social networks to be the groups of friendships the young adolescents create and maintain for various purposes. Social networks can provide social, emotional and cognitive supports (Weller 2007, p. 340) that adolescents need as they face the challenges associated with transitions. Social networks and the social supports they can provide have emerged as a significant factor in this research in the students’ experiences of high school. They appear to help student to be more resilient by acting as buffers for students as they navigate high school and can be considered to be a protective factor through helping to build students’ resilience. Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) define resilience as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p. 218).

High school is harder but fun, the best part is making friends. My friends read the hand-outs to me so I can understand it and help me, like lend me notes, test me with questions and stuff, ask the teacher to help me, they show me what to do; they notice if I am sad (Julianne, 5).

Social networks provided social supports for the participants and helped them to build their self-esteem by accepting them and including them in the group. LaBarber (2008) argues social supports enhance self-esteem and helps student who may be at risk for school failure to adapt to the requirements of school. Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) referred to Christopher Mruk’s definition of self-esteem as follows:

Self-esteem is dependent on two types of judgments: the extent to which one feels worthy of respect from others, and competent to face the challenges which lie ahead (Mruk, 1999 cited by Jindal-Snape and Miller, 2008 p. 218).

Essentially, self-esteem relates to how individuals perceive their own self-worth and their ability to handle the challenges of life. It can be argued that when students are members of a social network, their membership validates their self-worth in the group and enhances their self-esteem. Social networks act as external forces that encourage and support students with the challenges of high school. Inclusion in a group helps in meeting the basic psychological need to belong (Roffey, 2013) and having a sense of belonging has been associated with students’ academic achievement and social and emotional well-being (Roffey, 2013; Newman *et al*., 2007; Ma, 2003; Pavi and Monda- Amaya, 2001; and Beck and Malley, 1998). There appears to be a cyclical relationship between self-esteem and sense of belonging as each enhances the other (Ma, 2003).

Social networks defined as the links between and among friend that students create and maintain provide social supports and knowledge for students, and a place for students to belong. Belonging is the perception that one is “accepted, respected, included and supported” in the group (Ma 2003, p.340). These concepts of social networks, supports and belonging were previously discussed in chapter two but are revisited here because they emerged as significant features in helping students fit-in at high school and cope with the academic and social challenges. These concepts are connected as social networks supports belonging, and having a sense of belonging supports self-esteem as one compares oneself positively with others in the group. Julianne, Amelia and Giselle describe their social networks as providing a safe place for them to be and where they feel accepted and supported.

My friends never tease me, they make school fun; they are always there. I am really shy and my friends helped me to make friends in high school. My friends never teased me for going to resource room or whenever I have to leave class, but in prep school they [*the students*]use to tease me a lot and call me names, saying Julianne is stupid, but my friends really help and encourage me, they want me to be happy. They encourage me to go to the resource room when I am supposed to go (Julianne, 5).

I was not sure how people would react to me, but now I have made some friends and it doesn’t matter anymore. They make me feel comfortable about myself. They accept me. I feel a part of the group; we are all equal (Amelia, 5).

When I was in prep school I would get teased about it [*having ADHD*] and it made me feel bad, but in high school it’s easier because people don’t care and my friends don’t tease (Giselle, 5).

Individuals with LD have been found to be more likely to develop negative self-perception than their peers without LD (LaBarber, 2008) because of the challenges they may face academically and socially. For these reasons, having positive social networks are particularly important for these students if they are to be resilient in facing the challenges associated with transition.

Resilience is determined by how an individual perceives their risk factors and their protective factors (Bailey and Baines, 2012). I define risk as internal or external factors that present challenges to a child, and the degree of challenge is determined by both the level of risk presented and the level of resilience the child has. Risk factors and protective factors have both internal and external features (Jindal-Snape and Miller, 2008). Examples of internal risk factors for a child could be having a learning disability and low self-esteem and external protective factors can include having strong social support systems such as supportive family and peers.

Drawing on Bronfrenbrenner's model of human development, the peer micro system emerges as an important natural support system for adolescents who value the advice of their peers. Blackman (2010) argues children learn school and classroom cultures through interaction with peers so teachers should use these relationships to encourage positive behaviours. Some participants navigate high school with peers steering them through their experiences as Giselle describes below:

They help me to study, like they will explain things to me and they will explain how things work. They tell where my classes are because sometimes I forget where the class is, like what room it’s in. They helped me adjust to high school by being friendly, by telling me what’s going to happen and warning me (Giselle, 5).

The peer microsystem, which can be considered to be the students’ social networks, supported the students academically and socially and provided support that helped the students cope with the demands of high school. In this way, the students’ social networks acted as a significant protective external factor in helping the students adjust to high school. It is through friends that most students were able to access content information needed either by copying from their friends’ notes or having their friends explain concepts they did not grasp in class. Their friends also supported them in studying and preparing for tests and encouraged them to get help from teachers when possible. Amelia shares the strong support she received from her friends:

There is one I hang out with a lot she is like my personal teacher- she teaches me little songs or rhymes to remember things. I am not quite social but my friends help me, encourage me to do things and talk to people I would not usually talk to. My friends make going to high school better socially and educationally. I feel more comfortable socially- I am more willing to talk to other people (Amelia, 5).

Peer relationships are a vital part of the adolescent support system (Stanton-Salazar and Spina, 2005) influencing concepts of self-image and identity among group members as well as fostering feelings of connectedness and belonging and ultimately enhancing academic achievement. Through their social networks, students are inform about rules, academic assignments, social activities and possible dangers such as school bullies.

Peer relationships found in social networks provide multiple forms of social support and act as sounding boards for ideas, feelings and problems (Stanton-Salazar and Spina, 2005). The following comments demonstrate the many supports that students’ social networks provide. Megan receives academic support and explains “sometimes the teachers go too fast and you don’t get all of it down by the end of the class so I have to go to my friends and borrow their books” (Megan, 2). Ben uses his social network to gets information about social activities “the students had friends outside of school and so there was always some social event happening [*parties*] and you’d know about it” (Ben, 1).

Students who find school especially challenging are likely to seek emotional support from their social networks as reflected in the comments shared by Giselle “friends help make high school better, they make it fun and endurable so I can talk to somebody” (Giselle, 5). Lee’s comments seem to reflect a sense of isolation and exclusion that turning to friends help to alleviate “it’s nice to have other people around” (Lee, 5). With many schools facing the dangers of bullying, social networks can be an important source of support for vulnerable students as Giselle explains, “They would warm me about some students, to stay away from them, because they are bullies” (Giselle, 5).

The information students can access from their friends is a critical factor that affects their transition experience (Akos 2002, p. 340) as friendships are a significant source of social support. Pahl (2000) is cited by Weller (2007) as saying “having someone as a friend is a form of power, which those without close friendships do not have” (p. 162). The students’ social networks were life-lines in the students’ transition experiences supporting the argument that friendships are important for survival in high school (Ganeson and Ehrich 2009, p. 68).

This research, like work done by Waters *et al.* (2012), found that girls tended to rely more on their friends for social and emotional support as well as, academic support. The boys relied on their friendships more for social benefits, and to a lesser extent for academic support. It was interesting that both boys in this research indicated they rarely asked for academic support from their peers while the girls indicated that this was something they did regularly and credited their ability to keep up in school with the academic support they received from their girl-friends. The boys spoke about engaging in activities such as parties, playing football, games or going for walks. Girls also placed value on intrinsic qualities such as trust, loyalty and sense of fairness while boys focused on extrinsic qualities in friendships such as engagement in activities (Blackman, 2010). For clarity and to maintain anonymity I have called Ben’s previous school City and his present school Parkview.

The students [*at* *City*] had friends outside of school and so there was always some social event happening and you’d know about it. I had much, much, more friends than at Parkview. Not only friends but I knew a lot of people at City but at Parkview I don’t have too many friends. It is hard to make friends, it is so small, it is hard to make friends because you have to hang out with your class and there are only about 14 boys and about 20 girls. At City I had 40 boys in my class, each grade had 5 classes and each class had 40 boys whereas at Parkview there are only two classes and each has only about 25 students- boys and girls so I don’t have as many boys to mix with. I don’t mind having less boys because I like having the girls in class. At Parkview the social life is horrible. They are cliques even in class the girls sit on one side and the boys sit on one side (Ben, 1).

The girls tended to select friends who were from similar social backgrounds to themselves. This is likely to enhance the level of trust, loyalty and reciprocity between and among the friends; allowing easier access to the social capital among the group members. Coleman (1988) argues actors are purposeful in the relationships they establish (S105).

I only talk to people who look like me, well not look like me but act like me. Like they are funny but they study. They behave well and they listen. I don’t talk tobhutus [*A slang term referring to someone whose behaviour, speech, or way of dressing is considered to be vulgar or uncouth*] (Giselle, 2).

Giselle’s perception of her classmates implies those who are not like her do not know the rules of the game. Her social capital ensures she understands what kinds of behaviours are valued in school. Gale and Densmore (2000) argue schools are structured around middle-class norms (p. 117) and Bourdieu sees this structuring of schools as ensuring the reproduction of social capital among a small privileged group.

The social networks that students create in high schools and the supports and benefits they receive from these relationships are likely to significantly impact how students experience high school and how they perceive these experiences. The students’ stories suggest that when students are able to establish positive social networks, the supports they receive from these networks, help tremendously in enabling them to handle the challenges, and discontinuities of transition.

*Conclusion*

The aim of this research was to access students’ perspectives of transitioning to high school. Through the use of interviews I was able to gain a view into the students’ school experiences and by using thematic analysis to analyse their comments I was able to identify themes that highlighted certain factors that are likely to influence the students perceptions of high school.

What emerged was that while transitioning to high school was perceived as a positive experience, the students experienced several similar challenges in high school. Some challenges were typically associated with transitioning such as discontinuities and having to adjust to a different demands, expectations and environments. However some challenges were imposed by ableist assumptions and a lack of accommodation such as, assuming all students have the linguistic skills schools value, not providing note takers for students for whom note taking is difficult, and not utilizing technology that could assist students’ learning. Ableist assumptions were pervasive in some teachers’ pedagogical practices and this placed students at a disadvantage in the classroom as they tried to comply with normative expectations.

The research questions will be revisited and discussed in chapter six. In this chapter, the impact of social capital on students’ school experiences has emerged as being significant. Social capital allowed students to have the knowledge, skills and intuition necessary to understand the hidden curriculum and to form social networks. Social networks existing in students’ peer microsystem provided a place where students could experience a sense of belonging and build their resilience to tackle challenges.

When students perceive learning to be boring, teachers need to look critically at what they do and ask themselves if the pedagogy they practice reflects best practices and if they are relevant to today’s students. Schools also need to recognise and change ableist attitudes that may negatively affect students’ experiences of school.

**CHAPTER SIX**

**Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion**

*Introduction*

This is a qualitative insider research focused on investigating the transition experiences of six students who have been identified as having LD and or ADHD. The purpose of this research was to examine these students’ perspectives of transitioning to high school in order to have a better understanding of the challenges students with LD and or ADHD may experience in high school. These students attend traditional high schools in Jamaica. Traditional high schools offer an academic curriculum and are believed to “represent the best promise for upward social mobility” (Evans 2001, p.12).

This research investigates transition, disability and the secondary school experience within the Jamaican context. In chapter one, it was stated that the Jamaican government recognizes that children with LD and or ADHD are attending regular schools, and are largely unsupported (Vision 2030 Jamaica: Education Sector Plan, 2009). Many of these students are attending high schools. The prevalence of LD and ADHD in the school system was determined to be approximately 7% for LD (Dixon and Matalon, 2009) and 3% for ADHD (Pottinger, 2010). Through listening to experiences of the students identified with LD and ADHD, I hope to highlight the challenges these students experience in school and identify the kinds of accommodations that may be needed at the secondary level for students with disabilities.

The literature on transitions suggests transition provides both opportunities and challenges for children and is associated with creating a series of discontinuities as a result of academic, procedural and social changes. Children’s ability to manage the challenges associated with transitioning is affected by many factors including: their level of resilience and the support received from their microsystems; their ability to exercise their agency, perceptions of disability, their social capital and sense of belonging.

It has been argued that resilience is one’s ability to positively adapt to adversity (Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008). Transition experiences can be influenced by how resilient students are and the level of support they receive from their social networks. Bronfenbrenner’s concept of microsystems in children’s development, suggests the peer microsystem found in students social networks, can act as protective factors through the supports they provide. This is likely to help children to be more resilient and able to cope with the challenges of transitions.

The reconceptualization of children as active social agents has been argued in chapters one and three. As social agents, they are capable of purposefully creating and maintaining social networks that provide them with social capital. This social capital can help them navigate the challenges they experience in school. Social capital and a sense of belonging emerged as frameworks through which to understand the students’ stories about school and their transition experiences.

Perspectives on disability were discussed in chapter two and the medical and social models were presented. It has been argued that special education often reflects the medical model through its practice of identification and classification of individuals with disabilities and its focus on needs. However, with the move towards inclusion, the social model appears to be a more relevant and just model as disability is seen as being created by oppressive and exclusionary practices imposed on persons with disabilities, by society. Perceptions of disability can therefore impact how society responds to persons with disabilities and is likely to influence how accommodating schools are likely to be for students with disabilities. This is so because schools reflect society. If inclusion is to be experienced as more than a physical placement then the social model of disability must influence the views of educators and policy makers.

I have argued that disability can impact social capital. To reiterate, disability can impact one’s ability to access and build social capital. Individuals with disabilities may have smaller social networks to access, have less capital with which they can reciprocate favours, demand more than they can give back and may therefore be viewed as being less trustworthy. This can make it more difficult for them to access large amounts of social capital and to increase their own levels of social capital.

Social capital as presented from the perspectives of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam provide benefits and supports that can help children navigate high school. I have argued that children benefit from their parents’ social capital, as well as create and build their own, through accessing bonding and bridging capital that exists within and beyond their social networks. Thinking through the student’s stories, it can be suggested that the children’s social networks provide connections to other students and support feelings of belonging which significantly influenced how students perceive their experiences of school.

Students’ social networks can act as reservoirs of social capital which can provide access to supports and valuable information. This in turn can provide students with the social energy they need to navigate the academic and social aspects of high school. Through accessing their social capital, students are able to expand their personal capital by accessing bridging capital through their networks (friends of friends). Through these extended friendships, students are able to increase their knowledge and resources, and thereby increase their level of social capital.

It can be argued that when students have weak social networks, they are unlikely to feel a strong sense of belonging and are unable to access the kinds of resources they need to navigate high school effectively. This may result in disengagement, low motivation for learning and greater challenges in transitioning to secondary school.

*Discussion*

As an insider ethnographic researcher, I was focused on understanding how the participants in this research experienced high school. I sought to have an authentic view of the transition experiences of students with disabilities by being privy to their experiences. I gained access to the students’ world through the use of structured and semi-structured interviews that provided opportunities for me to listen to the students’ voices and to hear about school as they experienced it. Listening from a position of epistemological privilege (Shah, 2006), as a parent of a child with a disability and as a special educator, I believe provided an advantage in being able to understand the students’ point of view.

The information that was collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis which involved coding the information, inductively and deductively identifying patterns or specific themes under which the information could be reduced and examined for similarities, differences and general themes. Four general themes emerged and these were: pedagogy, ableism, the hidden curriculum and social networks. These themes can be understood through the theories of social capital and sense of belonging.

Social capital is likely to be found in large amounts among the dominant groups in society. As a result, these groups have the power to shape social institutions in ways that protect their status and capital. Schools can be described as social institutions that “represent the interests of dominant social groups” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 86) and as such they perpetuate these interests through the types of curricula they present to students. Through both the intended academic curriculum and the hidden curriculum schools help to preserve social capital in the hands of the elite. The pursuit of a narrow academic curriculum is likely to encourage the use of traditional methods of pedagogy and perpetuate ableist assumptions. This can cause students who have disabilities to feel unaccommodated and excluded from the learning environment.

Schools may also transmit certain values and beliefs through their hidden curriculum that may cause some students to feel as if they don’t belong. Having a sense of belonging has been presented as being integral to network building. Belonging fosters connectedness and enhances relationship building thereby facilitating trust and feelings of obligations; factors that are integral to the flow of social capital among group members. Having a sense of belonging can be considered a necessary antecedent to successful learning experiences (Beck and Malley, 1998) as students who do not feel as if they belong are unlikely to feel motivated to participate in an environment they perceive as exclusive. This is supported by the following comments, “I don’t really like school, it’s more focused on students who don’t have LD than on students that have them” (Lee, 1) and “I sleep in classes because they are boring” (Lee, 3). Dis-belonging is likely to contribute to feelings of loneliness, academic disengagement and low levels of motivation for learning.

Social capital provides social supports for students. Conversely, when students have small amounts of social capital they are likely to have less support, and consequently lower level of social energy with which to engage with their environment.

Positive social networks can combat feelings of isolation and exclusion, and have emerged as powerful sources of support and capital for students with disabilities. These students can use social networks to help mitigate the challenges they face in school and they can provide a place for the students to belong. Peer friendships, existing in social networks, created for most of the participants in this research, a sense of belonging which resulted in strong feelings of connection to their schools. The following comments are repeated here because I believe they support this interpretation.

I was not sure how people would react to me, but now I have made some friends and it doesn’t matter anymore. They make me feel comfortable about myself. They accept me. I feel a part of the group. We are all equal. (Amelia, 5)

I feel accepted at school like people understand me. I would say the whole school is my friend. I feel more comfortable socially. (Julianne, 5)

In analysing the information, it became apparent that there was a cyclical pattern in the analysis as the information that emerged pointed to themes and the themes helped to explain the information that emerged. For example, the traditional method of lecturing and note taking were the main pedagogical methods used by many of the teachers of the students involved in this research. This method supports ableist assumptions that everyone has the same competence in linguist skills. The unspoken message transmitted to students through the hidden curriculum suggests that linguistic skills are valued by society and students are expected to demonstrate linguistic competence. Where little or no accommodations are made for differences in students’ learning as well as to adjust to ableist assumptions, students must rely on their social networks to provide support and information. Support can be academic, social or emotional; information provides knowledge. Both supports and information can be considered types of capital that the students can use to engage with the traditional methodologies that are used in schools.

To reiterate, the main findings from this research suggests the students’ experiences of high school were impacted by pedagogical practices, ableist assumptions, the agenda of the hidden curriculum and the nature of the students’ social networks. In considering the main findings the traditional pedagogical method of presenting information through lectures, and having students take notes, was found to be the least desirable method of learning for the students. The students found listening to lectures a boring and passive activity. The lecture method should not be seen as totally without value, as it is a major avenue of learning in higher education. Students therefore need to be shown the benefits of this method of learning and be taught active listening skills.

Active listening involves concentrating on what is heard, analysing the information, and evaluating it (Price, 1999). Active listening can be challenging for students who may have difficulty with attending to information such as those identified as having ADHD and is therefore a skill that is important for these students to learn.

Teachers could also accommodate students identified with LD and ADHD by integrating the use of more technology in the curriculum as this may more effectively engage students in learning by presenting information through multiple pathways. Riera (2010) argues the revolution in technology has created a mismatch between the way teachers teach in the classroom and the way children learn outside the classroom. Teachers need to re-evaluate their dependence on traditional methods which can lead to rote memorization and disengagement and find ways to integrate technology in their pedagogy and engage Generation Z, that cohort of students born after the 1990’s.

Related to pedagogy is the type of learning experiences students are often expected to engage in. The students in this research indicated a preference for group learning because they felt “you don’t have to do the work by yourself and it is more fun when you have someone to talk to “(Lee, 2) and “when I study with friends I remember stuff because my friends talk about it” (Giselle, 1).

Learning is a social activity as people generally learn through seeing and doing. Co-operative learning activities are therefore likely to support learning because of the opportunities it offers to learn from the group. Cooperative learning activities have been associated with enhancing students’ self-esteem, encouraging participation in class, developing high order cognitive skills, and allowing students with disabilities to participate in group learning (Blackman, 2010).

Cooperative learning encourages the building of student networks and by extension can help to increase students’ social capital. Chuang *et al.* (2012) argues learning and friendships are relevant. Cooperative learning requires collaboration; and effective collaboration is most likely to occur among good friends (p.227).

The dynamics that occurs in students’ social networks and students’ willingness to learn from each other should not be lost on teachers. Teachers should recognise that peer relationships increase in significance during adolescence and that these relationships can play a significant role in students’ attitude toward school and in their sense of belonging and engagement (Faircloth and Hamm, 2011). Teachers should therefore capitalize on peer group networks as a means of engaging students and enhancing their learning experiences. Blackman (2010) found the social context of the classroom, and the affective domain of learning influenced the learning experiences of students with dyslexia (p.9).

The participants shared their frustration with the volume of notes they had to take and some found it difficult to listen and write simultaneously. Note taking is an important skill especially for students who wish to pursue tertiary education. This research highlights the importance of teaching students how to become strategic note takers and the importance of building homework and study skills (Akos, 2002).

Schools need to accommodate students learning by addressing the challenges of note taking. Students who have language based disabilities, and or attention problems, are likely to benefit from instruction in how to take notes effectively and efficiently. Some students may benefit from taping lectures which they can later transcribe, and some students may take more efficient notes if they are allowed to use a computer to type and benefit from the spell-check feature. Notes can also be emailed to students or given as hand-outs, and note-takers could be provided for students who experience difficulty with writing, such as students who have been identified as having dysgraphia. Teachers need to talk to students and listen to them so that they understand what method of accessing class notes students find most helpful.

Schools should also examine their homework policies and reflect on why homework is given, how much homework is appropriate for student to get and the type of homework assigned. It can be argued that children, like adults, need down time and there needs to be a healthy balance between time devoted to homework and time for engaging in other types of activities that are beneficial to children.

Ableist assumptions can create obstacles to student’s learning in the ways that are most effective for them and can result in exclusionary practices. Schools need to be aware of ableist assumptions that they may impose on students with disabilities; such as requiring students to write their notes instead of type them, and not allowing extra time to complete tests and assignments for students who have been identified as having LD, and who may have difficulty with processing information.

Educators need to be more accepting of student differences and encourage an inclusive attitude in schools so that the spectrum of learners in the classroom can be accommodated. As educational policies encourage more inclusion, schools need to examine practices that can be perceived as exclusionary as inclusive education demands education that meets the needs of diverse students (Bergsma, 2000).

Including students with disabilities in regular schools is more than offering a physical space, it should also allow for these students to access the same opportunities to learning that other students are able to access. This is likely to require schools to be more accommodating of student diversity and to accept that some students may need different ways to reach the same goals or they may need to have different goals. The ethos of schools should reflect a climate of respect and acceptance so that all learners feel as if they belong. Booker (2004) found that school culture was critical to the development of a sense of belonging and ultimately to academic success for African American students (p. 132). This is also likely to be the case for students with disabilities. A school’s culture and its ethos can encourage or discourage feelings of belonging and these attitudes are likely to be reflected in the hidden curriculum and reflected in the school’s practices and policies.

In Jamaica, the hidden curriculum in many traditional high schools reflect our colonial past, and perpetuates the transmission of certain values from one generation to the next (Wren, 1999), such as, transmitting the perception that speaking English is better than speaking Jamaican Creole/ Patois. The hidden curriculum also teaches that teachers hold power and are active and directive while students have little power and are passive and reactive (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 92). Students may also come to understand that individuals with large amounts of social capital are more significant than individuals with small amounts of social capital, the former are likely to receive benefits that the latter are denied as “you cannot choose what is not available nor what you do not have the capital to secure” (Gale and Densmore 2000, p. 95).

The hidden curriculum can also send the message that normality is better than disability and that academic achievement is valued more than other types of achievements. The way students perceive the messages sent through the hidden curriculum can influence their perceptions about school climate, themselves and ultimately their sense of belonging.

Positive social networks are a critical feature of students’ transition experiences as they provide supportive interpersonal relationships. These relationships have been found to ease the stressors that are associated with transitioning (Tomada *et al.,* 2005). Children actively increase their social capital through building social networks and these networks become sources of social support and social energy. Children’s social networks provide places for them to experience feelings of belonging and respect and help students to be resilient in facing the challenges of transitioning to high school. A sense of belonging has been shown to be critical in students’ perception of their place in their learning environment and impacts motivation to learn. Because learning is a social activity, schools need to recognize the potential within students’ social networks to enhance students’ school experiences and to promote feelings of belonging.

Social networks can act as sources of empowerment for students by supporting their academic achievement and enhancing their social and emotional well-being. Schools should therefore actively create opportunities for students to engage in activities that are likely to develop positive peer groups and social networks such as fostering a sense of community in the classroom, encouraging learning in groups through group activities and projects, as well as encouraging students to become members of clubs, sports teams and to participate in other extra-curricular activities.

Children’s social capital can be conceptualized as a puzzle with four pieces: a sense of belonging, trust, reciprocity and social networks. When all the pieces of the puzzle fit together, children can use their social capital to access benefits. Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) argues, it is only when the significance of belonging, social networks, trust and reciprocity are recognized that children’s social capital can be appreciated.

*The Research Questions*

This research sought to answers the following research questions:

* What are students’ perspectives of transitioning to high school?
* What supports do students received and what supports are perceived as helpful?
* Does gender influenced perceptions of transition experiences?
* How does social capital, social networks and a sense of belonging impact students’ transition experiences?
* What are the implications for the future?

In reflecting on the students’ stories and my first research question: What are students’ perceptions of transitioning to high school? I was surprised to find that most of the participants liked going to high school in spite of the challenges they experienced. The students perceived high school as more stressful and more academically challenging than preparatory school. Most of them felt they were capable of handling these challenges because of the support they received from friends and family. This perception of high school is supported by much of the literature on transition as the literature suggests, adolescents generally experience transitioning as a challenging period characterised by stress, anxiety, adaptations and often a decline in motivation (Topping, 2011; Benner, 2011; Brewin and Statham, 2011; Smith *et el.,* 2008; Barber and Olsen, 2004 and Eccles *et al.,* 1993).

The students’ perception of high school seemed to be significantly influenced by their social interactions. They liked the social aspects of high school and felt students were generally more supportive of them; they reported experiencing less teasing than when they attended preparatory school. They felt friendship was important and many of them used their friends for academic support; this would suggest that the friendships that exist in students’ social networks seem to play a significant role in how students’ experience high school.

The students perceived many of their teachers as unsupportive and uninterested in them, and found learning to be often boring. This suggests a mix-match between teacher pedagogy and today’s generation of students. These students preferred to be more actively engaged in learning and were more comfortable with using technology for learning. The findings suggest that the students’ teachers could make more efficient use of technology in the classroom as the students reported they only use the computer for conducting research. Some students found these types of assignments confusing as they found it difficult to sift through the volume of information available on the internet and to identify the pertinent information.

The research findings suggest students with a disability, at the high school level, receive very little support from teachers. Giselle explained that although her mother writes to her teachers telling them about her having ADHD and requesting certain accommodations, “they don’t do anything about it like giving me extra time” (Giselle, 2). This disregard by teachers could be related to several factors including: the pursuit of a narrow academic curriculum aimed at normative students and pedagogical practices shaped by ableist beliefs that expect students to conform and perform like everyone else.

Internal risk factors such as disability can impact student learning and may be compounded by external risk factors such as lack of accommodations. Expectations of completing large volumes of work, taking effective notes, learning many subjects, and relating to different teachers were perceived as stressful factors. Challenges experienced with writing, spelling, processing information, organization skills, and attention problems made it difficult for some students to keep up with the work load and to access information from class lectures; placing students at risk of falling behind.

In considering my second research question: What supports do students receive and what supports do students perceive as helpful? I found, most of the participants received very little support in the form of accommodations, from their teachers. Some teachers were perceived as being unfair, demanding, uncaring and lacking understanding. As a result, the students perceived their schools to be unaccommodating places.

It can be suggested that teachers’ understanding of how students’ perceive their teachers and their classroom experiences should cause educators to be more reflective of their practices, and the impact these may have on students. The literature does show that teachers’ actions can influence students’ sense of belonging in the classroom (Ma, 2003; and Pavi and Monda-Amaya, 2001). “A pedagogy of belonging emphasizes the importance of the teacher-student relationship and actively involves all students in the life of the classroom and school community” (Beck and Malley 1998, p.135).

The students’ responses suggest many teachers are stuck in pedagogical practices that effectively exclude some students from the learning experience, and which contribute to feelings of dis-belonging. I believe many teachers in the classroom are influenced by ableist assumptions. These assumptions support the view that disability is a deficit rather than a difference. A focus on deficit can impede the provision of accommodations, as teachers focus on what students cannot do, rather than on what they can do. Ableist beliefs are likely to discourage making accommodations for students with disabilities, as students are expected to learn in the same way that non-disabled students learn. The resultant failure to accommodate students with disabilities in the classroom demonstrates an unwillingness to embrace student diversity.

The students’ stories suggest they received a great deal of support from their friends; and peer networks seemed integral to a positive school experience. Most of the students tried to keep-up with their class through the support of friends which leads me to think teachers should make greater use of peers to engage students in learning. This can be done through greater use of cooperative learning activities and encouragement of friendships and networks among students.

My third research question looked at whether or not students’ perceptions of school were influenced by gender. The research findings did not support gender as a major factor that influenced how the students perceived their transition experiences, as they all shared similar experiences. This however, could be influenced by the fact that most participants attended single sex schools. Only one participant attended a co-educational school and this participant liked the fact that girls were at his school. He felt this was a positive factor in his transition experience although he explained that the girls tended to stick together; suggesting the girls were unlikely to have had a primary influence on his day to day experiences.

Regardless of gender, transitioning to high school was generally perceived as exciting and challenging. It could be argued however, that gender may influence how social networks are perceived. The girls tended to see their social networks as sources of academic and emotional support, while the boys perceived their networks as sources of social activity. The boys who participated in this research stated they rarely sought academic support from their friends, but socially they did a lot together. The girls reported regularly getting notes from their friends, and studying together. The girls were also more selective in the friends they chose, and they all said their friends were like them; the similarity being they were from similar social backgrounds.

This supports Coleman’s view of norms as a type of social capital, and his arguments of how closure supports norms. The girls’ social networks benefits from the fact that they share similar norms, and they can hold each other to certain expectations through exercising closure. The boys tended to have a more extensive range of friends, and their social networks are more reflective of Putnam’s view in that their networks are built through both bonding and bridging capitals. The boys’ networks had an outward focus that is, they were friends because of things they were able to do both inside and outside of school. This could relate to the community aspect of social capital that Putnam argues. Having considered these different perspectives of social network it can be argued that gender may have some influence on how students perceived the function of their social networks.

My fourth research question looked at the impact that social capital, social networks and sense of belonging may have on students’ perceptions of their transition experiences. The findings of this research indicate that social capital found in the students’ social networks, and a sense of belonging emerged as significant factors in students’ transition experiences. The students’ frequently used the social capital in their networks, in the form of academic and social supports, to cope with the demands of high school. Social capital, made up of social obligations (Bourdieu, 1986), enabled the students to access from their network the types of supports they need in high school such as: proper notes, support in studying for tests, help in homework and projects, and knowledge about events and activities.

Social networks provided a sense of belonging that helped these students feel a sense of connectedness and attachment to their schools in spite of academic challenges. Roffey (2013) argues belonging is critical to resilience. I argue resilience is necessary for successful transition outcomes.

Belonging also enhances the nature of interactions within social networks, as the greater the sense of belonging, the greater the sense of connectedness is likely to be, and the greater the sense of obligations to the social network. It can be suggested that a sense of belonging enhances the quality of social capital that is available to students in their social network because social capital is accessed through connectedness, and obligations. If students have poor interaction with network members, they are unlikely to be able to access the levels of social support the network can provide.

The theory of belonging is therefore significant in supporting the theory of social capital in this research. I believe both theories present a way to understand how students come to have generally positive perceptions of high school in spite of obvious challenges, and the limited accommodations they experience. The girls in this research seemed to have a stronger sense of belonging, and felt a strong connection to their school. Perhaps, this is because they also had strong family ties to their school and therefore a strong sense of obligation.

To reiterate, social capital exists in social networks. Bourdieu (1986) argues individuals invest consciously and unconsciously in relationships to build their social networks in order to benefit from these relationships when needed. The students in this research actively built their social networks at school, and consciously and unconsciously used them when they needed. Social networks both support and are supported by a sense of belonging. When students have a strong sense of belonging they are likely to have access to large amounts of social capital and have more positive experiences of transitioning. Belonging also provides a geographic anchor that help students to feel connected and invested in their school.

My final question focused on implications for the future. In reflecting on the stories the students told about school, I believe high schools need to be transformed so that they can become more supportive places for all students. This is likely to require that all major stakeholders focus their attention on what happens in our high schools at the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, schools need to establish themselves as communities of learners. All learners need to be respected and their differences valued. Schools need to encourage more positive student to student relationships, and student to teacher relationships, so that all students perceive themselves as part of a closely connected community. This is likely to provide students with access to larger amounts of social capital since being a member of a well-connected community is believed to provide greater benefits (Putnam, 2000). This suggests that school practices and policies need to encourage a sense of belonging and be more sensitive and responsive to students’ needs.

In order for this to become a reality, teachers need to present instructions that are responsive to student diversity and provide instructional opportunities that can be adapted to diverse learners (Krorger and Bauer, 2004). Teachers also need to use technology effectively to motivate, and engage this generation of technologically savvy students in learning. Teachers need to see a child’s learning problem as their teaching problem (Goodley 2011, p. 152) and reflect on their practices to see how they can provide equal access and opportunities for all their students. This is likely to require that the curricula be less tied to normative expectations and be “diversified to such an extent that it meets the learning needs of all students” (Bergsma 2000, p. 15).

At the macro levels, policies need to be instituted that support students before, during, and after transitioning to high school. This is likely to require a closer relationship between the primary and secondary systems so that students transition smoothly from primary to secondary education.

Schools, as an extension of society, need to actively remove obstacles that are placed in the way of persons with disabilities, as well as discourage ableist practices. This is particularly important as more students with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms.

*Reflexivity*

Reflecting on this research, the participants and their stories have impacted me at a personal, professional and theoretical level. On a personal level I started this research with certain questions in mind and a personal interest in the topic. I realised I wanted to know if traditional high schools had changed over the past two decades in their approach to students with disabilities and if so how much? I also wanted to know how students with disabilities, who attended these types of secondary schools, perceived their school experiences and to what extent social capital may have impacted their experiences. In listening to the participants’ stories I am reminded of how slowly change occurs. The accounts these students shared could have been given by my daughter twenty years ago, and it is sad to recognise that in terms of ableist beliefs and the hidden curriculum, little seems to have changed in how traditional high schools function.

The onus for learning still remains largely on the student. Students with disabilities are expected to change, and to fit into environments that fail to understand, or to regard their learning differences. The students’ stories reflect teacher’s continued reluctance to make accommodations for students with disabilities. This could be because of inculcated ableist assumptions, or perhaps it is because most high schools do not have teachers who are trained to work with students with special needs (Morris, 2011), and therefore they genuinely do not know what to do to adequately accommodate student diversity, and so they ignore students’ needs or hope that somehow the students will be able to cope. Furthermore, society still holds negative views about disability and schools as agents of society may not see the need to make accommodations in the general classrooms for students with disabilities.

This suggests that traditional schools’ culture need to change, and teachers need more training; either in-service or at the level of the teachers colleges; in how to accommodate student diversity and differentiate instruction. Principals also need to hold their staff to higher levels of expectation for student outcomes, and go to greater lengths to include all students in the life of the school. Until all students are valued, and until teachers are able to differentiate their instruction in ways that engage all students in learning, it is likely that traditional schools will remain unwelcoming places for students with disabilities.

The students in this research were fully aware of the importance of academic proficiency and some felt they were not as intelligent as they classmates because they struggled to keep up. The students’ perception of themselves was impacted by the messages they received from the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum acculturates in students the values, rituals and routines of wider society (Goodley 2011, p.138). Traditional high schools are perceived by society as the best avenue to tertiary education because of their focus on transmitting an academic curriculum. As a result, the hidden curriculum of many traditional high schools is likely to send the message that academically proficient students are of more value, and are more deserving of teachers’ time and school resources. I believe this message perpetuates unjust school environments for students with disabilities. This injustice is especially evident when schools present these expectations to all students without providing accommodations for students who may need support in order to meet these expectations.

In reflecting on the children’s stories, what impacted me was how resilient the students were in the face of such challenges. Most of the students were intent on doing their best in school in spite of the challenges they were experiencing. This is likely related to the impact of social capital on their experiences of school. Social capital available in the students’ families and the students’ social networks are likely to be sources of supports for students that encourage them to persist and to achieve. I also recognise that all the participants were middle class students and therefore came to school possessing the kinds of culture, values and norms that tradition high schools value. This possibly contributed to these students ability to establish strong social networks that they could use as supports in school.

On a professional level, I was challenged by the stories I heard from these participants. The students often spoke about how stressed they felt but mostly they were disappointed and frustrated with many of the teachers they had. As a teacher I am saddened to hear how often teachers fail students through implementing pedagogy that is ineffective on many levels. The participants shared stories that were often poignant and presented teachers in an un-complementary light. Some teachers were described as authoritarian and uncaring, as showing favouritism, being ill-prepared and unable to control the class, and presenting lessons that were boring or that the students could not see as relevant. I believe educators need to give credence to these harsh comments and address them where possible.

As a teacher educator I feel challenged to help prepare future teachers for the diversity that is evident in today’s classrooms and to help novice teachers understand the importance of being socially just in the classroom. Teachers need to respect and value each student, understand different kinds of learners and be equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to engage students across a range of abilities, cultures and interests.

I believe teachers’ colleges need to do a better job of preparing teachers for the realities of today’s classroom. Perhaps entry requirements and the criterion for prospective applicants need to be re-evaluated; the curriculum at the teachers’ colleges needs to be examined; and novice teachers need support through strong mentorship to further hone their skills so that all students receive the best education Jamaica can offer. The argument as to whether teachers are born or are made cannot be addressed here but one must reflect on a system that seems to put into schools teachers who fail to teach effectively. The students’ stories suggest many teachers are lacking in their ability to both engage students in learning, and in making students feel a sense of membership and belonging in their classroom and in school.

On a theoretical level, this research has challenged me to question my position on disability. Although I have been a special educator for many years, I realized I had never consciously considered my theoretical position on disability before now. In reading the literature on disability, I realized my position on disability had unconsciously been formed on the medical model of disability. In doing this research, I realized that my philosophy was now more in line with the social model of disability as I had to recognize that society presents many unnecessary challenges to individuals with disabilities. The children’s stories demonstrated, how the restrictions and lack of accommodations experienced at school, created obstacles to their learning; and how negative perceptions of disability affect the school climate and how students experience school.

In reflecting on the analytical themes of pedagogy, hidden curriculum, ableism and social networks, I recognize how closely associated they are with the theories of social capital and belonging. It can be argued that social capital impacts teacher’s pedagogy and schools’ curricula because social capital is the power that shape how schools function, and what schools do. Social networks can provide supports that are a type of social capital. Social capital is built and accessed through social networks, therefore social capital, and social networks, are closely related concepts. Social networks also provide a place for students to experience belonging.

I have also come to see how ableist assumptions may be influenced by social capital since certain values and attributes that are forms of capital may perpetuate ableist beliefs and assumptions. For example, the English language can be considered a form of capital because it can provide academic and economic benefits. Ableist assumptions may lead to the expectation that all students should “speak and understand English” (Craig, 2006, p. 29) equally well. This expectation is supported by the hidden curriculum where students come to know they are expected to speak and write English in school because it is associated with intelligence and prestige.

In most schools, there is no indication in the curriculum that English is in fact a second language for most Jamaican students (Craig, 2006). This too, may be linked to ableist assumptions. I have previously argued that ableist assumptions may ignore students’ disabilities and require students to perform ‘normally’ such as to write rather than tape notes or do a written exam rather than an oral exam thereby presenting unnecessary challenges to students who have LD and or ADHD. Ableist assumptions can also negatively impact the sense of belonging that students with disabilities in traditional high schools may feel through presenting a school ethos and supporting certain practices that values only normalcy and academic supremacy.

In reflection on the journey, and the findings of this research, I believe both can have an impact at the policy level. In terms of the research journey I found some schools to have been uncooperative and unwilling to become involved in research that focused on students with disabilities. This could suggest that some children are believed to be more important than others in the school system and that the societal attitudes toward disability continue to be negative (Vision 2030, Persons with Disabilities 2009, p.8).

As Jamaica moves toward a more inclusive educational system, these negative attitudes must be addressed. There needs to be increased public education on issues concerning disability and more in-service training must be provided for teachers in schools. The findings from this research suggests that at the macro level, policies need to be put into place that protect the rights of children with disabilities to receive equal access to learning. A transition policy needs to be created to facilitate a smooth transition of students from the primary to the secondary system, and supports for students with disabilities need to be provided at the high school level if inclusion is to be successful.

*Recommendations*

This research has identified some challenges experienced in school by a group of six students identified with having LD and ADHD. The students attended four different high schools but their concerns and experiences were remarkably similar which could suggest that certain practices in high schools may be generalised across the secondary system. These practices promote inequality and marginalization of some students.

The following recommendations are suggested as a response to the findings of the research. I believe they could support positive changes at the secondary level and allow all students to experience schools as places where they are accepted, and where they have equal access. The recommendations are placed under the categories of social policy, professional practice and pedagogical applications.

*Social Policy*

1. There needs to be greater public education on issues of disability aimed at reducing negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities and increasing public knowledge and awareness of disability.
2. There needs to be a national transition policy. Such a policy will hold schools accountable for the successful transitioning of students from primary to secondary school. This policy needs to establish a link between the final years of primary school and the early years of secondary school so that students have the skills, both academic and social, for successful transfer to the secondary level of education. Failure to develop and implement a transition policy will result in an individual approach to transition and the continuation of the present situation where some students are left to sink or swim in the secondary system.
3. The policy on disability needs to be passed into a law so that the rights of persons with disabilities are safeguarded.
4. There needs to be more specially trained teachers placed in the general education classrooms. These teachers should provide academic support to students with disabilities as well as professional support to the class teacher. Placing students with disabilities in general education classroom without providing supports for the student and the teacher is likely to be a recipe for failure.

*Professional Practice*

1. Teacher colleges need to prepare prospective teachers for the diversity of today’s classroom. This is likely to require more than teaching content and methodology. Today’s teachers must be reflective and flexible; they must understand disability, disadvantage and difference in order to meet the needs of a diverse classroom.
2. The quality of teachers in the secondary system need to be evaluated. All teachers at the secondary level should be highly trained in their area of speciality as well as have teacher training. This will increase the likelihood that persons who are teaching are qualified in their area, and understand the learning process and learners. Teachers need to know how to unpack content for students so that every student can understand what they are learning and why. This may require schools to provide more internal training for teachers so that teachers can hone their skills, deepen their content knowledge and expand their range of methodology so that the traditional lecture method becomes one of many approaches teachers use in the classroom.
3. Schools need to provide greater accommodations for students with disabilities that allow students to have access and equality of opportunities. Accommodations could include: providing scribes and or readers for some students and providing more learning supports such as notes, extra time and extra tuition.
4. The literature on transition describes transition as challenging for most students, and in particular students with disabilities. Schools need to understand these challenges and put into practice policies, and procedures both at the micro and macro levels that will help students have more successful transition experiences. Valuing students’ social capital, and helping them build their social capital, as well as, creating school environments that are accepting of all students are likely to improve students’ transition experiences. Social and cultural capital allow students to have access to the types of knowledge that schools value and help students to be more resilient in facing the challenges of transition.
5. Principals need to be efficient and effective instructional leaders. Principals need to lead by example; by holding up a vision of the school as an inclusive community, principals can encourage a sense of belonging for all students; and encourage teachers to respect, and accept all students; and to accommodate students’ learning needs.

*Pedagogical Applications*

1. Secondary schools should include in their curriculum for first year students a course that teaches foundation skills that can help students adjust to the different expectations of high school. This course could include learning: study skills, note taking skills, research skills and organizational and scheduling skills.
2. Teachers need to create communities of learners in their classroom by fostering feelings of belonging so that all students experience full participation, feel accepted and respected, and are able to make connections with their teacher and students in the classroom.
3. Students’ social capital has been identified as a powerful tool for student engagement. Teachers should encourage the development of positive social networks among students so that students can build their social capital within the classroom. Social networks building can be encouraged through increased use of cooperative group activities and through encouraging students to participate in school clubs, societies and activities.
4. Teachers need to use pedagogy that is appropriate to today’s learners and incorporate technology in their classrooms. Today’s learners live in an age infused with technology. In order to make learning reflect real life, technology must be used more freely and naturally in the classroom.
5. Teachers need to listen to their students and recognize the power issues that exist in the classroom as this determines whose voice is valid and heard. Teachers need to guard against squelching students voices by identifying and desisting from practices that students perceive as embarrassing or exclusionary.
6. Teachers need to be adept at differentiating instruction so that they can effectively meet the needs and challenges of all learners in the classroom.

*Conclusion*

This research adds to the literature on transition by investigating the transition experience from a Jamaican perspective. It presented an insider view of what high school is like for a group of students identified as having LD and ADHD. The research used ethnographic methodology to collect the students’ stories through face to face individual and group interviews, as well as through telephone interviews. After examining the stories that were collected from the children, the theories of social capital and belonging emerged as theoretical frameworks through which their experiences could be understood.

The findings of the research suggest social capital and belonging are significant in students’ experiences and perceptions of high school. Children benefit from the social capital they receive from their families and access their own social capital through their social networks. They build their social capital by establishing and maintaining social networks from which they can access benefits. These social networks provide supports for students through bonding and bridging capital. These types of capital allow students to be able to cope with the challenges of high school, and to navigate their way through school by providing academic, social and emotional supports. Students’ social networks provide places where students can feel accepted, supported and a sense of belonging. This suggests teachers should utilize children’s social networks as sources of support for students and should encourage students to build positive social networks especially students with disabilities for whom social capital may be more difficult to access.

Belonging creates a sense of connection between and among individuals, and encourages trust relationships that foster obligations of reciprocity. It acts as the lubricant in children’s social capital and enables social networks to function as buffers for students as they navigate high school. Belonging also supports students’ motivation for learning. Most of the students in this research experienced a strong sense of belonging to their school. This is likely attributed to family ties to their schools, as well as, to their membership in supportive social networks. These networks allowed the students to have access to information they needed, and allowed them to remain connected to their class and school.

The children’s experiences of traditional high schools indicate high schools need to be more supportive places for students with disabilities, as few if any accommodations are provided for these students at the secondary level. Most of the participants were surprised by the academic and social expectations of high school. This could suggest that while secondary schools need to provide accommodations for students with disabilities; the preparatory/primary schools also need to adequately prepare students for the reality of high school by equipping them with the skills to handle the academic and social challenges of high school.

The children’s stories point to the need for: improved student/teacher relationships, pedagogical practices that are more inclusive and relevant to today’s learners, a curriculum that does not exclude non-normative children, and the cultivation of school climates that embrace all students. The students’ stories also revealed their resilience in the face of challenges as they built social networks and used them to navigate the difficulties experienced in high school.

Although this is a small research, it highlights some of the short-comings of traditional high schools. This is so particularly in relation to the inclusion of students with disabilities at the secondary level of schooling. The findings of this research suggests: pedagogical practices, ableist assumptions, the hidden curriculum, and social networks impacted the participants experiences, and their perceptions of high school. Schools need to treat everyone equally and fairly. This does not mean treating all students the same but rather valuing all students, and giving to all students what they need, so that they can experience schools as places that foster learning.

This research was focused on understanding the transition experiences of a small group of students who transitioned to traditional high schools. Further research is recommended that could investigate the transition experiences of students in other types of secondary schools. It is recognised that the participants in this research came from privileged backgrounds. Research could be done that investigates and compares the transition experiences of students from less privileged backgrounds. The transition experiences of children with more visible disabilities such as children who are physically disabled or blind may also be interesting to investigate as these students are likely to have different experiences and different stories to tell

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**APPENDIX I**

**ETHICAL APPROVAL DOCUMENT**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| UniColourLogo | **The**  **School**  **Of**  **Education.** |

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|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Dawn Keaveny  EdD Caribbean |  | **Head of School**  Professor Cathy Nutbrown  Department of Educational Studies  388 Glossop Road  Sheffield  S10 2JA |
| 18 December 2023 | **Telephone:** +44 (0)114 222  **Email:** edd@sheffield.ac.uk |

Dear Dawn  
  
**ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER**

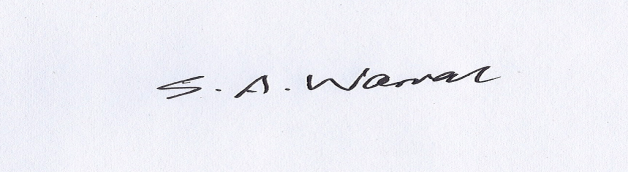
**Transitioning from Primary to High School : perspectives of students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD**

Thank you for submitting your ethics application. I am writing to confirm that your application has now been approved, and you can proceed with your research.

This letter is evidence that your application has been approved and should be included as an Appendix in your final submission.

Good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely



Dr Simon Warren

**Chair of the School of Education Ethics Review Panel**

**APENDIX II:**

**INFORMATION SHEET**

**Information Sheet for Parents**

My name is Dawn-Marie Keaveny and I am pursuing a Doctoral degree with the University of Sheffield, England. I am interested in doing research on the transition experiences of children who have a Learning Disability (LD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as they move from primary or prep school to high school. The aim of this research project is to understand the unique challenges these children may experience and to suggest reasonable accommodations schools could make and strategies children could employ that would help these children experience greater success at this level of their schooling.

This research would involve meeting with children who have a LD or ADHD up to six times during the school year to speak with them about their experiences. These meetings would be for about one hour and would take place at the school. The meetings would take place in a safe place (e.g. the school library) and would occur during the school day (depending on the children’s schedule) or after school. The children would not be taken from their classes or publicly identified in any way. The talks will be private and the children will be allowed to choose pseudonyms so that they can remain anonymous. This project would involve speaking with about ten children who attend traditional high schools in the Kingston area. The information the children provide would be written up and presented in my doctoral thesis.

I am asking for your permission to allow your child/ward to speak with me about his or her experiences. If you agree to allow your child/ward to participate in this project, you will be asked to sign the attached consent form A indicating your consent. Your child/ward will also receive information about the project. This is so that they can understand what the project will be about and what they would be required to do if they decide to participate in the project. They will also be asked to sign a consent form indicating their willingness to be a participant in the project. Both consent forms should be returned to your child’s/ward’s teacher within two weeks of receiving this information letter.

Your child/ward should not be forced to participate in this research if they do not want to. They should make this decision freely and willingly. If your child/ward wishes to change his or her mind and to withdraw from participating in the project that will be fine and they will not be penalized in any way for this.

Thank you for reading this information sheet. If you would like additional information about this project please feel free to contact me through email or by phone. My contact information is:

Dawn-Marie Keaveny

Email: [dmkeaveny@gmail.com](mailto:dmkeaveny@gmail.com)

Telephone: 929-7720 or 754-4757 (work) Tuesdays and Wednesdays

**APPENDIX III**

**INFORMATION SHEET**

**Information Sheet for Participants**

My name is Dawn-Marie Keaveny. I am interested in hearing from children like yourself who have a LD or ADHD about what is was like for you as you moved from going to primary or prep school to going to high school.

I am interested in hearing about what you liked and did not like about going to high school and about things you think could be better. We will speak privately and I will not share what you tell me unless you tell me that someone has hurt you then I will have to speak with your teacher and parents about this. I will tape our talks and later I will write it up in a book. No one will know who you are because I will use a fake name. You can choose the name you would like to be called.

You can choose whether or not you would like to talk with me about your experiences. If you do not want to talk with me that will be okay and you will not be penalized in any way. If you decide to talk with me and then feel like changing your mind that is also fine. You can tell your teacher or parents and they can let me know. You will not get into any trouble for changing your mind.

If you want to meet and talk with me, I would meet with you at your school. We would meet up to six times during the school year and our meetings would be for about an hour.

I will also be meeting and speaking with other children at their schools and talking about their experiences. I will include in my book the stories that children like yourself have shared with me.

Because you are not yet eighteen I will also need your parents to give me their permission to speak with you. I will be sending a letter to your parents to tell them about this research project and to ask them to allow you to speak with me about your experiences in moving from primary or prep school to high school.

Please let me know within the next two week if you would like to share your story with me. If you want to take part in this project you will need to sign the consent form B which is attached to this letter. This is just to show that you have agreed to speak with me. You can tell your teacher or your parents if you would like to speak with me and you can hand in your signed consent form to your teacher and I will collect it from him or her before our first meeting. If you have any questions about this project you can ask your teacher or parents to contact me through my email or at the telephone numbers below. Thank you for reading this letter.

Dawn-Marie Keaveny

Email: [dmkeaveny@gmail.com](mailto:dmkeaveny@gmail.com)

Telephone: 929-7720 or 754-4757 (work) Tuesdays and Wednesdays

**APPENDIX IV**

**CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS**

Consent Form A

Title of project: Transitioning from primary to high school: Perspectives of students with Learning Disabilities (LD) and or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Name of researcher: Dawn-Marie Keaveny

Please check the box in response to each question.

* I have read and understand the information letter about the proposed project
* I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project
* I understand that my child’s/ward’s participation is voluntary and that

he or she is free to withdraw without giving any reason

* I understand that my child’s /ward’s experiences will be used in this project
* I agree to allow my child/ward to participate in this project

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Parent’s/Guardian’s Name Date Signature

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Date Signature

**APPENDIX V**

**CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS**

Consent Form B

Please read each statement and then check the box if your answer is YES

* I have read and understand the information letter about the project
* I have been able to ask questions about the project
* I understand that I can choose whether or not to take part in this project

and I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

* I give permission for my story to be used in this project
* I would like to participate in the project

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant Date Signature

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Date Signature

**APPENDIX IV**

**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

*Introduction and Explanations*

Thank you for meeting with me and for agreeing to participate in this research.

* Your participation is very important.
* There are five other students who will be participating in this research.
* I will meet with each of you three to four times during the school year to talk about your experiences of school. Our meetings will last about one hour.
* Our final meeting will be a group meeting. You will meet the other participants and be able to share your experiences of school. This meeting will be about two hours.

*Purpose*

* To investigate your experiences of high school.
* To understand the challenges you may experience in high school.
* To be able to suggest reasonable accommodations / support high schools can offer to students who have LD and ADHD.

*Guidelines*

* Tell me what high school is like for you.
* There are no right or wrong answers.
* You can tell good and bad things; I want to know what you think.
* What you tell me is confidential; I will only use the information for the research.
* If I ask a question and you do not understand, ask me to explain the question
* If a ask a question and you did not hear me clearly, ask me to repeat the question
* I will be using a tape recorder to record your comments.

***Interview I: Going to High School***

1. What was high school like when you first started?
2. What grade are you in now?
3. What is high school like for you now?
4. Tell me some stories about school.
5. Tell me some of the things you like the most about school and why?
6. Tell me some of the things you like least about school and why?
7. Tell me about any activities you do at school or out of school.

***Interview II: Perceptions about Teaching and Learning***

1. You said school was boring. What do you think makes school boring?
2. What do you think would make school more interesting for you?
3. What do you like most about going to high school?
4. What do you like the least about going to high school?
5. Tell me about your teachers.
6. What kinds of teachers do you like and why?
7. What kinds of teachers don’t you like and why?
8. Tell me about your classes. What’s your favourite class and why?
9. What’s your least favourite class and why?
10. You said you get lots of notes in class. Tell me some more about note taking?
11. How do you feel about homework?
12. Tell me about your study habits.

***Interview III: Teachers, Friendships and Social Networks***

1. Do you like your teachers?
2. Tell me why you like or do not like your teachers.
3. Do you think your teachers are helpful?
4. When are teachers helpful and when are they not helpful?
5. When do you think teachers are fair or unfair?
6. Tell me about your friends at school.
7. How did you become friends?
8. What sorts of things do you do with your friends in school and out of school?
9. How do your friends make school better for you?
10. How would you describe yourself as a student?
11. Tell me some words that come to your mind when you think about school
12. If you could change things at your school, what would you like to be different and why?

***Interview IV: Group Interview- Comparing Stories***

1. What did you look forward to most about going to high school?
2. Did you feel nervous about going to high school and if so why?
3. Do you think you were prepared for high school- why or why not?
4. What is high school like for you?
5. What surprised you most about high school when you got there?
6. What do you like best and least about going to high school?
7. What advice would you give to a student who is just about to go to high school?
8. How would you describe a good teacher?
9. Do you think that children who have a LD or ADHD can do well at high school – why or why not?
10. Do you think children who have a LD or ADHD need more support than children without LD and ADHD – why?
11. What kinds of support do you think children with LD or ADHD may need?
12. Do you think children with LD and ADHD are accepted in school and if not why not?

Thank you all for participating in this research and for sharing your experiences with me.

***Interview V: Telephone Interview – Friendships***

1. Can you tell me some more about your friends?

2. You said your friends help you in school. Can you tell me more about this?

3. Besides help with school work, can you tell me other ways your friends help you?

Thank you for speaking with me and for sharing your time and your stories with me.