

**High School Adolescents with Social Emotional Learning
Impairments**

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By

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Abstract

The acquisition of social emotional learning skills is critical to healthy development. Children who are unable to attain and adequately use these skills are at risk for injurious outcomes including peer rejection and difficulties with family and teacher relationships. Such children, despite having average intellectual ability, are viewed as having a social emotional learning impairment (SELI) (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009). These impairments are common in a variety of neurodevelopmental disorders that accompany childhood. This qualitative study uses grounded theory to explore how sixteen adolescents with SELIs experience high school. Results are discussed within a self-psychology framework. Participants' responses suggest that, like most adolescents, a feeling of safety and a sense of competence are among the most sought after commodities necessary for establishing their academic and social identity in high school. Although participants expressed a variety of social and emotional difficulties, they demonstrated the capacity to mitigate academic and social challenges in the service of fostering and maintaining an adequate sense of self. Selfobject, adjunctive, and compensatory functions were employed to maintain self-cohesion. A sense of academic competence was discovered to be a key factor for maintaining self-cohesion. Awareness of the impact of their neurodevelopmental disorders was a significant factor in participants' developing coherent self-narratives. As was anticipated, most participants reported experiencing a great deal of stress and anxiety related to the process of socialization; however, they were motivated to overcome social challenges in order to seek out enriching peer relationships.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Purpose of the study

Effective social and emotional functioning is a critical feature within the foundations of healthy development (Greenberg, Weissberg, Zins, Fredricks, & Elias, 2003). For children to function well interpersonally, they must be capable of identifying and utilizing verbal and nonverbal social emotional information correctly and swiftly (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009). Children who struggle socially are predisposed to a host of injurious outcomes including peer rejection and difficulties with teachers and family members, placing them at risk for serious emotional problems (Palombo, 2017; Stormshak, Bierman, Bruschi, Dodge, & Coie, 1999; Nowicki & Duke, 1992; Dodge, 1983). Disruptions to social skills can result in social isolation, psychological distress, and reduced self-esteem, which may impact quality of life considerably (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010). Awareness of social emotional learning (SEL) on children's development has been gaining considerable attention and has resulted in an increase in research, practice, and policy (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2005). The value of SEL in education is such that some states have espoused social emotional learning standards, which are then mandated by school districts to be taught in public primary and secondary education settings (Dusenbury, Weissberg,

Goren, & Domitrov, 2014). School-based interventions that specifically address enhancing children's social emotional skills have been found to benefit children's physical and mental health, as well as moral judgment, citizenship, academics, and achievement motivation (Durlak, Weissberg, Taylor, Dymnicki, & Schellinger, 2008). However, despite the increased awareness of the value of SEL and its inception within the educational process, there are children who possess neurological limitations that impede essential social emotional development. Such neurological shortcomings leave these children at a substantial disadvantage when compared to their neurotypical peers.

Several models of social functioning suggest that in order to engage in socially competent behavior, children's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional capacities must interact together effectively (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009; Adolphs, 2003; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Crick & Dodge, 1994). Yet, despite average to above average intelligence, many children's social emotional systems are compromised, thus limiting their capacities to learn skills necessary for interpersonal relating. For these children, striving toward healthy social emotional development is seemingly an insurmountable task, notwithstanding the advent of standard SEL curricula in schools.

This study is concerned with the adolescents who as a result of neurological limitations struggle to gain enrichment from their social worlds. It examines closely the viewpoints of adolescents who maintain at least average intelligence, but possess a brain-based social emotional learning impairment (SELI) that impacts negatively on one's ability to identify and utilize verbal and nonverbal social emotional information (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009). Such brain-based difficulties are often referred to as neurodevelopmental disorders. Some clinical examples of neurodevelopmental disorders

where social difficulties are a prominent criterion can be found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [AMA], 2013). They include autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), social communication (pragmatic) disorder (SCD), attention deficit hyper activity disorder (ADHD), and specific learning disability (SLD). Additionally, nonverbal learning disorder (NVLD), whose defining features also entail social impairments (Myklebust, 1975), possesses origins in neuropsychology but is not recognized by the DSM-5.

Thus, the central purpose of this study is to examine the impact that SELIs have on adolescents' functioning as they navigate their way through high school. This study explores how adolescents with social emotional limitations attempt to develop a healthy self-concept. It investigates what these high schoolers experience as extraordinarily challenging, and what measures they employ to compensate for their neurological limitations.

Significance of the Study for Clinical Social Work

Palombo (2001) asserts that insufficient attention has been given to the way in which neurological deficits affect a child's experience of the world. He points out that children's subjective experiences are filtered through their neurological deficits as well as the context through which they are raised (p. 5). While explanations of brain-based difficulties have historically been rooted in neuropsychological perspectives, theories assembled from such perspectives offer hypotheses that are limited to cognitive and behavioral explanations. Neuropsychological modes of study are adequate for ascertaining objective data; however, they are not as useful in helping to determine

subjective experience. On the other hand, psychodynamic psychology provides explanations into motives that drive a child to act, think, or feel in certain ways. Palombo (2001) emphasizes that the perspective of self-psychology enables us to understand the subjective experience of the child, the impact that neurological difficulties have on development, and their contribution to personality formation. He goes on to say that self-psychology provides an explanatory framework that encompasses the role of motivation, affect, and social relationships in development.

Social workers are well-suited to assist with illuminating the vast array of difficulties surrounding social emotional impairments. Clinical social workers provide mental health services for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of mental, behavioral, and emotional disorders in individuals, families, and groups. This unique training solidly positions social workers to assist children in helping to understand the impact of social emotional learning issues in order to maximize their potential. Moreover, social workers are well suited to assist family members, school personnel, and others involved in the child's world in appropriately identifying and treating difficulties related to their social emotional impairments.

Problem Formulation

This study asks the following question: How do adolescents with a SELI navigate their way through high school? Adolescence can already be a trying time for most in that they are learning, growing, and discovering their place in this world. Difficulties in acquiring and using social emotional learning competencies can make adolescence an exponentially more daunting time. Participants in this study were asked to expound upon

their high school experiences. These youths provided a richer understanding of how adolescents with SELIs perceive and cope with challenges common to the high school milieu.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Adolescent Development

A classic stereotype has been that adolescence is a period of *sturm und drang* (“storm and stress”) (Hall, 1904). The period between childhood and adulthood was thought to be fraught with confusion and oscillating extremes ranging from hopelessness and depression to enthusiasm and elation. However, upon closer examination what appears as turbulent behavior can be seen as normal strivings toward identity formation, higher-level conceptualizations of society and its institutions, and the establishment of personal values and beliefs (Brown, 1990). According to the National Institutes of Health (Mannheim, 2013), adolescence is a period of time in children’s development which is expected to include predictable physical and mental milestones. Children are anticipated to develop the ability to understand abstract ideas, establish and maintain satisfying relationships, move toward a more mature sense of themselves and their purpose, and question old values without losing their identity. In his renowned study on normal adolescent boys, Offer (1969) explained that normal developing youth acquire values of their own and begin the long process of finding themselves. Steinberg (2014) explains that at the onset of puberty, sex hormones facilitate the development and pruning of new neurons. In doing so, the adolescent becomes much more sensitive to environmental

influences and is thereby more attentive and more easily influenced by the world around them (p. 43). Through developmental functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) experiments, researchers in the field of cognitive neuroscience have determined adolescents' "social brain network" (a system of brain functions that reflect the use of social cognitive skills) undergo a qualitative neuroanatomical increase until stabilizing in early adulthood (Mills, Lalonde, Clansen, Giedd, & Blakemore, 2014).

An unvarying notion among observations of adolescent development suggests the social environment to be paramount in the successful expansion of one's identity and overall psychological maturation. Erikson (1994) discussed healthy identity development in terms of successfully negotiating a series of social crises specific to eight predetermined developmental stages throughout the lifespan. As an adolescent, the developing youth is challenged to negotiate adaptively new and confusing social demands; a stage of development Erikson deemed Identity Versus Identity Diffusion (p 94). Erikson writes:

The growing and developing young people, faced with this physiological revolution within them, are now primarily concerned with attempts at consolidating their social roles. They are sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the earlier cultivated roles and skills with the ideal prototypes of the day.

According to Erikson, adolescents are drawn to and identify with groups of peers to which they can compare and contrast the traits previously attained from subsequent

stages in order to consolidate into a new sense of identity. Thus the process of socialization is a vital necessity to adolescent identity formation.

Adolescent Development and Self Psychology

Self-psychology is the lens through which this study examines adolescent experience. As explained by self-psychology (see Palombo, 1988), infants are generally born with a sense of self cohesion, unless organic deficiencies preclude or stifle its consolidation. Self-cohesion is described as the sense of subjective unity and identity that infants experience and through which they interact with caregivers (p. 176). Psychic structure is developed in children as a result of internalizing responses from parents. In order for optimal development to transpire, a child must persist in sustaining selfobjects from childhood through adolescence and into adult life. Selfobjects can be seen as the set of experiences necessary to achieve a sense of cohesion and stability (Palombo, 2017). There are essentially three primary types of selfobject configurations: mirroring, idealizing, and alter-ego functions, also known as twinships (Fosshage, 1995). Mirroring takes place as the parent reflects back and confirms the child's grandness and goodness. Idealized selfobjects provide for the child the experience of a sense of calm, agency, and wisdom from an idealized individual. Twinship functions include the experience of having a common bond with others that "unites human beings and that leads to the feeling of kinship with others so that nothing human feels alien" (Palombo, 2008).

Early on, selfobject functions are underdeveloped mental states that have not yet acquired the stability, autonomy, and continuity that are necessary to permit an individual

to function. In order for a child to develop healthy psychic structure, these selfobjects are transmuted into what eventually become self-functions. The self-functions are then used by the individual to regulate self-esteem, monitor stress, and to define and pursue realistic goals (Elson, 1986). Deficits occur in the self when the original selfobjects have been deficient in providing consistently to the child (Palombo, 2017). Inadequate selfobject functions are construed as a developmental failure and can be experienced by the individual as an inability to sustain cohesion, resulting in anxiety. Self-deficits can also result in a longing for the experiences associated with the missing selfobject functions (p. 55).

Instead of the use of adaptation to consolidate one's identity, as explained in Erikson's outlook on adolescent development cited above, self-psychology views adolescence as a time that requires complementing of the self by new selfobject functions as being central to the negotiation of the phase of adolescence (Palombo, 1988). In other words, in transitioning between childhood and adolescence, the adolescent requires a new set of selfobject functions. The adolescent must then construct a narrative out of past and present experiences in order to reassess former meanings derived from childhood experience so they may be refashioned and reintegrated into a new set of meanings (Palombo, 2008). Through this transitional period, the adolescent may bring with them unresolved issues or selfobject deficits from prior developmental phases. Consequently, a temporary state of fragmentation is likely to occur, resulting in a diffuseness in cohesion. A modification in the way caregivers provide selfobject functions, coupled with the adolescent's newfound capacity for abstract thought, facilitates the process through

which the youngster restores a sense of psychological equilibrium within this phase of development (p. 180).

In the following passage, Palombo (2008) speaks to the complexities of adolescence and the variety of unique ways in which each youngster must navigate this phase.

There is no single path through which all adolescents must travel; that is there is no model of adolescent phase for all adolescents. Rather, different adolescents address issues differently and resolve them in accordance with their endowments and the availability of selfobjects to complement them or to compensate for possible deficits. There is no set script, narrative, or myth that guides the adolescent developmental process. Each adolescent must construct a narrative out of past and present experiences (p. 180).

The above passage is particularly noteworthy for this study, as this study seeks to uncover the unique strengths children with a SELI often accrue in compensation for their neurological deficiencies.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The conceptual journey from Emotional Intelligence to SEL in schools.

In 1990, Peter Salovey and John Mayer wrote two articles that would essentially generate the term emotional intelligence (EI) (see Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso 2004). The authors would essentially change the popular notion that thinking and feeling are two separate and distinct spheres of functioning. The evolution of the term EI was conceived

out of research on emotion and human intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Salovey and Mayer's efforts, which were inspired in part by Howard Gardner's theory on multiple intelligences, focus on a measurable set of competencies. These competencies are said to be a form of intelligence that focuses on and with emotional information. Salovey and Mayer (1997) defined EI as follows:

Emotional Intelligence is the capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote intellectual growth (p. 209).

Mayer and Salovey (2004) postulated a four branch model of EI. The four areas include the ability to:

1. perceive emotions,
2. use emotions to facilitate thought,
3. understand emotions, and
4. manage emotions.

The authors explain (p.199) that the first two branches, those which deal with perception and expression of emotion and the capacity to enhance emotional thought, are “relatively discrete areas of information processing that we expect to be modularized or bound within the emotion system.” They go on to say that by contrast the fourth branch, emotion management, “must be integrated within an individual's overall plans and goals.”

Salovey and Mayer's work emphasizes that EI is a cooperative combination of intelligence and emotion (p. 197)—that “emotion makes thinking more intelligent and that one thinks more intelligently about emotions” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Moreover, the competencies which make up EI can be empirically measured and validated (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). For instance, high measures of EI correspond to individuals who are good at perceiving emotions and understanding their meaning. High EI individuals are drawn toward occupations involving social interactions. Conversely, those with lower measures of EI are indicated to be more likely to engage in problem behaviors such as drug use and violent episodes (p.210). Thus, the authors' notion of EI posits that the ability to recognize, understand, use, and manage emotions contributes to one's ability to adapt to a variety of realms in life.

Goleman's impact on SEL.

Daniel Goleman (1995), a psychologist and author who studies and writes about EI, credits Salovey for introducing him to the concept of EI. In 1995 Goleman published his seminal work *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Goleman's work offered a user-friendly means through which to present the concept of EI. Where Salovey and Mayer through systematic and empirical measures can be seen as the architects of the EI framework, Goleman's efforts have served to launch its popularity. Goleman's work was also instrumental in forging the term social emotional learning (SEL). As described below, Goleman's timely contributions were paramount in

eventually catapulting to the forefront of the educational system a systematized method of teaching and learning social emotional competencies.

SEL in education.

Greenberg et al. (2003) pointed out the misguided efforts of many child advocates, educators, and researchers to address the growing demands of schools to assist in promoting academic success in order to enhance mental health and prevent problem behaviors. Concern for ineffective efforts and failed initiatives to improve children's positive development inspired a meeting of several disciplines. In 1994 under the leadership of Daniel Goleman, the Fetzer Institute hosted a gathering of researchers, philanthropists, educators, and child advocates who aspired to enhance children's social competence, emotional intelligence, drug education, violence prevention, sex education, health promotion, character education, service learning, civic education school reform, and school-family-community partnership (p. 467). Out of the Fetzer group emerged the organization the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL's mission is to advance the academic and social emotional competencies of all children through research, practice, and policy (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015). It was within the initial meetings of CASEL that the term "social emotional learning" (SEL) began being used. SEL and EI were said to have in common the coordination of cognition, affect, and behavior that include awareness and management of one's own emotions and awareness and understanding the emotions of others (Goleman, 2001). The Fetzer group believed learning social emotional skills could

be taught and learned analogous to learning more traditional academic skills such as math and reading. Teaching SEL was postulated to be most effective through classroom instruction, engaging in positive activities throughout the school, and broad student, parent, and community involvement in planning, implementation, and evaluation (see Greenberg et al). Research on school-based interventions has since confirmed that SEL is central to children's development regarding physical and mental health, moral judgment, citizenship, academics, and achievement motivation (Durlak, Dymnicki, Weissberg, & Schekkinger, 2011). Since the meetings at the Fetzer institute, the field of education has been steadily incorporating SEL research into reform (Greenberg et al., 2003; Durlak, et al., 2011; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Zins and Elias (2007) declared, "SEL is the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others, competencies that clearly are essential for all students." Lantieri (2009), an educator among the Fetzer group disciplines, explained the following:

SEL is informed by scholarly research demonstrating that all children can have a school experience that helps them to be not just academically competent but supports them in being engaged life-long learners who are self-aware, connected to others, and active contributors to building a more just, peaceful, productive, and sustainable world (p. 4).

Similarly, Durlack, et al. (2011) convey that empirical evidence exists to suggest that teaching SEL integrates competence promotion and youth development frameworks for reducing risk factors and fostering protective mechanism for positive adjustment. They point out that extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social emotional competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school

performance, whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties (p. 406). Educational programs designed to teach SEL are guided by four proximal goals of five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Durlack, et al. 2011). CASEL (2003) defines these competency areas in the following way:

- *Self-awareness*: The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.
- *Self-management*: The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.
- *Social awareness*: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
- *Relationship skills*: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.
- *Responsible decision making*: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of

ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

CASEL intends for schools to utilize these five areas of social emotional competencies in order to focus on and enhance children's overall SEL development.

Models of Social Emotional Functioning

Currently, a growing body of research demonstrates the numerous ways in which children benefit through enhancing their social emotional skills (Sklad, Diekstra, DeRitter, Ben, & Gravensteijn, 2012; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Greenberg, Weissberg, Zins, Fredricks, & Elias, 2003). Such overwhelming evidence has led to changes in educational policy and practice as well as an increase in curricula to enhance SEL (Dusenbury, Weissberg, Goren, & Domitrov, 2014). In order to effectively learn social emotional skills, certain mechanisms must be in place. Cognitive and neurodevelopmental fields of study view SEL in terms of how the brain processes social information. From this perspective, social and emotional competencies are predicated upon one's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional capacities to interact effectively in concert with one another (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009; Adolphs, 2003; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Models from social, cognitive and neurodevelopmental sciences offer explanations of the processes through which social and emotional adjustment takes place. For instance, from a social-cognitive perspective, Crick and Dodge (1994) proposed a

model of social information processing (SIP). Their work posits a detailed model of how children arrive at emotional and behavioral decisions based on their cognitive capacities to process and interpret social cues. Lemerise and Williams (2000) would later expand the model to emphasize emotional components among the cognitive processes regarding children's social competence. Adolphs' (2003) neuroscientific approach to social behavior identifies collections of processes and neurostructures that participate in social perceptions and social judgments, social reasoning, and the ways in which our behavior is guided. Drawing on Adolphs' work, Lipton and Nowicki (2009) developed the Social Emotional Learning Framework (SELF) in order to enhance understanding and promote better assessment of children and adolescents with SEL processing impairments. Each of these models will be discussed below in further detail.

Social Information Processing.

Crick and Dodge (1994) proposed a six-step model of social information processing (SIP) for understanding how children make decisions in social interactions. A basic premise of SIP (and other social cognitive models) is that children's understanding and interpretation of situations influences their related behavior (see Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Along those lines, each of Crick and Dodge's steps are purported to influence one another. These steps include:

1. encoding of external and internal cues,
2. interpretation and mental representation of those cues,
3. clarification or selection of a goal,

4. response access or construction,
5. response decision, and
6. behavior enactment.

During the first two steps, the authors hypothesize that children attend to particular situational and internal cues, encode, and then interpret them. After the situation has been interpreted, Crick and Dodge propose that children select a desired outcome or continue with a preexisting goal. In step four, it is hypothesized that children will choose a response to a situation from memory. However, if the situation is new to them children may construct new behaviors in response to the social cues. In the fifth step, response decision, it is said that children evaluate the previously accessed or constructed responses in order to select the most positively evaluated response for enactment. At step six, the chosen response is behaviorally enacted. The authors emphasize that the social decisions of children are influenced by their learning history and temperament, as well as the specifics of each situation (p 76).

Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) revisited Crick and Dodge's model. In reviewing the model they suggested that integrating emotional processes into the SIP model expands its explanatory power. Lemerise and Arsenio suggest that children's capacity to regulate and express emotions is directly related to social competence. They hypothesized that emotionality and regulatory abilities will affect both processing of social (and emotional) information and decision making in challenging situations (p.112). Hence, where Crick and Dodge present a cognitive model for understanding the social mechanisms of children, Lemerise and Arsenio's contributions expand the model to include the influence of emotional components to cognitive processes.

Adolphs' model.

The field of social cognitive neuroscience utilizes methods such as neuroimaging combined with studies of brain disorders to help decipher areas of social competence in children's development. Adolphs (2003) asserts that the "social brain" involves a variety of complex neurological structures that work together multidirectionally in various stages. For instance, perception of stimuli activates higher order sensory cortices, which are also involved in constructing internal models of one's social environment. Such models include representations of others, relationships with one's self, and the value of one's actions within a social group (p. 166). The amygdala, an area of the brain for processing emotions, and neurostructures within its surrounding area are said to act as a means of linking perceptions to cognitions and behavior based on the emotional value of the stimuli. Working in concert with one another, these neurological structures contribute to our perceptions and judgments of social stimuli, the way we reason about social information, and the ways in which our individual and collective behaviors are guided (p. 175).

Social Emotional Learning Framework.

Lipton and Nowicki (2009) proposed the Social Emotional Learning Framework (SELF) in an effort to understand and assess the common SEL problems shared across a variety of diagnostic categories (e.g. ASD, NVLD, LD, etc.). The SELF draws primarily from the aforementioned Crick and Dodge's SIP and Adolphs' cognitive neuroscience models. The complete model of the SELF was intended to focus on both comprehension

and execution. The majority of research to date has focused primarily on the comprehension aspect of the SELF, which is of most interest to this proposed study.

Research has demonstrated that the more one's social emotional comprehension is developed, the more they will exhibit positive social interactions and better peer relationships (see McKown, Allen, Russo-Ponsaran, & Johnson, 2013). According to Lipton and Nowicki (2009), social emotional comprehension consists of three units of functioning: awareness, meaning, and reasoning. Each of these units are said to operate sequentially, simultaneously, multidirectionally, and concurrently with one another.

Drawing on Nowicki and Duke's (1994) research on nonverbal communication, Social Awareness is described as the capacity to perceive and the early recognition of emotional information, which involves identifying from nonverbal cues the feeling states in others. McKown et al. (2013) points out that the concept of social awareness is similar to Salovey and Mayer's notion of "emotional perception" (Salovey & Mayer, 1989-1990). Lipton and Nowicki (2009) emphasize that awareness of emotions in others is seen as an important SEL milestone in typically developing infants.

Lipton and Nowicki (p.105) contend that in order to be socially competent, one must translate social emotional cues into interpersonal meaning. Social Emotional Meaning is said to involve the interpretation of another's words and actions and linking them to a social context. Analogous to Adolphs' model (2003), motivation, emotion, and cognition contribute to this process through assisting the individual in deciphering the intentions of others, what they are feeling, and what they are thinking. Lipton and Nowicki (2009) emphasize Theory of Mind (ToM) to be important in the formulation of social emotional meaning. ToM is defined as ". . . the ability to represent mental states of

others, that is: their thoughts, desires, beliefs, intentions, and knowledge” (Leslie, 1987), and is said to become more sophisticated over the course of one’s development.

Lastly, Lipton and Nowicki (2009) point out that in addition to accurate perception and interpretation of social emotional cues, higher level reasoning must be employed for social success. Social Emotional Reasoning places into context the perceived social emotional information so the individual may problem solve and evaluate in order to develop and employ appropriate and effective social goals. Lipton and Nowicki point out Bauminger’s research (2002) that suggests children with neurobehavioral disorders such as academic learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorders exhibit compromised social problem-solving difficulties.

In sum, the SELF is a model to help conceptualize the core commonalities in a variety of neurodevelopmental disorders. The SELF draws from well-known models of social comprehension. Of most interest to this study is the SELF’s notion of social emotional comprehension, which entails the domains of awareness, meaning, and reasoning, all of which work in concert with one another. Children and adolescence who possess normal intelligence yet exhibit difficulties in one or more of these domains are seen as having a social emotional learning impairment (SELI) (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009).

Social Emotional Learning Impairment (SELI)

Lipton and Nowicki (2009) propose the term Social Emotional Learning Impairment (SELI) “to reflect underlying brain-based processes that give rise to social impairments in children regardless of their diagnostic status as determined by the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders” (p. 99). The term SELI is intended to include individual’s with at least average intelligence that have difficulties encoding, interpreting, or reasoning about social emotional information. The authors assert that regardless of children’s diagnostic status, focusing on strengths and weaknesses of children with social emotional skill deficits is a more efficient and effective approach when considering etiology and intervention for children with SELI. They underscore a variety of neurodevelopmental disorders, all of which have in common social emotional impairments. These include nonverbal learning disorder, attention deficit disorder, speech and language impairments, autistic spectrum disorders, and learning disorders. In clarifying their notion of SELI, Lipton and Nowicki (p. 100) highlight that mistakes in nonverbal modes of communication are common among some children with SELI. Impairments in one’s capacity to read facial expressions and posture as well as deciphering proper use of prosody (tone of voice to imply expression) give rise to interpersonal difficulties. Moreover, despite intact capacities to read nonverbal modes of communication, children who have difficulties with taking the perspective of another person or interpreting their intentions, are likely to develop interpersonal difficulties as well (p. 100). Limitations in the capacity for competent social interactions have been demonstrated to have an injurious impact on one’s psychological well-being. (Palombo, 2017; Nowicki & Duke, 1992; Dodge, 1983).

Transdiagnostic Categories of SELI

To date there exists an abundance of research which suggests a connection between various neurodevelopmental issues and social and emotional difficulties

(Bauminger, Edelesstein, & Morash, 2008; Bellini, 2006; Broitman & Davis, 2013; Demopoulos, Hopkins, & Davis, 2013; Elias, 2004; Joffe & Black, 2012; Johnson & Myklebust, 1967; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Losh & Capps, 2006; McKown, Gumbiner, Russo, & Lipton, 2009; Nowicki, 2003; Nowicki & Duke, 1992; Palombo, 2017; Riggs, Jahromi, Razza, Dillworth-Bart, & Mueller, 2006; Rourke, 1989; Semrud-Clikeman & Hynd, 1990; Swanson & Malone, 1992; Tsatsanis, Fuerst, & Rourke, 1997). Children who do not demonstrate effective social functioning are rejected by their peers, have trouble with forging meaningful relationships, and can develop significant emotional difficulties (Palombo, 2001; Stormshak, et al., 1999; Nowicki & Duke, 1992; Coie & Dodge, 1988). Due to their difficulties processing social emotional information, children who possess a SELI are particularly vulnerable to the deleterious impact of social rejections and interpersonal failures. SELIs reflect brain-based social processes that give rise to social emotional learning difficulties, and are found amid several neurodevelopmental classifications (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009). When compared with their non-disordered peers, children with SELIs have been observed to display more emotional and behavioral difficulties (Nijmeijer, et al., 2008; Losh and Capps, 2006; Bellini, 2006; Elias, 2004; Palombo, 2006; Rourke, 1989). SELIs include both DSM and non-DSM disorders and will be addressed below in more detail.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), neurodevelopmental disorders are a group of conditions with onset in the early developmental period and are characterized by developmental deficits that produce impairments of personal, social, academic, or occupational functioning. Because they occur early on in one's

development, neurodevelopmental disorders may produce lifelong functional impairments (p. 31). Several classifications of neurodevelopmental disorders include diagnostic criteria pertaining to impaired social functioning (e.g. autism spectrum disorder, social communication disorder), while others such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and specific learning disorder include impaired social functioning under the DSM-5's Diagnostic Features or Functional Consequences sections. Nonverbal learning disorder (NVLD) is seen by some practitioners and researchers as a neurodevelopmental disorder. Among its primary feature includes difficulties in comprehending nonverbal communication (Rourke, 1989). However, NVLD is not listed among the DSM-5 or any other references of formal eligibility (Broitman & Davis, 2013).

Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

According to the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is marked by persistent impairments in reciprocal social communication and social interaction. ASD is a new diagnostic category in the Neurodevelopmental Disorders section. It replaces the disorders that in the previous edition, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-4, made up the category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). Included under PDD were autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

Research on impaired social functioning being central to ASD is well documented (Carter, Davis, Klin, & Volkmar, 2005; Demopoulos, Hopkins, & Davis, 2013).The

impact of social difficulties on the emotional well-being of children with ASD has been studied as well. For instance, Bellini (2006) examined how social skill deficits contribute to social anxiety in adolescents with ASD. Bellini proposed a developmental pathways model in order to identify the potential for either predisposing or protective factors which may contribute to the development, protection, or remediation of social anxiety in adolescents with high functioning ASD. Forty-one adolescents with ASD were examined using a standard multiple regression analysis. His model was seen as a significant predictor of social anxiety, which suggests that elevated psychological arousal, combined with social skill deficits, contributes significantly to the variance in social anxiety in adolescents with ASD. Bellini emphasizes that adolescents with ASD who are prone to high levels of psychological arousal are particularly vulnerable to social anxiety, given their impaired social capacities.

Through a discourse analytic framework, Losh and Capps (2006) examined the emotional understanding in individuals with ASD. The authors compared 28 children with high functioning autism to 22 typically developing children in an effort to determine the ways in which children interpret emotional events. They found that children with high functioning autism diverged significantly from typically developing children in terms of how they interpret and convey emotional experiences. Although they were able to distinguish appropriate contexts for the expression of simple emotions, children with high functioning autism were less inclined to organize and convey emotional experiences into personalized, explanatory narrative frameworks (p. 816). The authors surmise that individuals with autism may possess less prominent or elaborated memories of emotions,

which is likely to impact the way in which subjective meaning of affectively charged experiences is comprised.

Social Communication Disorder.

Norbury (2014) declared that successful communication can be defined broadly in the following way:

. . . a child's understanding of a speaker's intentions and the verbal and nonverbal cues that signal those intentions, as well as the child's interpretation of the environmental context, societal norms and expectations and how these coalesce with structural aspects of language (e.g. vocabulary, syntax, and phonology) (p. 204).

As defined by the DSM-5 (APA, 2014), a social (pragmatic) communication disorder (SCD) is characterized as follows:

. . . a primary difficulty with pragmatics or the social use of language communication as manifested by deficits in understanding and following social rules of verbal and nonverbal communication in natural contexts, changing language according to the needs of the listener or situation, and following rules of conversation and storytelling (p. 48).

SCD is also a new diagnostic category in the DSM-5. SCD has in common with ASD the diagnostic requirement of deficits in social communication skills. However, to be diagnosed SCD, certain features of ASD must be ruled out. These features include

restricted interests, repetitive behaviors, insistence on sameness, or sensory abnormalities (p. 50). On the other hand, associated features of SCD are said to include the diagnosis of ADHD and SLD as being more common among individuals with SCD.

Joffe and Black (2012) were interested in the relationship between language ability and social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (SEBD) in adolescents. The authors emphasize that academic and language weaknesses may not be discernible until exposure to the more challenging linguistic and academic demands within the secondary schools (p. 462). The study consisted of a self-report questionnaire given to 352 students who were underperforming academically, and who demonstrated poor language performance. Parents (n=225) and teachers (n=230) also completed questionnaires on behalf of the selected students. Teachers identified students based on average to low average scores on standardized assessments as well as students with low language and poor academic abilities within the classroom. Students with identified learning issues were excluded. Student's language abilities were then tested. Results indicated that students with low educational attainment and poor language demonstrate significantly greater SEBD than a normal sample, as reported by themselves, parents, and teachers (p. 468). The authors concluded that students with low academic and language performances are more vulnerable to experiencing SEBD as compared to their typically developing peers. Unique to this study is that the students had not been previously diagnosed with language difficulties. Instead, they were identified subsequent to the teacher's referral for poor language and weak academic performance (p. 470).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

As stated in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), “The essential diagnostic feature of ADHD is a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development” (p. 61). Peer rejection is listed among the functional consequences of having ADHD (p. 63). Nijmeijer et al. (2008) synthesize a variety of literature which emphasizes, “Children with ADHD often have conflicts with adults and peers, and suffer from unpopularity, rejection by peers, and a lack of friendships, in part as a consequence of their ADHD symptoms.” Interestingly, recent research suggests there exists a great deal of commonality between ADHD and other developmental disorders. Demopoulos, Hopkins, & Davis (2013) compared social cognitive profiles of children and adolescents with ASD (n=137) and ADHD (n=436). Using tests of facial and vocal affect recognition, social judgement, and problem-solving, and parent and teacher reports of social functioning, the authors found similar patterns of deficits between the two groups. They concluded that types of social deficits in ASD and ADHD might be more similar than previously thought. Staikova and colleagues (2013) observed that while treatments for ADHD were effective for the management of core symptoms, they showed limited effectiveness in improving children’s social skills. The authors reasoned that because pragmatic deficits are found in other neurodevelopmental disorders, then perhaps social impairment is mediated by pragmatic deficits as well. Children (n=63) underwent comprehensive assessments of pragmatic language, which included parent ratings, standardized tests, and a narrative task. The authors concluded that pragmatic language impairments in children with ADHD may account for high rates of social impairment.

Specific Learning Disorder (SLD).

Specific learning disorder (SLD) is also among the neurodevelopmental disorders in DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Although primary diagnostic criteria entail difficulties learning academic skills, its diagnostic features include difficulties accurately perceiving verbal and nonverbal information (p. 68). The connection between learning disorders and social and emotional difficulties is well documented (Bauminger, Edelestein, & Morash, 2008; Elias, 2004; Nowicki E. A., 2003; Kavale & Forness, 1996). Most noteworthy for this study is that there exists a consensus that most students with learning disabilities also demonstrate difficulties with social relationships (Elias, 2004). Children with a learning disability are often rejected by peers and display social shortcomings, which are linked in-part to the child's difficulties in reading nonverbal cues (p. 53). Using a meta-analysis methodology, Kavale and Forness (1996) examined 152 studies. A quantitative synthesis showed that an average of 75% of students with learning disabilities exhibited social skill deficits that distinguished them from comparison samples. Bauminger, Edelstein, and Morash (2008) compared the social cognition processes in children with and without learning disabilities (LD). Participants included 100 children in middle childhood, 50 with and 50 without LD. The researchers examined children's social information processing capacities, as well as emotional understanding of events. Findings revealed that children with LD demonstrated "major difficulties" in social information processing, and "consistent difficulties" in understanding complex emotions as compared to the non-LD group (p. 56).

In an effort to determine whether students with LD display greater levels of clinical depression than their peers without LD, Magg and Reid (2006) conducted a meta-

analysis of data-based literature. Using fifteen different studies, the authors quantified mean differences in depression measure scores and levels of clinical depression between students with and without LD. Results indicate a corroboration of previous research that suggests students with LD exhibit higher scores on depression scales than those students without LD. Although they caution that the magnitude of difference in their findings was not sufficient enough to determine significant scores for clinical depression, the authors conclude that students with LD are at higher risk for developing depression, experiencing it more severely, and displaying other characteristics associated with depression than are their non LD peers.

Elias (2004) has been a large proponent on the research and advancement of SEL in schools. In a paper discussing the connection between learning disorders and social emotional learning, Elias accentuates, “The term ‘social emotional learning’ (SEL) was developed for use in research and practice in emotional intelligence as applied to the schools because it reflected a strong recognition of the role of both social and emotional factors in successful academic learning” (p. 54). Elias goes on to emphasize, “Their [students with learning disorders] difficulties, particularly in adolescence, with organization and focus in writing often reflect parallel difficulties with understanding the social world” (p. 55).

Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NVLD).

Nonverbal learning disorder (NVLD) is a syndrome not recognized by DSM-5. However, one of the defining features of NVLD is a significant impairment in nonverbal

communication (Rourke, 1989). Earliest descriptions of NVLD were introduced by Johnson and Myklebust in 1967. In their book on learning disabilities, the authors differentiate between “a neurology of learning which relates to verbal functions, and a neurology of learning which relates to nonverbal functions” (p. 42). They defined NVLD as a disorder characteristic of children who essentially are unable to comprehend the significance of many aspects of the environment; who cannot pretend and anticipate; and who fail to learn and appreciate the implications of actions such as gestures, facial expressions, caresses, and other elements of attitude. However, to date some professionals have emphasized there is not enough evidence to support the existence of NVLD as a separate category, and that the term autism spectrum disorder is sufficient in explaining the clusters of behaviors and cognitive skills found within NVLD students (Broitman & Davis, 2013; Forrest, 2004). As previously discussed, this scholastic and clinical uncertainty spawned the term Social Emotional Learning Impairment (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009) in order to reflect underlying brain processes that give rise to social impairments in children regardless of diagnostic status.

Myklebust (1975) asserted, “Perhaps the most serious problem associated with deficiencies in social perception is the way it limits and impedes the development and acquisition of meaning, of *inner* experience” (p. 86). More recently, Palombo (2006) examines in-depth how NVLD relates to one’s social emotional development. In his first paper on NVLD, “The Diagnosis and Treatment of Children with Nonverbal Learning Disabilities” (1996), Palombo proposes a thesis which suggests that, due to their unique deficits, children with NVLD are susceptible to developing disorders of the self and relational problems. He explains that children with NVLD construe a unique set of

meanings from their personal experiences. Because of their inability to decode a range of nonverbal communications, these children acquire a unique set of personal meanings that appear coherent to the child, yet may not make sense to others (Palombo, 2006). When the child's view is not concordant with that of others, the dialogue between the child and others is derailed. This derailment ultimately interferes with the child's ability to draw sustenance from his or her caregivers or significant others, which can then lead to serious consequences for the child's sense of self.

Rourke (1995) suggests that NVLD leads to a distinct pattern of difficulty in academic achievement and social emotional functioning that includes a predisposition toward adolescent and adult depression and suicidal risk. He suggests that such difficulties result from deficits in social competence and social emotional adaptation (p. 5). According to Rourke, these problems can lead to a marked tendency toward social withdrawal and isolation. This places the individual at risk for developing what Rourke referred to as "internalized" forms of psychopathology. Such pathology manifests in anxiety and depression, and is presumed to increase with age.

Chapter III

Methodology

Aims of Study

Several models of social functioning suggest that in order to engage in socially competent behavior, children's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional capacities must interact together effectively (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009; Adolphs, 2003; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Crick & Dodge, 1994). Yet, many children with average to above average intelligence maintain social emotional systems that are compromised. As a result, their ability to acquire the skills necessary for interpersonal relating is limited.

Neurodevelopmental conditions responsible for such social emotional limitations are referred to as SELIs (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009). The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding as to how adolescents with SELIs navigate their way through high school. The narratives of high school adolescents with SELIs are captured in order to highlight the unique ways in which they negotiate challenges common to high school. Through in depth inquiry into these adolescents' experiences, this study deepens our understanding into what it is like for them to progress through high school.

Research Design and Strategy

In an effort to highlight the unique meanings of each individual's experience, a constructivist epistemological stance is used in order to give voice to those youth who encounter life with a SELI. Cresswell contends (2003) that in order to develop patterns or theory, qualitative research makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives. Such perspectives include multiple meanings of individual experiences constructed within a social and historical context. Data emerges as it is filtered through the viewpoint of the researcher. In terms of methodology, grounded theory is used. Charmaz (2014) explains that grounded theory methods consist of systematic and flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data out of which theory is constructed. Thus, through the research process, the theory is "grounded" in the data.

Operational Definitions of Major Concepts

In Zins and Elias (2006), social emotional learning is defined as follows:

. . .the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (p. 234).

There are five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible

decision-making (Durlack, et al., 2011). These competencies are defined by CASEL (2003) as follows:

- *Self-awareness*: The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.
- *Self-management*: The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.
- *Social awareness*: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
- *Relationship skills*: The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.
- *Responsible decision making*: The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

In order to assist in identifying adolescents with impairments in social emotional learning, this study draws from the Social Emotional Learning Framework (SELF) devised by Lipton and Nowicki (2009). The SELF is a theoretical model developed to conceptualize social emotional comprehension. The authors state:

The SELF is a transdiagnostic conceptualization that highlights the social-emotional learning processes that may significantly contribute to social functioning impairments. It assumes that brain-based social emotional learning deficits come in a variety of patterns and combinations and are affected by specific environmental experiences, culture, and unique aspects of the individual child (p. 110).

The SELF was designed to help identify children and adolescents with common social emotional issues, absent the use of specific diagnostic categories such as ASD and NVLD (p. 110). The SELF incorporates components of prominent theories of social emotional comprehension, which include social neuroscience, social information processing theory, affective social competence, and emotional intelligence (see McKown et al., 2013). The SELF takes into account social awareness, social meaning, and social reasoning as the three dimensions children use in order to employ social skills successfully (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009). Children and adolescents who possess normal intelligence yet exhibit processing difficulties in one or more of these domains are seen as having a social emotional learning impairment (SELI) (Lipton & Nowicki, 2009). Impairments in social emotional comprehension are found across the DSM-5 and non-

DSM-5 clinical diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder, Social Communication Disorder, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Specific Learning Disorder, and Nonverbal Learning Disorder. For the purposes of this study, all of the above diagnoses were considered.

Statement of Assumptions

1. This study assumes that adolescents are capable of articulating their experiences.
2. It is assumed that an interview format is suitable for conducting this research.
3. It is assumed that adolescents with a SELI may experience their world differently than those without a SELI.
4. The researcher assumes that adolescents with a SELI are more vulnerable to psychological, social, and emotional consequences than those without a SELI.

Sample

Participants include 16 adolescents whose neurodevelopmental diagnoses are consistent with SELI criteria. Twelve participants had been diagnosed with an ASD. Of these twelve, seven had also been diagnosed with ADHD. Three participants carried a primary diagnosis of ADHD, one of which was also diagnosed with an SLD. One participant was diagnosed with NVLD. Seven of the participants had at one time been diagnosed with coexisting anxiety or depressive disorders.

Participants are between the ages of 14 and 19 years of age, and are either currently attending a public high school or have recently graduated from a public high school. Parents of the youths in this study were very engaged in their lives and were clearly committed to addressing their child's needs. All participants were currently receiving or at one time received psychotherapy. They also received school support as a result of their neurodevelopmental difficulties. School support included special education services (i.e. Individual Education Plans), or 504 accommodations (a formal plan written in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits discrimination against children with learning difficulties).

Participants were recruited through flyers (see appendix A) posted on Facebook and informational websites that cater to parents of children with various neurodevelopmental disorders. The flyer was also distributed to adults who attended lectures intended to provide information for parents of adolescents.

The interview setting included a private location of the participant's choosing. Thirteen of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes; two were conducted over Skype, and one participant was interviewed in a private location in a public library. The interview process lasted approximately 60 minutes. Data were collected only by the researcher through student interviews, observations, and discussions with parents. Although not part of the interview protocol, parents were often eager to discuss circumstances they believed relevant to the study.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, this qualitative study necessitated a small number of participants who were selected in a nonrandom fashion. As a result, this study is not generalizable. A small, distinctive population was purposefully sought out in order to capture participants' rich, subjective experiences that are conducive to grounded theory analysis. The aim of this study was intended to uncover the experiences of a specific population (i.e. adolescents with a SELI). This study did not seek out a particular socioeconomic, geographical, gender, or racial distribution. Most participants resided in suburban areas of Chicago. One attended school in Chicago, and two in rural communities in Illinois and Indiana. Limited demographic representation does not allow this study to conclude that the experiences were true beyond the opinion of each participant.

Second, the researcher is a full time school social worker and has daily exposure to adolescents with a variety of neurodevelopmental disorders. Although experience with similar populations aided in establishing rapport with these youth and their parents, his own biases are dynamically intertwined with those of the participants, which could have shaped their responses. Moreover, this process entailed observation of participants' subjective experiences. The opinions and attitudes that comprised participants' responses at the time of their interviews were likely to have been driven by their current emotional states.

Lastly, the population was self-selected and likely to have skewed the study's results. Youths who participated in the study were eager and able to tell their stories.

They were also influenced by an adult caregiver to partake in the study. Parents of participants gave the impression they were positively engaged in their lives. Adolescents who did not participate in the study could have demonstrated a different perspective in comparison to those who agreed to be interviewed.

Data Analysis

Analysis was performed using a grounded theory method as outlined by Charmaz (2014). The process began by transcribing recorded interviews into written form. Each of the participants' transcripts was originally analyzed through the use of initial coding where each word, line, and segment was sorted. Initial codes were given to the data in order to depict action and processes. Once initial codes were established, data were compared in an effort to combine and categorize the information. The process of creating initial codes gave the researcher possible paths to take in further analyzing the data.

The second step of coding was the focused phase (p. 140). This allowed further distillation of categories and preliminary ideas that emerged through the initial coding phase. Through this second phase of coding the most significant or frequent initial codes were used to sort and integrate large amounts of data. Through sifting, sorting, and synthesizing large amounts of data, decisions were made in order to more completely and decisively categorize data from the initial coding processes.

Once categories emerged, subcategories arose through the use of axial coding. Axial coding links findings with sub findings and is intended to be an organizational technique within the coding process (p. 147). Theoretical coding was then used in order

to identify relationships uncovered through the focused coding process. Ideas were connected to the various themes, words, and processes that emerged through the preceding measures of coding.

Memo-writing was used in order to further analyze ideas surrounding codes. Memos were gathered throughout the process of data collection. Impressions of each participant were recorded after each interview. Memos were also gathered throughout the coding process in order facilitate the direction of the data into categories and conceptualizations.

Lastly, member checking was employed to ascertain the accuracy of coding. Respondents were contacted via phone to confirm the accuracy of ideas. Seven respondents were available for follow-up phone calls. Saturation of the data was reached when it was determined no new data was required to further the properties of the categories (p. 213).

Data for this project took many months to obtain. The population studied is considered especially vulnerable, which required a host of measures to prevent exploitation. As a result, it was difficult to locate participants. Only one interview was conducted so that the prospect of a lengthy process would not dissuade potential volunteers. The population was initially intended to include only high school students with a SELI. However, the parameters of the sample were later expanded to encompass students who had recently graduated high school. This was necessary in order to obtain an appropriate amount of participants.

Confidentiality and Protecting Rights of Participants

Participation in this study was strictly voluntary. Participation required both the parent and the adolescent's consent. The purpose of the research was explained to participants in a language that was age appropriate. Procedures to protect participant confidentiality were explained as part of the consent process. Clarifying questions were asked throughout this process to ensure parent and participant understanding. Copies of signed consent forms were issued to the parent and participant (see Appendix B). Once permission was obtained, volunteers were again asked whether or not they would like to partake in the study. They were informed that they need respond only to questions they felt comfortable answering. Participants were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time. All participants were fully engaged and appeared to enjoy the interview process. Parents and participants were informed that the researcher could provide them with the name of a local therapist if needed. None of the parents or participants requested this information.

Raw data was only accessible to the principle investigator. Identifying information was kept in a locked cabinet in the principal researcher's home. Data were transcribed on the researcher's password protected personal computer. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants throughout the process of data analysis. All data will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study.

Chapter IV

Results

Introduction to the Results

Findings are derived from 16 youths who range in age from fourteen to nineteen, and who are known to have a SELI. Participants received on-going support from parents, therapists, and the school, such as Individualized Education Plans and 504 plans. Through intensive interviewing, participants shared with the researcher a variety of encounters, feelings, opinions, and attitudes in regard to their high school experience. This exploration captured prevalent themes of the stressful disappointments as well as the revitalizing successes these adolescents experienced amid the various people and structures that make up high school. Each participant's story demonstrated to the researcher that for the participant a sense of safety and feelings of competence are among the most sought after commodities for establishing an identity in high school. Feelings of competence were seen within one's ability to adapt successfully to the academic and social processes associated with high school. A sense of safety was sought out through connecting with peers, competent teachers, and trustworthy adults. Interestingly, many participants' safety needs also were established through their sense of academic competence and the familiar routine of the learning process. This mix of safety and competence allowed for further enriching social and academic transactions to take place.

Moreover, many participants demonstrated incisive awareness of the limitations impacting on their ability to address the challenges associated with high school. Participants' self-awareness firmly assisted these youths in their efforts to problem-solve and adapt to high school. Participants' collective narrative evidenced a rational and optimistic outlook for future endeavors as they discussed their expectations for a life beyond high school. Nearly all participants demonstrated realistic long term goals, which paired nicely with their competencies.

Categories

The results of this study break down into three overarching areas, which are divided into three chapters: Academic Identity, Social Identity, and Other Findings. The chapter Academic Identity contains three categories: Academic Competence, Academic Frustration, and Academic Adaptation. The second chapter, Social Identity, contains two categories, Social Frustration and Social Adaptation. The third, titled Other Findings, includes several categories: Adult Assistance, Diagnosis Awareness, Teacher Attributes, Planning Beyond High School, and Overall School Experience.

A dominant theme among participants' narratives was that their personas as high school students break down into two essential facets: an academic identity and a social identity. A great deal of energy was dedicated to locating adequacy and competence in these two areas. Participants shared what they feel are the strengths and limitations related to their academic and social capabilities. They juxtaposed academic self and social self-perceptions with observations of peers and siblings. Participants also made

retrospective comparisons to their current academic and social capacities. These comparisons are seen as a means of reinforcing academic and social aptitudes and evaluating which of their abilities require improvement. Participants were discovered to be very self-aware of their limitations, particularly those with social difficulties.

In comparison to their social capacities, participants were observed to have made more explicit statements regarding their sense of academic aptitude. Participants commonly made declarations about being a good student or being better in a particular subject area than another. As a result, the category Academic Competence emerged.

When participants' attempts to further academic or social capacities were stifled, varying levels of frustration or anxiety ensued. Representative of these phenomena are set forth in the categories Academic Frustration and Social Frustration. Specific properties associated with Academic Frustration are described in subcategories Stuck and Dejected and Anxious and Depressed. Specific properties associated with the category Social Frustration are described in subcategories Reluctance to Engage, Big Crowds, Social Depletion, and Awareness of Social Limitations.

Attempts to mitigate frustration related to academic and social difficulties are captured in the categories Academic Adaptation and Social Adaptation. Specific properties associated with Academic Adaptation are detailed in the subcategories Endurance, Prioritization, and Sharing and Comparing Skills, which highlight the various ways participants made adequate academic adjustments. Specific properties associated with the category Social Adaptation are Common Interests, Sense of Safety, and Social

Stretching. These properties underscore participants' attempts at improving peer connections, as well as the functions these connections served.

In addition to the overarching findings, a variety of phenomena emerged as separate categories, yet they were intertwined with participants' sense of academic and social identities. These findings are captured in the chapter Other Findings. For instance, in highlighting their academic and social functioning, participants commonly described receiving help from an adult such as a teacher, parent, counselor, therapist, coach, etc. Such assistance was employed as a strategy to help participants in achieving a particular academic, social, or emotional aim. This gave rise to the category Adult Assistance.

Many participants expressed insight into the role their neurodevelopmental disorder plays into their social and emotional experiences. The category Diagnosis Awareness discusses participants' ability to relate strengths and limitations to their ways of being. The capacity to reflect on symptoms resultant from neurodevelopmental limitations allowed for greater insight into academic and social challenges.

Teacher Attributes also emerged as its own category. Common among all participants were the qualities they valued in their teachers. Participants expressed that sensitive, engaging, and competent teachers are very important. Participants felt these qualities made for a positive experience versus a negative experience, hence the associated properties Positive and Negative in reference to teacher attributes. A teacher-student bond was necessary for participants to feel safe and cared for, and to thrive within the learning environment.

In the category Planning Beyond High School, participants shared what they believe might be in store for them after graduation. Most post high school aspirations were indicated to be realistically in line with their current skill sets and characteristics. Several participants indicated anxiety related to attending college, which was associated with leaving home and making new friends.

Lastly, the majority of participants expressed a positive experience in relation to high school, while a few claimed their experience to be predominantly negative. The category of Overall Impression, and consequently the associated properties Positive and Negative, was created to demonstrate how participants sum up the experience of high school. Many positive encounters were discussed, most of which centered on friendships and positive teacher interactions. Negative experiences were related primarily to a sense of not feeling connected, feeling unsafe, and discontentment with the learning process.

Chapter V

Academic Identity

Academic Competence

Most participants declared that from a social stand point school historically has been challenging. As they entered high school, it was important to discover an area through which they could experience a sense of pride and proficiency. Despite self-professed social limitations, many participants were hardwired to “do school.” These participants took pride in their mastery in one or more academic areas. They sought out and maintained a sense of competence by way of the academic process. To assess and validate academic proficiencies, participants would often juxtapose academic skills with their peers. The sense of agency participants forged out of their academic competency would beget confidence for further scholastic challenges. Moreover, as their sense of mastery in a particular academic area began to consolidate, participants could then fashion ideas for future career aspirations.

Regarding the subject of math, Andy, a freshman with an ASD and ADHD, was beginning to find his niche. He shared, “I’ve always been very good at calculating. Like, I’ve always been able to look at a problem and solve it with ease. All I know is that when I do it [math], it feels good.” When participants highlighted an area of strength they

would often compare their abilities with their peers to further validate their competencies. For instance, Xavier expresses pride in his coding abilities after taking a challenging computer course. He further internalizes his newfound ability through a peer comparison as indicated by the following:

It was a class where I learned the basics of website coding. I didn't know anything about coding so the way he taught me and how it was hands on or something, I caught on real fast, which was a surprise to even me... Yeah, arguably I was the second best in the class, second best only to a kid who has a much easier time learning. And he codes on his own, like hours a day.

Having an awareness regarding one's academic ability contributes to the process of formulating plans beyond high school. Kate is a senior who was disgruntled by the high academic pressure her school placed on its student body. Her narrative was riddled with frustration and anxiety with respect to traditional content areas, with which she struggles. However, she feels competent with respect to certain non-traditional classes. She points out, "I'm more excited to go to college and pursue stuff that I want to pursue, instead of like being stuck taking classes I don't want to take." Kate found her niche within the performing arts classes and among her artistic peers. Despite the scholastic pressure of her high school, Kate's academic competencies offered her a trajectory to formulate a realistic plan beyond high school.

Academic Frustration

Jared shared,

All this talk about how you need to get on top of this, you're going to college soon, you're not a kid anymore. All of that coming down on me, I just remember going to my first period class feeling sick and wanting to throw up. I asked the teacher to go the bathroom and I remember breaking down crying for half the period. I was, you know, having a brutal time and not being able to focus on my work—just wanting to go home and go into my bedroom and like punch a wall.

Whether or not participants expressed an ability to thrive academically, all of the respondents shared varying levels of frustration within the academic process. Themes of being stuck and unable to shoulder academic tasks were experienced on both an acute and chronic level. Exposure to academic frustration would give rise to feelings of aggravation, dejection, and anxiety. Participants often described their academic frustration as a temporary state of negative emotion. However, when participants could not “muscle through” academic challenges, the negative emotion had a more lasting and deleterious impact. When the sensation of being chronically “stuck” occurred, some experienced a loss of motivation in relation to the learning process. Others noted anxiety and depression in relation to prolonged academic frustration.

Stuck and dejected.

Peter, a competent student with ASD, expands on his experience of being “stuck.” He relayed, “It’s frustrating because you’re trying to figure out all of these things and when you can’t figure it out, it’s almost like this sense of dejection.” Peter would later add that academic frustration can be particularly aggravating when it occurs within an area of established competence. He stated, “Especially when it’s something you feel you are good at. You are surprised because you thought you had it in the bag.” Peter, who was among many participants who struggled socially in middle school, shared that when he began high school it was important to be able to “hang your hat” on your academic abilities. Several respondents indicated that when their academic competence is compromised they experience a sense of depletion and loss of motivation. For instance, Stan is a senior with ASD. He is a talented student who takes pride in his ability to easily master difficult material. However, regarding his frustrating encounter in an honors physics class, Stan shared, “I remember specifically sixth period is when I was done with the day and I was like, ‘That’s it, I’m done! And I just basically like stopped doing stuff.’”

Anxious and depressed.

For some participants, the sense of angst from their academic frustrations was fleeting. However, when academic challenges were experienced as chronically insurmountable, sustained academic frustration would result in more severe and prolonged feelings of anxiety and dejection.

Mark, who has ADHD, shared his frustrations regarding an AP (Advanced Placement) science class from which he eventually withdrew.

It [science class] took some life out of me. It added stress, making me stay up at night. I was all right staying up for other classes, trying to stay up and finish web assignments and stuff like that. It took a lot of stress to do it. Some of the assignments were over my head. I had a lot to do and I couldn't really handle it well. It was all I could take.

Kate's high school is known for its high standards and competitiveness. She shared she begrudgingly struggles to keep up with academic expectations. She commented on the duress she believes it causes for her and among her peers.

And I know a lot of people who stay up super late because they're like, "I don't want to have to go to bed and wake up again and again and go to school!" I think this is why anxiety and mental disorders are going through the roof!

Kate was among several participants who in addition to having a neurobehavioral disorder were diagnosed with anxiety or depression. She spoke explicitly about the academic pressure she regularly feels. Kate gave the impression she was wounded by the same process that is supposed to supply her with scholastic competence.

Xavier was an exceptional student. He had been diagnosed with depression and anxiety. Xavier demonstrated a tendency to personalize his struggles related to geometry class. The anticipation that he might fail a test transcended a temporary feeling of aggravation and left a sizeable imprint on his sense of self. He shared,

It [frustration] was mostly during sophomore year in geometry where if I thought I bombed a test it would make me feel like a failure. I never bomb tests. I felt like I was going to fail the class and that I wasn't going to be able to bounce back from that.

Academic Adaptation

So that's why I started out freshman year with all honors classes, to test my stuff. I guess he [older brother] was a guinea pig and I was the one who should have done well. We were just trying to correct the mistakes that happened to him because he sort of got a little screwed over. They [the high school] didn't put him on the right path for college. But I came in guns blazing trying to see what I could do.

Participants shared a variety of strategies in order to work through academic frustration and to inspire motivation associated with the learning process. Three themes were present in the collective narratives: academic endurance, prioritizing academic tasks, and making comparisons. In reference to the latter, participants would validate their academic competencies and inspire motivation through comparing their abilities to siblings, peers, or to an earlier time in school (e.g. middle school).

Endurance.

The opening quote of this subcategory belongs to Mark, who, despite struggling with symptoms of ADHD, was determined to take on a challenging course load made up of honors and Advance Placement (AP) classes. Mark is a very proud student who strives to work independently through academic challenges. In spite of the tremendous frustration he felt within his many difficult classes, Mark exhibited the tenacity to push the academic envelope. He stated,

Some might have taken an easier path than I did. I sort of took high level classes. Starting out freshman year in an honors class, then sophomore year in an AP class, and three AP classes and an honors last year, and this year I started out with four APs.

The capacity to endure academic challenges emerged as most common way to adapt to the challenges of academia. Participants' endurance grew out of many hours of frustrating scholastic tasks that they managed to work through. Stan parallels Mark's desire to push through and endure a difficult class. Stan's high level of interest for the subject of physics served as an antidote for the physical and mental exhaustion it spawned. He stated,

I try to keep going but my brain just tells me to quit. And sometimes I quit, but sometimes I keep going. It's just, I don't know. If I'm having a really bad day my body just quits. Although if it's a fun class and I'm feeling bad, I try to do more.

Andy, a freshman with ASD and ADHD explicates an optimistic state of mind necessary to endure his most frustrating subject area, English. He stated, "What I have learned is to

always look on the bright side and not the bad side.” Jack, a senior with an ASD, is a member of his high school’s cross country team, demonstrates a steady pace is not only important in distance running, but in academia as well. When asked what is most challenging for him academically, Jack shared the following:

I would say keeping up with the homework and grades. I mean, it’s not like there is just one year when you are going to be worry free. Like, you just have to stay on it, stay on top of it.

Mary was also diagnosed with an ASD as well as ADHD. She describes how she adaptively employs her anxiety to assist with academic persistence.

Honestly, the fear of failure helps. It’s probably not the best way to do it, but the anxiety is a good way to kick yourself into gear as much as it sucks. So I think the weird thing is anxiety is, it’s the number one thing that keeps me going and making me do this.

Prioritizing.

In addition to exhibiting academic endurance, participants shared various ways of sifting through what they believe to be important. This adaptive skill served the purpose of managing stress. Sometimes prioritizing would take the shape of simply avoiding homework for a more pleasurable activity. However, in many cases, participants discerned what was of value to them through a more painstaking process.

Mark shares the difficult decision to drop one of his valued honors classes. “They were demanding too much, I guess. They were just taking too much out of me—the work that I needed to complete and the level of stress that I was in wasn’t worth completing the class.”

In a similar fashion, Becky, a senior who was diagnosed with nonverbal learning disability, shared how she managed to avoid the strain and hassle of an advanced band class. She shared, “I hate auditioning. In my freshman year I went to the audition room and I freaked out! And then I left. And I was like, ‘You know, I’m fine with being in concert band.’” Becky would go on to explain she was content with her decision to remain in the lower-level concert band class throughout high school.

Jared was diagnosed with ASD and the non-attentive form of ADHD. He is an exceptional student. Jared demonstrates below that he is a conscientious student. However, he also expresses how he sometimes prioritizes leisure time activities over what he believes to be a trivial homework assignment. He stated,

I do care about my grades and I do want to do well in school. I don’t always slack off and I am very good at taking standardized tests, so that helps me out a lot. But if it’s something I just don’t care about, if it comes down to it, at 9:30 if I have a science worksheet or watching football, I’m watching the football game because that interests me. I value the happiness of watching a football game over the five points I get from a homework assignment.

Sharing and comparing.

A third theme present among participants was the notion of comparisons. Participants would compare their current academic capabilities with peers, siblings, or retrospectively (i.e. comparing themselves to a previous time in school). Juxtaposing in this way served to validate academic competence. In the opening quote to this subcategory (Academic Adaptation), Mark compares his motivation to take difficult classes to that of his older brother. In comparing himself to his brother, who was “screwed over” by not taking college-ready courses, Mark was destined to carve for himself a scholastic path beyond high school. As a result, Mark began his first year “guns blazing;” motivated and poised to endure the academic challenges he anticipated to be in store.

Kate’s stress and frustration were normalized through an adaptive peer comparison. Kate explained that prior to high school she was anticipating social groups at school would resemble the hostile cliques portrayed in such John Hughes movies as *The Breakfast Club* and *Sixteen Candles*. However, instead Kate found herself connected to a network of compassionate peers who shared her frustrations with academic stressors. She shared,

It’s interesting because growing up you watch these old classic movies about how high school is going to have all of these cliques. It’s crazy because high school isn’t as judgmental as I thought at first. Instead, I notice we’re all just young kids trying to figure out what we are doing with our lives. But I think I see more support and more understanding from everyone because I think since they are so

stressed out and worried about school and all of this other stuff that we are able to kind of connect through all of that.

This normalizing of academic stressors offered Kate kinship and relief. Much like Kate, Kevin forged companionships by sharing his school dissatisfaction with peers. Kevin cleverly stated, “Common disinterest toward the school can create friendships.”

Jared is a self-proclaimed inflexible and stubborn intellect. He informed that prior to high school his inflexible style of thinking and desire for teacher attention resulted in acting out behavior. Through comparing his current behavioral disposition to that of middle school, Jared demonstrates the gains he has made in tolerating frustration set off by disagreements with his teacher.

So, before my reaction to dealing with them [teachers], especially in middle school, was like, “This isn’t going my way and I’m going to let you know that it’s not going my way!” I would melt down and I was very confrontational about it. I would almost always have to go see the psychologist and I would need to go decompress and move away from the situation. But in high school, I’ve gotten a lot better at being more accepting of the situation.

Chapter VI

Social Identity

Given the social comprehension difficulties common among children with a SELI (see Lipton & Nowicki, 2009), it was anticipated that participants would detail a variety of socially frustrating experiences. Such was determined to be the case. However, resolution to many of these frustrating challenges was discovered to be unexpectedly plentiful. It was also remarkable to uncover the amount of insight participants expressed in relation to their social limitations. The following two categories, Social Frustration and Social Adaptation, reflect the themes among participants' experiences related to both their social frustration, as well as the processes they employ to adapt to their social surroundings in high school.

Social Frustration

You know where you're at the point where you want to take a step and you can't? Like you just freeze? You just kinda freeze. You really want to do it, but you don't have the courage or even the ability to think of it.

The above quote is from Stan who expressed a sense of inadequacy in his capacity to interact with peers. Like Stan, many participants conveyed a longing to connect with

peers. Some demonstrated more success than others in their ability to associate with their high school cohorts. However, nearly all participants communicated a level of frustration resultant from the trials and tribulations of their social efforts. Participants were discovered to demonstrate incisive awareness into their social difficulties. The impact of their social frustration was expressed on a continuum that ranged from low confidence in one's ability to engage with others, to a sense of loneliness and depression. Themes that presented in participants' narratives included reluctant engagement with peers, being overwhelmed by crowds, feeling socially depleted, and awareness of social difficulties.

Reluctance to engage.

Stan conveyed a longing to establish deeper, more meaningful friendships among his high school peers. Stan's shrewd awareness of his social difficulties is evident as he recounts what stifles him in his pursuit of more meaningful relationships.

Like, there is sort of like a barrier for me. To me there's like a stranger, acquaintance, school friend, best friend. I can get people to school friend, stranger, acquaintance. I then take those acquaintances and find out which ones would be a best school friend. But then you have like an Iron Curtain of just like from school friend to best friend because I just have trouble saying, "Hey, do you want to hang out after school?"

Participants often articulated thoughtfully the difficulties social interactions caused for them. Reluctance to engage was commonly a result of anxiety or a sense of

being overwhelmed or over stimulated. Jared also articulated clearly the social apprehension he endured in his effort to connect with peers. He stated,

I had a hard time joining a social group. When you get to high school, cliques are very much a thing and there are predefined social groups. As stereotypical as it is, it's hard to find a lunch table to sit at. So I had a hard time getting into the pre-established groups. And with those pre-established groups, it was awkward. I really want to eat with this guy but I don't want to eat with that guy or something like that. Or, I really want to talk to this guy, but he's always with that guy. So it's hard to get that personalized attention in a big group . . . It's a lot of stimulation for me. Because I want to talk with him and him and him, but I don't want to do it all together. I want to talk one on one, but they want to do it in a group. That's hard for me to do.

Big crowds.

The sensation of feeling stress relative to large groups was common for many participants. Early on in her interview, Becky declared she was not fond of school primarily because of the crowds. She stated, "There are way too many people and everybody is trying to talk to you, and it's shouty." Becky further analyzed the reason behind her discomfort. "The problem is that [in] the old part of the school the hallways are still really small. So it gets like a clogged vein with cholesterol, like clumps of students."

Kevin, also attends a large high school. He gave a similar account regarding the dense population of his school. “What I least liked was the amount of kids that like on a daily basis are all corralled together.” Kevin went on to describe a claustrophobic sensation behind his discomfort. He shared, “It made me feel that if something happened it would be very difficult to remove myself from the situation.”

Jared shared he had made tremendous social strides since beginning high school. However, he continues to have difficulties in larger groups. Jared reported physical manifestations in relationship to crowds as he relayed, “So especially in the big impersonal situation like that, it’s just scary, and I feel like I want to throw up.”

Mary expresses her discontent for large groups as well. She stated,

It’s really hard being crammed in with a bunch of people you don’t quite know or don’t care to know very well; it’s a bunch of your peers that are frankly kind of immature or just talking about things you don’t want to hear about or and you can’t escape them. You are stuck with them for upwards of 6 hours in a day and it can be very stressful.

Social depletion.

The stress and strain of social engagement was present in a variety of forms. At some point in their high school experiences, a sense of feeling socially depleted was evident among all participants. Stan highlights his feeling socially depleted in the following way:

There's this thing that I came up with called the social battery. Think of it like an iPhone charger. Now if you're more extroverted than introverted, the opposite is true. I'm very introverted, so being in a very loud party drains my battery very quickly. And the more introverted I am, the longer it takes for that battery to recharge; AKA, the more time I need to spend alone to feel rested and stuff

Kate, who was much more socially inclined than Stan, demonstrated that she is not immune to feeling overwhelmed and depleted. She illustrates her aggravation as she negotiates multiple social demands.

So I had a friend, and this was a Monday, and the day before, Sunday, he texts me and said, "Hey, my girlfriend says I can't talk to you anymore" blah blah blah and all that stuff. So, that was upsetting. Then I also got a text during the day from one of my other friends who said, "Hey, one of our friends tried to overdose last night!" So that was crazy. And then I also broke up with this guy that I've been seeing. And when you add to that me over thinking literally everything, it was crazy! So I was walking to choir and the first guy who told me he had to ignore me, he said hi to me. Then after the bell rang I just started bawling.

Pete describes the first time he realized the gravity of his social challenges and the emotional impact it had on him. He shared,

I knew that I was different but in the fourth or fifth grade I was like "Oh this is much worse than I previously thought it was." You know, when everyone is starting to get all, you know, caught up in their image and how they appear to everyone else. And uh, I was kind of depressed for a little bit.

Anxiety and depressive feelings related to social experiences were demonstrated by many of the participants. Oliver, who has ASD and ADHD, shared that he was distraught over a social incident that occurred in one of his classes. He was reluctant to give details, however he explained, “I don’t want to go back to my school because I said stuff that I regret this year.” Despite his social limitations, Oliver conveyed a great deal of pride in his ability to associate with his peers. When his faux pas resulted in a suspension, Oliver became depressed, which resulted in an outpatient psychiatric hospitalization. Oliver’s experience highlights the tenuous social identity that many participants demonstrated.

Social circumstances did not always require a discrete unpleasant event (as was Oliver’s case) in order for participants to feel anxiety and a sense of depletion. Social frustrations were also experienced through feeling misunderstood or that they perhaps misunderstood another’s intentions. Violet, who has ASD and an SLD, stated the following:

I’ve heard my friends tell me that when they’re bluntly honest with me, it’s like, I’m still in a childish stage, and I might accidentally insult you. It’s happened many times with my mom. I won’t notice it but I will say something and she will be totally offended.

Nolan, who also has an ASD, was explicit in the way that his being misperceived made him feel. He shared,

Yeah... I just felt like an asshole ever since then. It didn't really hit me that I was a real piece of shit for saying that until junior year. But I wanted him to like me and I was like, "Good god, what the hell was I thinking!"

Both Violet and Nolan were explicit regarding their misinterpretation of others and how it impacts them. They highlight the keen awareness many participants demonstrated in essentially knowing what they do not know about social processes.

Awareness of social limitations.

The insight that participants had into their social difficulties was impressive. It was clear that a great deal of thought had gone into how these youths experience their social worlds. They were proficient at breaking down and sizing up what they believed to be the cause of their social angst. Participants' perceptive self-analyses seemed necessary in the service of developing plausible ways to adapt to their social environments—to reduce emotional discomfort and improve social engagement. Before participants can resolve an issue, they needed first to gain perspective on its source. The following subcategory indicates the measures participants take to adapt to their social environments.

Social Adaptation

I felt like I was able to connect with the students because we could actually choose the class. I could actually choose what I wanted to be. And like all of the

other kids [who] chose to be in that class, there was like a common thing kind of keeping us all together; like, we chose to be in this class specifically.

In the above passage, Kevin shares the importance that commonality has in making meaningful connections with peers. He explained that the subject of history facilitated a bond between him and his classmates. Locating a positive connection with a peer or group of peers was found to be the most dominate theme under the category of Social Adaptation. Participants described a variety of ways in which to successfully engage with their peers. Through establishing friendly connections, participants experienced a sense of safety. Once safety was established, they were poised to take risks necessary for further social exploration. Consequently, the sense of safety attained through peer connections was an important and sought after commodity. The many participants who struggled with uncomfortable social anxiety and frustration often took steps or were pushed by others to “stretch” their social capacities. Thus the properties related to the category of Social Adaptation are common interests, sense of safety, and social stretching

Common interests.

Locating common interests among peers was the most cited method of connecting. Participants found similar interest amid their cohorts in extracurricular activities as well as through discussing common interests such as video games, technology, and pop culture. Pete communicates his enthusiasm when he discovered how to better connect with his peers through common interests. He sated,

By about sophomore year in high school I pretty much had it down. I figured out what I wanted to do and it's worked very well so far socially. I found some groups who had some same interests—same senses of humor, same preferences, same ideologies used.

Pete expands his social technique as he states,

Because pop culture brings in common things that everyone kind of like knows about, and it gives you more of an opportunity to kind of work into a conversation. Where you bring up a pop culture event and you kind of start talking about it and then it just kind of works its way into something that kind is connected. And then one thing leads to another and you're talking about something completely unrelated.

Many participants who were anxious about social interaction demonstrated the utility of a social spearhead to help advance meaningful social connections. Pete broke down the process of testing the social waters before delving in to more robust social topics. His technique involved leading with topics common to many of his peers.

Likewise, Xavier was explicit about his social spearheading techniques. In discussing how he becomes acquainted with new peers he shared,

Since I have a lot of anxiety in person, what I would do is, those friends that I wanted to get to know more or to get to know in general, I would friend them on Facebook and I would message them. Often times we would develop close relationships in that way. Then I'd be able to talk to them easier in school. So it was like a stepping stone.

Technology was commonly used to break the ice. Becky also demonstrated how technology insulates her from overwhelming anxiety she is prone to experience at large social functions. She highlighted her clever use of a Pokémon game that she brought to a party.

I wouldn't talk to people unless people came up to me and said, "Wow you're really good with Pokémon." And then I started talking to them about common ground. But most of the time I was just sitting on the couch and playing Pokémon and people would talk to me about that and then we talked about other games we liked. Yeah, Pokémon helps me feel better. It's nice to know that like, I know it's fake but it's nice to hear. Like a few people say, "You're really talented!" Even if they're just talking about my Pokémon character.

Through the use of a game that provoked interest in others, Becky was able to rally her peers to approach her at a comfortable pace. As a result, she was able to engage in meaningful conversations to which her sense of competence and pride were validated.

Sense of safety.

As one would expect among any developing adolescent, connecting with peers was as important for participants as eating and breathing. The clever methods participants used to make and improve social connections is testimony to its universal importance. A primary function that connecting with a peer or group of peers served was a sense of safety. Having supportive peers allowed participants to experience a sense of ease and

reassurance within their school environments. It also provided them a sense of increased confidence, which allowed them to risk exposure to additional social situations.

Below, Jared shares the unique support he receives from his peer group.

Part of it is that it helps in social situations. They're all teenage boys, too. Like, "Hey guys! I'm going to ask this girl to Taco Bell!" And their like, "Do it! She's cute!" But also, they give support like, "Man, I'm going through this really awful breakup." And they're like, "Yeah, that's happened to me too." And it's not stuff that the high school or college age counselors can relate to immediately. So I've gotten support with stuff like that.

Violet shares the sense of relief her friends provided her upon arriving at a new school.

I thought, "There's going to be so many kids around me and if I do something stupid somebody is going to see. But after the first day I met two of my friends, one was a boy one was a girl. Then things started getting normal.

Kate also conveyed the good fortune she feels in finding a caring group of cohorts.

I think in the community that I'm in, the people I'm surrounded with...

Thankfully I'm around people who are very open and very kind and more understanding; but I know other people in like other, quote-unquote, cliques or other places within the school who feel the complete opposite of me.

Nolan, who reported being socially awkward, indicated that his friends were the best part of his school experience. He describes the sense of safety and glee he and his peers experienced on a regular basis at the lunch table.

We would have daily roast sessions where we would just flame each other. Then we would just talk shit about people. Not like people who never did anything wrong; people that actually do shit that actually bothered us. You know, those people were just terrible people. And what I liked most about that was we were so open. We weren't afraid that they knew we were talking shit about them. We didn't care. We had no fears at all.

Nolan relayed later that having a group of friends resulted in increased confidence for meeting new peers. He stated, "Once I met my friends and really became friends with them, I didn't really get bothered by meeting new people or having to meet new people."

Social stretching.

Participants' strong inclinations to expand their social worlds were evident. This could be seen in their desire to reach out and connect more with peers despite the discomfort they experienced within the socialization process. Pete relays the success he experienced when he made up his mind to take more social risks. He stated,

I made the decision that I am going to socialize with people—not as much as I can, but much more than I did. And just kind of see where it went. This was around the end of eighth grade in the beginning of freshman year. And it worked very well. I made a lot more friends, I found a lot of people with the same interests as me, and I found a lot of people who I thought would be much more different than me. And we kind of just hit it off.

Compared to Pete, Stan's social life is not as robust. However, his preference to be alone did not prevent Stan from stretching beyond his comfort level. He conveyed his plan to be more social in the following way:

I value my private life a lot. Like, I'd much rather be alone playing video games and stuff then hanging out with people in social settings. But recently I realized it might be good for me to at least experiment and see what I can do because I do have several candidates in my head.

Oliver is an extremely social young man. However, he shared that early on he had tremendous difficulties with socialization. Oliver credits his mother for pushing him to socialize more.

She [his mother] would put me in social groups and stuff like that. And then one day in the summer, you know how people spent all of their time inside and stuff? My mom would not allow that. In sixth grade she would kick me out of the house, and then she would tell me to go bike somewhere like over to a friend's house. So that's pretty much how it started

Chapter VII

Other Findings

Adult Assistance

Common among participants were references to who assisted them and how they were assisted in a time of need. Teachers, case managers, coaches and counselors are often seen as trusted advocates who are used to assist with social and emotional needs. Participants described having a trusting bond with these advocates. This trust made them feel safe to approach their advocates in times of need. These adults served functions that included assisting with academic needs, offering hope and encouragement, and assisting with emotional regulation.

For Ken, school does not come easy. Despite working diligently to keep his grades up, Ken would often become frustrated with the learning process. Ken would call on his father to help keep him motivated and to assist Ken in controlling his emotions. Ken made use of his father's wisdom and encouragement in two different ways: actual contact, and by referencing guidance which his dad previously provided. Below, Ken gives an example of how he directly called on his father for assistance.

Sometimes I'll ask the teacher if can go to the restroom because I have to cool myself down. Or I call my father to ask for advice. I call him during work. And I'll be like, "Hey dad, can I ask you for some quick tips?" And he'll be like, "Do this." But first he will ask me, "How bad was the situation?" And then he'll tell

me what to do and just see how it goes. And then he'll call me back or text me to see what happened.

Ken described several instances of the guidance his father provided in absentia, as well. Ken recalled one of his father's lessons, "Because I know I have anger, too. My father helps me with that. He says anger is not a road to success so that's one thing he teaches me is how to control my anger."

Xavier also made use of his father's help. However, he points out the strong connection he made with a special teacher. When asked whom he goes to for assistance, Xavier stated,

Mainly my father, but there was [a teacher] who dealt with other kids. Her name was Miss D. I still talk to her nowadays. I see her at my job sometimes. I would say I definitely have a bond with her.

Stan points out the assistance he received from a teacher as well. His teacher was challenged with the task of helping Stan "stretch" his social capacities in an effort to reach out to more peers. Stan shared,

I go into a class where they teach you about social skills, mostly. And the teacher has prodded me to be a little more, to do more stuff like the friend thing. She's trying to get me to go to more dances which I'm still not going to.

Stan also cites a trusted teaching assistant (TA) who assists him with controlling his frustration at school.

But after I get angry I just want to talk about it. I need to get a rant with somebody, normally my TA. I will just walk and talk with the TA in the hallway. And that helps a lot. Just ranting about the problem with the TA in the hallway. I like walk and talk and that helps a lot to find a short-term solution.

Diagnosis Awareness

Participants regularly made connections between the symptoms of their neurodevelopmental disorder and their school functioning. The capacity to examine how their neurodevelopmental disorder impacts on functioning indicates that adolescents with a SELI are to some extent aware of the increased strides needed to function in high school in comparison to their neurotypical peers. Awareness of this kind is seen as extremely adaptive. One's awareness of their neurodevelopmental difficulties results in potential opportunities to make adequate adjustments to one's environment. It also is necessary for the purpose of integrating one's neurodevelopmental strengths and weaknesses into their sense of self—to expose the dragon before slaying it.

Mark relays a developing awareness of the impact of ADHD has on his academic frustrations. When asked what he felt to be the most challenging part of school he shared, “Probably trying to maintain a constant effort. I don't know if it's ADHD, but when things get really tough sometimes I crumble. That's the toughest part.” Oliver also indicated how ADHD affects his school performance when he stated, “I get distracted easily and it makes it difficult to pay attention during lectures.” Kate discusses the exhausting cycle that ADHD creates when coupled with her anxiety:

It's interesting because the anxiety, the ADHD and the other stuff all groups together and it's difficult to see how it affects me individually. But I don't know. I think it's stressful because if I'm too tired to pay attention or if I'm just too anxious or I just feel I can't pay attention in general, than that causes more anxiety, which in turn makes it more difficult to pay attention and it's just kind of like this huge circle effect.

Jared demonstrates that some understanding of one's neurodevelopmental difficulties is an important step in coming to terms with it. Jared shared,

And when I look at stuff now in my own social relationships, I see so many times that I get messages sent verbally, nonverbally, and I'm unable to pick up on things. Where I would freak out about things before, now I'm like "Oh it doesn't really matter. I'm fine." I'm a lot more confident in my interactions with people.

And I think that's something that bodes very well for life.

Pete describes gains he has made as well as he states, "Socializing is still more difficult [for me] than most people will have to deal with, but it's much easier for me now than, say, four or five years ago."

Participants' awareness of their neurodevelopmental difficulties positions them to make appropriate adjustments. Moreover, this type of self-enlightenment allows them to synthesize their limitations into their sense of identity—to develop a narrative script which says, "I need to work on this," or perhaps, "I'm okay with being like this."

Teacher Attributes

Participants were very explicit regarding what they believed made a good teacher. Below, categories are separated into what they believe made up both positive and negative qualities in relation to their teachers.

Positive.

My teacher, Mr. K, is always very nice and I like when he talks because I'm always into what he is saying. Almost all of the teachers are like that. I always feel a good vibe from the teachers. I wonder if that's why I always like listening to them.

The above quote is from Andy who stated he enjoys school primarily as a result of the positive experience with his teachers. Participants were consistent with what attributes they feel are necessary to make a "good teacher." They described good teachers as being those who are able to connect and engage with their students. It was also important to see their teachers as being able to motivate students and to be enthusiastic about teaching.

Participants needed to feel that teachers were there for and enjoyed being with them. Connecting with a teacher offered meaning beyond a student-teacher relationship, which made for a more powerful learning experience. Jared sums up the experience of a compelling learning relationship when asked what he likes in a teacher:

Like, the teachers who want to have fun. They want to learn about their students. I think the teachers who look at it like, "I'm trying to teach you the material!" I don't think they're as good. But when they look at it like, "I'm trying to help you be ready for life, and yes, learning this history is important but also these other

skills are good. And [then] they talk about all this and how it relates to you. And not just, “Here is this what happened and you should memorize it!”

“Good teachers” were enthusiastic about content area, but also enjoyed interacting with students. They would often deviate from the lessons being taught to make small talk with the class. Departing from lecture material helps the student experience the teacher as less sterile and more of a real person, and ultimately facilitates sought after connections. For instance, Stan shared, “Like a good teacher is one who can just interact with the students and just chat with them.” Jared expressed his zeal for a favorite teacher:

He [teacher] wasn’t afraid to get off-topic and we could have silly conversations. We could talk about our weekends and do all that, but he also knows when it’s time to get down to business. And I didn’t look at him as an authoritarian figure—like a mean old teacher. I looked at them as like, “Yeah!” When I see him in the hall I’d be like, “hey what’s up” and not like, “oh, hello Sir.” They’re willing to connect with us and talk with us.

Also important to making a connection was that the teacher was experienced as being understanding and supportive. Participants often came to class with multiple burdens and worries which made learning difficult. In reference to his favorite teachers, Pete shared, “They’re very empathetic and they help me work through all of these things that I have.” Xavier also speaks to the importance of an in-tune teacher as he catalogs what he feels are important teacher attributes, “Like being enthusiastic and being understanding; not giving up when it comes to struggling students; someone who makes the coursework challenging but doable. But in general I think that is what makes a good

teacher.” Oliver emphasized how he feels good teachers know how to motivate and meet students where they are at. He shared, “Like a good teacher is someone who tries to motivate the class to work harder. They like give you assignments that are not too much but not too less.” Kate was explicit about the tremendous anxiety she feels in response to school. She was insistent that a good teacher is appropriately in sync with students in need. She reflects on favorite teachers:

They were my American Studies teachers and they’re probably the best class I’ve ever been in. They cared so much about our wellbeing. I would be able to go up to them and be like, “Hey, I had a really bad night last night. I was not able to finish this homework. Is it ok that I can turn it in as soon as I can?” They are like “Totally!”

Negative.

I think teachers make or break a class a lot of the time. No matter how much you love a subject or something, how good you might be, if you have a bad teacher it’s not going to make a difference, you’re not going to do well in the class.

In addition to illuminating positive attributes, participants also highlighted what they believed to be negative attributes among their teachers. A teacher’s inability to connect with students was the most commonly cited trait. An absence of teacher-student connection placed students at risk for feeling chronically misunderstood.

Kate expresses her frustration when the teacher-student bond is missing. She asserts, “I think it’s just a lot of times there’s a disconnect between the students and the teachers and that makes it difficult.” Kevin also expressed his agitation with teachers who he believes do not make an effort to connect. He conveyed the following:

You’d be surprised how many teachers give off the vibe that they don’t want to teach and they don’t want to be here right now. I feel like if someone is an educator they should really, really take their job seriously and not just hand out packets and talk for a few minutes and then be on the computer the whole time.

Ken also shared his discontent for teachers who don’t seem to care. His response to what he believes to be frustrating in school is as follows:

Not knowing if teachers are anyone able to help, or like if they just don’t care. They’re just there and they’re like, “If you fail, you fail, if you do good, then you do good. I don’t care” I’m worried about those teachers and if they are like that, how can we change even though it’s not my responsibility

Like many of the participants, Ken places the onus on the teacher to keep him engaged in the learning process. Participants needed to be reassured that they had access to understanding teachers that could help. In order to do so a level of bonding was required. Nolan gave the impression that he takes it personally when teachers are not available for him. In his response, Nolan demonstrates how a poor connection with a teacher can impact on motivation for academic tasks. His agitation is notable as he explains,

When they don't bother to teach you anything, or they don't get that connection with you. If you don't care about us then why the fuck should I do any of the stuff you tell me to do. You need to have respect for the students.

Mary also offered a colorful description for how her teacher's inability to connect impacts on the learning experience:

It was just harder to stay focused in that class. So you're tired and you don't want to be there and the teacher was kind of not the most fun person to be around.

When he taught it was not that interesting, you know. So a lot of times the teacher can make the class and that teacher was not enjoyable. I found him hard to listen to, boring, not engaging, a little bit. I don't know how to say menacing or cold, I don't know if he is, you know, a person who likes his students that much or not. He tried to, but it showed that he wasn't good at connecting with the kids.

When participants felt disconnected, they were vulnerable to feeling misunderstood or unheard. Jack was reticent to say anything negative about his teachers. However, he managed to demonstrate agitation in the absence of an adequate connection to a particular teacher. He shared, "The teacher was a little short with everybody. She just comes off to me as wanting to put everyone in the same basket." By not relating with students as individuals, a connection is less likely. When the student-teacher bond was absent, participants expressed a sense of feeling unheard or misunderstood by their teachers. For example, Kevin, who was prone to overwhelming anxiety at school, indicates a strong need for a teacher to be in-tune with his needs:

And what made me mad is that there were some teachers understood what I was going through—like, when I was having a lot of mental issues and difficulties. But then other teachers thought that I was just jazzing it up trying to get out of class. [This one teacher] thought that I was lying. I would just sit in the corner and hide from the security guard and pretend like I wasn't there. And then when she asked where I was I would tell her I was at the nurses because I didn't want her to think that I was wandering around. And then she said I checked the nurse and she said that you weren't there.

Similarly, Violet demonstrates a need to be understood more by her teacher. In regard to her physical education class she stated,

Like, if you have special needs, I had this teacher who had been our substitute before. She knows I have special issues. I have a weird tendon so if I run for certain long periods of time it will literally pull and then I won't be able to move. So I at least try but [it is not enough for her]. And every day she will be yelling and screaming at me about it. And I'll be like, "But I have a doctor's note!"

Planning Beyond High School

The majority of participants expressed realistic goals regarding their plans beyond high school. As one would expect, participants in the latter years of high school tended to have a more concise plan. All of the participants who had not yet graduated high school were considering college. Two participants had recently graduated high school and were currently attending a community college. Themes that were present consisted of whether

or not skills and abilities met their future college ambition, and how they feel about going to college.

As discussed earlier, participants were impressively self-aware. They called on their strengths and limitations to assist in formulating decisions about college majors and possible careers. Most conveyed what appear to be realistic post high school choices based on how their interests matched up with a scholastic forte. For instance, Becky had a knack for art. She desires to pursue a career in animation. Jack is in a varsity sport and taking anatomy and hopes to become a physical therapist. Peter also conveyed a realistic pairing of his strong suits with a possible career. He highlights a specific plan:

I'm going to study history and social sciences. I've already been accepted to college. I'm going to work to be a history teacher. I might minor in Spanish because I'm in an [advanced] Spanish class right now. Learning Spanish is definitely going to help me in my future endeavors.

Likewise, Jared expressed confidence in his plans beyond high school. He stated,

I want to go to Kansas and study broadcasting and have a minor in political science. I really like politics. It's something that interests me, and public speaking and all that. But I definitely want to go into some type of sports journalism and broadcasting.

Some remained uncertain of a particular college and career path. However, they used knowledge about themselves to help narrow their options. In discussing her career aspirations Mary stated,

I realized that I did not want to be a one on one psychologist because I like people, but I think my emotions would probably get in the way of that job. I think I would become too close to a person or I would get, you know, my emotions would affect the job.

Only two participants shared what appeared to be impractical ambitions based on scholastic strengths and limitations. Mark shared he would like to study science and research in college, which were among the two classes he indicated to be the most frustrating. Mark is an extremely determined student who likely desires to enter college much like he did high school—with “guns blazing.” Ken, who is small in stature, shared he would like to one day play professional basketball. He added that he desires to attend college in order to study engineering. Ken shared that he struggles in the area of math.

A second theme was that of participant’s anxious feelings about beginning college. The anxiety centered primarily on the idea of leaving the supportive network with which they are familiar—peers, family and the like. Mary shares her worries about going away to school in the following way:

I ‘m worried you know as you get older and you’re going to go to college and stuff and all your friends are going to move away, it’s always been harder for me make new friends. I’ve always had an establishment of old friends which is helpful you know. You have a foundation and then once we all move away I’ll make completely new friends without any base.

Jared is two years away from graduating. He expressed difficulties in deciding whether he should go away to college or remain close to home.

So part of me is always been like, "I'm going to Penn State!" So I've always kind of been comfortable with the idea of going away from home. But part of me also wants to stay close to what I have. I'm a very worried. In about the last half year or so I have established a strong base of friends here at the high school. So I'm kind of scared to go and start that over and go to college.

Pete puts into perspective what changes to expect when he leaves for school:

I know there will be like faculty and other students there but that's different, you know? I understand now that I'm still going to get help from my family and my friends, but just in a different way. And it's more of a learning experience. You have to learn to become self-sufficient.

Overall High School Experience

Participants' responses were analyzed to determine what they felt was their overall experience of high school. Most of the participants viewed high school as primarily positive. Some saw their experience as a predominantly negative one.

Positive.

The overarching theme presented here is that of peers and teachers making for a positive school experience. For instance, Olivia gives the impression that despite a great deal of pressure outside of high school, she sees it as a positive place. Olivia stated,

I like [high school] a lot. Last semester, the second semester of sophomore year, was really really hard because my cousin passed away, and I was taking a class I probably shouldn't take. I like my friend group most. There's things I don't like, like the homework and stuff that most kids don't like.

Like Olivia, many participants cited friends as being their favorite part of high school. However, teachers were seen as common contributors to a positive high school experience, as well. Andy shared, "Everybody is friendly and everybody is very nice. The teachers are very helpful and so are the assistants. I really like the school I go to." In reference to his favorite class Mark relayed, "I had a lot of friends in the class; a good teacher, excellent teacher; fun stuff, too." Mark expanded, "Teachers want to see you succeed, contrary to popular belief. And they're willing to help you. It's just a matter of like, creating a trust with them." Again, the theme of a trusting connection is cited as making school an overall positive experience

Negative.

"I don't like [high school]. I'm a senior, and I've got four months left, and I've been counting down since freshman year."

"Thinking back on it, it was kind of like a bad dream. And I think to myself, and I remember so many different things, and I think to myself, yeah that was bad but it's over now."

Very few students were blatant in their dislike for high school. Where comments of positive teacher and peer connections dominated the Positive subcategory, negative comments highlight a theme of being disconnected and an absence of feeling safe. A sense of low competence within the learning process was also present. Kevin emphasizes the compromised sense of safety he felt among the large crowds of his high school. He stated,

What I least liked was the amount of kids that like on a daily basis are all corralled together. And looking back on it, I only had these people as my friends because we were randomly put together and that's all that it was. It made me feel that if something happened it would be very difficult to remove myself from the situation.

A predisposition to anxiety among crowds contributed to a negative experience for Kevin. In addition, he clearly was missing the sense of safety attained from a genuine, caring group of peers. Unlike many participants who cited friends as being a key component to enjoying school, Kevin expressed an absence of such friends. As a result, chronic feelings of being anxious and unsafe contributed to an overall negative experience.

Kate also reported a largely negative experience in high school. The scholastic challenges represented in her high performing school contributed to a disconnect between herself and the school as a whole. When asked why she felt negative about school she commented, "Because I think it's so difficult to feel you're in an environment where

people actually care about how you're doing instead of just your grades and your performances on like homework and tests.”

Jack and Mary take a similar position in that they did not enjoy the process of learning. Jack exclaimed he does not like school, “Because I don't like going to school and learning! I hate the learning part!” Mary shared, “It's a hellish place mostly. I mean the environment itself is all right but the school work is just terrible for me at least.” The experience of compromised successes within the learning process impedes the sense of agency one acquires through learning. If academic competence was low, feelings of academic frustration became more pervasive.

Chapter VIII

Theoretical Findings and Discussions

Overview of Findings: SEL Perspectives

This study was designed to investigate how adolescents with a SELI experience high school. It enhances our understanding as to how high school youth who as a result of a SELI struggle to acquire the social emotional competencies necessary for healthy development. As proposed by Lipton and Nowicki (2009), the term SELI reflects underlying brain-based processes that give rise to social impairments in children regardless of their diagnostic status. In order to qualify as having a SELI, one must possess at least average intelligence, yet maintain difficulties encoding, interpreting, or reasoning about social emotional information. Effective social emotional functioning is critical to healthy development (Greenberg, Weissberg, Zins, Fredricks, & Elias, 2003).

The 16 youths in this study provided unique viewpoints in regard to their high school experiences. A number of participants demonstrated that despite their exceptional challenges (i.e. those affiliated with a SELI) they were able to hit their stride in high school. Others related less sure-footed experiences. Nonetheless, all participants communicated a variety of defeats and triumphs in relationship to their high school milieus. It should be emphasized that participants are a product of a great deal of assistance from highly engaged parents, as well as therapists and school personnel. The role these adults played in participants' lives is seen as extraordinary in that they

provided for these youngsters psychological enrichment and facilitated opportunities for success.

This study demonstrates that despite their SEL limitations, participants were capable of effectively mitigating academic and social challenges in order to maintain an adequate sense of self. As a result of their limited social emotional functioning, findings were anticipated to uncover among participants a reduced quality of life due to prevailing social isolation, psychological distress, and reduced self-esteem, (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010). Indeed, in line with research (Palombo, 2006; Stormshak, Bierman, Bruschi, Dodge, & Coie, 1999; Nowicki & Duke, 1992; Dodge, 1983), participants' narratives demonstrated evidence of injury as a result of their social emotional difficulties. Limited SEL competencies in the areas of social awareness and relationship skills were evident. However, despite these difficulties participants displayed a level of insight, resilience, and motivation that was unforeseen. They were motivated to seek out connections with others, and they demonstrated the capacity to established meaningful relationships.

Participants also exhibited the capacity to employ successfully the SEL competency of responsible decision-making. In order to adjust to and thrive within their school environments, these youth demonstrated the ability to analyze and problem-solve issues related to academic and social challenges, as well as the capacity to evaluate their efforts. It is important to note that parent engagement and support, psychotherapy, and assistance from school programming are important factors which likely contributed to the success and resilience that participants displayed. Although these factors were not overtly revealed within participants' narratives, the researcher's contact with parents in the

recruitment process and his knowledge of school practices contributed to this deduction. Nonetheless, participants called on a variety of resources to facilitate an adequate adjustment to high school, and to position themselves to thrive as they contemplate future pursuits.

The sense of agency which stemmed from many participants' academic competencies was discovered to have been a major contributor in enhancing self-esteem. Interestingly, many participants' academic competence gave rise to the courage and agency necessary to take social risks. This finding can be distinguished from the research which suggests that mastery of SEL competencies enhances academic performance (Durlack, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011). It would appear that for these youth a sense of academic mastery led to social connections. This resulted in opportunities to enhance these participants' social emotional competencies. Such would suggest the important role participants' academic strengths (i.e. neurological endowments) play in developing social connections and in fostering a more solid identity.

Lemerise and Arsenio (2000) would suggest that participant's regulatory abilities were adequately intact so as to develop plausible social solutions that could be constructed and enacted. Regulating emotion and developing and enacting a solution are akin to the SEL competency of self-management. Notwithstanding emotionality related to social difficulties, participants were capable of circumventing situations that resulted in overwhelming emotions. They discovered ways of spearheading conversations and pacing themselves socially in order to foster meaningful social relationships.

Lastly, where most participants demonstrated difficulties in the SEL competency areas of social awareness and relationship skills, they prevailed in the area of self-awareness. These youth conveyed impressive insights in association with their SELI-related difficulties. Self-awareness of one's neurological limitations is important in order to understand challenging circumstances or situations that may otherwise be perplexing to the individual with a SELI. Creating meaning of one's experiences is necessary to construct a sound and cohesive sense of self. Additionally, participants' competence in the area of self-awareness gave rise to discerning problematic circumstances and thereby allowed for the forging of adaptive social and academic solutions.

Overall, these youths' collective stories illustrated that despite social emotional limitations, they had adequately forged meaning out of their experiences—both good and bad. They demonstrated the capacity to positively integrate their experiences into a sense of self, giving the impression they understand that their SELI-related difficulties stemmed from neurodevelopmental deficits and not from some failing of their own.

Organization of Theoretical Discussion

This theoretical discussion begins with an explanation of self-psychology as it applies to adolescent development. Self-psychology concepts relative to the findings are then discussed. These concepts entail the complementary functions (selfobjects, adjunctive, and compensatory) participants employed in order to maintain a positive and cohesive sense of self (Fosshage, 1995). Additionally, the concept of self-narrative is

explained in order to illuminate how participants' subjective experiences culminate into a coherent sense of self.

Following an explanation of relevant concepts, the theoretical discussion employs self-psychology to discuss the overarching findings of Academic Identity and Social Identity. Self-psychology is then used to elucidate the means through which participants developed and maintained identity and a sense of self throughout their high school journeys. In describing this unique voyage, the participants' collective narrative will be placed in a temporal sequence in order to organize the findings.

Participants' narratives bring to light a temporal progression that underlies the social and psychological expedition through high school. Adolescence has a beginning, middle and end, and, accordingly, participants' stories suggest different experiences, objectives, and needs at varying stages throughout high school. The narratives demonstrate that participants sought out a sense of safety and agency upon entering high school. For many, feelings of competence that stemmed from academic successes served as a base for establishing an initial sense of safety and agency. The classroom context offered familiar routines and suitable academic challenges, which reduced anxiety and enhanced feelings of proficiency. Participants connected with a variety of adults such as teachers, coaches, and counselors in order to meet selfobject needs (i.e. mirroring and idealization). As participants became further acclimated to the high school environment, they became more willing to take the social risks necessary for seeking out meaningful relationships. Despite an abundance of social anxiety, many participants employed a variety of methods through which to facilitate peer connections. The acquisition of peer relationships gave rise to necessary selfobjects (i.e. twinships), which created a sense of

belonging and validated competencies. Older participants were more capable of expressing a cogent self-narrative, conveying a greater semblance of self-agency, and forging realistic goals and ambitions beyond high school based on who they believe they are and what they feel they are capable of accomplishing.

Self-Psychology and Developing a Self

Adolescence is a time when individuals are expected to develop the ability to understand abstract ideas, establish and maintain satisfying relationships, move toward a more mature sense of themselves and their purpose, and question old values without losing their identity (Mannheim, 2013). Results from this study suggest that participants are no different than their neurotypical peers in striving to achieve the aims associated with this phase of development. The high school environment can be seen as a stage on which to practice the many developmental trials of adolescence. Of primary importance to this study are the ways in which students with a SELI navigate various challenges within the high school milieu.

Palombo (2001) emphasizes that self-psychology enables us to understand the subjective experience of the child, the impact that neurological difficulties have on development, and their contribution to personality formation. Self-psychology provides an explanatory framework that encompasses the role of motivation, affect, and social relationships in development. Palombo (p. 25) explains that the self is regarded by self-psychologists in the following way:

The self... undergirds the totality of a person's experiences, both conscious and unconscious. It represents the subjective dimension of the person's psychic organization. The cohesive self is enduring and stable. It represents a sense of intactness, wholeness, and vitality. Once firmly established, it embodies the person's values and world view.

To obtain a cohesive self, one must experience a subjective sense of unity and identity. This experience is predicated upon interactions with nurturing and in-tune caregivers in the early stages of life. Essential functions necessary for self-cohesion are that of selfobject functions, adjunctive functions, and compensatory functions. Moreover, to experience a sense of self is to have a self-narrative. According to Palombo (2017), a self-narrative includes having a sense of agency, the capacity for intentionality and volition, and a sense of coherence. As the child traverses adolescence, they must construct a narrative out of past and present experiences in order to reassess former meanings derived from childhood experiences so they may be refashioned and reintegrated into a new set of meanings (Palombo, 2008). The inability to maintain self-cohesion results in a fragmented state causing anxiety as well as compromises one's sense of agency, vitality, and vigor.

Selfobject functions.

For a healthy self to develop, caregivers respond adequately to the narcissistic needs of the child. As the child (self) interacts optimally with a caregiver (selfobject), the needs of the child are adequately met. The selfobject functions acquired from adequate

caregiver interactions are transmuted by the child and become functions of the self. These internalized selfobject functions, now part of one's nuclear self, are then employed by the developing child to regulate self-esteem, monitor stress, and to define and pursue realistic goals (Elson, 1986).

There are three primary types of selfobject configurations: mirroring, idealizing, and twinship functions (Fosshage, 1995). Mirroring takes place as the parent reflects back and confirms the child's grandness and goodness. This selfobject function is necessary for the experience of being acknowledged and affirmed. Idealizing allows the child to rely upon the agency and wisdom of an idealized person. Idealized selfobjects are necessary for the child to experience a sense of safety and security in the world. Twinship functions are necessary for one to experience a sense of having a common bond with others or a feeling of essential likeness. Once established as part of the self, selfobject needs and the availability of selfobject responsiveness within relationships are required across a lifetime for developing and maintaining self-cohesion (p. 240).

Adjunctive.

Also important in assisting the adolescent to maintain self-cohesion are adjunctive functions. These are functions that complement the adolescent in an area of deficit, but do not qualify as actual selfobject functions (Palombo, 2001). Adjunctive functions are associated with impairments in one or more of the brain's cognitive, affective, or social domains (Palombo, 2017). Children with neurological deficits tend to draw from the adjunctive functions of others to complement their deficient psyches. (p. 56). For

instance, repeating directions to a child who has difficulties with verbal processing or who lacks in attention qualifies as an adjunctive function. Prosthetic devices can also be seen as serving an adjunctive function (Palombo, 2001). The use of technology is becoming increasingly more popular. Using a small device to record lectures and grammar checks on computers are examples. Adjunctive functions were used by some participants who struggle with social interaction. They used messaging applications or videogame chats to facilitate peer interactions.

Compensation.

Compensation is a strategy used by the child to achieve a desired goal without the mediating intervention of a selfobject or adjunctive function (Palombo 2001). Compensation takes place when a child uses a neurological strength to bypass a particular neurological weakness. Palombo (p. 39) cites an example where children who have difficulties reading nonverbal cues use their extensive memories to “verbally mediate” nonverbal information. In other words, they talk themselves through situations involving nonverbal communication. Compensation also takes place when a caregiver cannot provide a child with a particular need. As a result, the child seeks out the needed response through different means. For example, Xavier reported an exceptional capacity to write code for computers. He gained confidence as a result of his gift for these coding skills. Ultimately, this compensatory function contributed to Xavier’s sense of agency and academic identity.

Self-narrative and sense of self.

Self-narratives allow individuals to construct and organize meanings from their experiences. Given that this study examines the subjective experiences of individuals with a SELI, it is important to consider how meaning is forged out of their high school experiences. Palombo (2001) construes self-narrative as a “broad set of communications through which children tell us about themselves that reflect the organization of their experiences” (p. 43). He discusses self-narratives in relationship to their neurological underpinnings in that a self-narrative is comprised of life events stored within our implicit and explicit memory systems. One’s self narrative script is forged out of encoded events and their associated affects. This script then becomes organized into themes. As children develop, new experiences are reworked to fit previously fashioned themes. Making sense out of one’s experiences is done in the service of establishing a coherent narrative. When adequately integrated, a person’s self-narrative leads to further coherence and self-regulation (p. 57).

Academic and Social Identity

The collective stories of this study underscore who participants believe they are and what they are striving to become. Participants’ accounts of predominately social and academic situations were not surprising given that this study’s focus of inquiry centered on high school experiences. How participants’ experienced high school and how these experiences were used to facilitate a sense of identity was of primary importance to this study. In this vein, a majority of participants viewed themselves as more academically

than socially adept. Themes of academic competence and pride were associated with many participants' high school experiences. On the other hand, most indicated significant difficulties in the area of socialization. It was clear that a great deal of energy had gone into discovering themselves both academically and socially.

A primary task in adolescence is to negotiate the social demands of one's environment (Erikson, 1994). Given the social constraints associated with SELIs, this study anticipated uncovering an abundance of depleted self-states as a result of chronic social stress and relational failures. Surprisingly, this was true only to a minimal extent. Although socializing was a struggle for most, nearly every participant highlighted the enrichment they received in regard to successful social bonds and friendships. In fact, most participants cited friendships as being among the primary reasons they enjoyed their high school experience. For the few whose SELI resulted in extraordinary social limitations, a great deal of thought and determination went into locating or maintaining meaningful peer connections. Thus, despite neurological shortcomings participants were motivated and driven to overcome social challenges in the service of discovering meaningful relationships and enhancing a sense of social identity.

Successful academic and social experiences were sought out in order to contribute to a positive and affirming sense of self. For most participants, a sense of academic accomplishment often supplanted frustrations that arose from social difficulties. Feeling academically competent was important to help maintain self-cohesion, especially for the many participants whose neurological deficits restricted social competencies. This was particularly evident early on as participants began the experience of high school. However, despite their social challenges, participants were not dissuaded from pursuing

meaningful relationships. Difficulties stemming from academic and social frustration were addressed through the use of thoughtful solutions and firm resolve.

Entering high school with academic competence.

Participants were candid about the discomfort they felt at school. Be it anxiety and frustration ensuing from social difficulties or academic challenges, participants detailed reflective resolutions to many of the problems they experienced. While several narratives contained mention of stressful breakdowns resultant from school, extreme school-related emotionality was most commonly referred to as an event in the past (e.g. in junior high school). By the time participants entered high school, emotional breakdowns were avoided. They had discovered adequate means through which to manage overwhelming feelings of stress, anxiety, and insecurity.

Upon matriculating high school, the selfobjects used to regulate self-esteem and maintain cohesion in primary school were no longer accessible to the participants. The capacity to self-regulate and maintain motivation would need to come from different sources. All participants evidenced some capacity for internalizing selfobject functions. Among the internal structures that contributed to the maintenance of self-cohesion was a sense of academic competence they had forged prior to high school. Very few participants gave the impression that they struggled academically. Most of them expressed a sense of academic proficiency in at least one subject area. They viewed themselves as average to above average students. English, particularly writing assignments, was the most dreaded and frustrating academic area. A discussion of the

neurological deficits and endowments contributing to children's academic strengths and limitations is beyond the scope of this study. However, it can be noted that many participants reported an exceptional capacity to memorize facts and to excel in history, math, or science. Such endowments are important in that they contributed to a sense of competence. This firm sense of academic competence assisted participants in organizing and consolidating a sense of self. It was as if an armament of academic capabilities provided for participants the psychological grit required to address the awaited challenges of high school.

It is presumed that beginning in elementary school participants' neurological endowments carved out a path for the mastery of certain academic skills. Academic success was likely to have been routinely acknowledged and affirmed by teachers and parents. These timely affirmations met earlier mirroring needs of the participants. Over a period of several years, the positive exchanges over academic accomplishments were internalized. This resulted in a sense of firmness, vitality, and worthiness that centered on mastering a set of academic skills. As they advanced into high school, a firm sense of academic identity had already begun to take shape. Participants could confidently express, "I'm really good at math," or, "history is a subject that comes naturally to me." This sense of "I can do it" in one or more academic areas was synthesized into the narratives of these academically competent participants and gave rise to a sense of self cohesion.

The level of competence the participants achieved at the primary school level gave them the confidence, vitality, and sense of agency necessary to regulate frustration and anxiety in the course of further academic challenges. The results discussion under the

subheading Academic Endurance and Prioritizing illustrates the specific means participants used to autonomously overcome feelings of dejection and the frustration of being academically “stuck.” As they progressed through these challenges, competence and agency were further enhanced giving participants an enriched sense of academic identity and adding to their overall self-esteem.

Thus, participants’ sense of academic competence was a major contributor in maintaining self-cohesion within a new, larger environment. For the few participants who indicated difficulties enduring anxiety and frustration resultant from high school, self-states were compromised. They would express feeling chronically anxious, depleted and depressed. As a result, these participants would need to seek out further functions to complement the self.

Enhancing self-cohesion: classroom as compensatory function.

At the onset of high school, many children have begun or are about to begin the physiological transformation of puberty. This period of development brings with it the capacity for formal operational thought. Equipped with this new set of cognitive reasoning skills, the adolescent’s assessment of reality becomes discordant with the once held belief that a parent or caregiver is omnipotent and all-knowing (Palombo, 1988). The sense of safety derived from previous idealized parent imago functions is significantly muted, which results in diminished self-assurance. Upon entering the new and somewhat unpredictable environment of high school, developing adolescents are prone to emotional dysregulation and destabilization of the self. Children with

neurological deficits (such as those found among adolescents with SELIs) are particularly vulnerable to an imbalance of self-cohesion (Palombo, 2017). Impairments in social emotional learning limit the efficient and effective use of verbal and nonverbal communication, predisposing children with SELIs to a host of injurious social outcomes (Lipton and Nowicki, 2009). Thus, among the many challenges that participants faced entering high school was discovering a means through which self-cohesion could be maintained.

In entering the novel, less predictable environment of high school, some capacity to self soothe and to tolerate disappointment was necessary for participants. Selfobjects were not readily available for the maintenance of cohesion. Preexisting internal structures, such as those affiliated with academic competence, assisted participants with self-regulation and allowed for maintenance of self-cohesion while new complementary functions were being sought. Notwithstanding new scholastic challenges, the process of learning was routine, and a sense of academic confidence had for many been previously established. Subject areas (e.g. math, science, history) requiring skills that participants had previously mastered provided a sense of familiarity and safety. The social and academic context of the classroom was used by participants as an important compensatory function. Dynamic interactions with the learning environment were synthesized with participants' existing self-states. Ultimately, the experience of competence and safety were achieved, which contributed to participants' capacity to maintain self-cohesion.

The classroom experience was an important component in the transition to high school. The classroom's contribution to participants' sense of safety and vitality permitted participants to connect more readily with teachers and students.

Discovering new selfobject connections: mirroring and idealization.

Complementing of the self by new selfobject functions is central to the negotiation of adolescence (Palombo, 1988). In order to further develop a sense of autonomy and continuity, adolescents need to seek out new selfobjects and construct new self-narratives. New narratives are forged through reassessing former meanings derived from earlier experiences and reintegrate them into new ones (Palombo, 2008). At the onset of high school, academic competence and the familiar context of the classroom assisted participants in maintaining self-cohesion. It provided for them a level of safety and contributed to a sense of agency. To further advance from dependence to autonomy, participants would need to discover new self-objects.

A variety of adult roles were observed to satisfy participants' selfobject needs. Successful adult connections provided safety, trust, encouragement and affirmation necessary for participants to face added academic and social challenges. Adults unavailable to provide selfobject functions were described by many participants with palpable disapproval and disdain. Social emotional limitations left participants entering high school feeling particularly vulnerable and uncertain. Vulnerable self-states resulted in an increased need for compassionate responses from and connections with forgiving adults. If adequate connections are frustrated, participants are left wanting, which gives

rise to narcissistic injury. Such would explain participants' agitation as they shared what they found most undesirable in regard to teacher traits (e.g. a teacher's inability to connect with students).

Despite many narratives containing the disappointing actions of teachers, all of the participants reported forging trusting bonds with teachers, coaches and counselors. The collective narrative highlighted an insistence on particular teacher traits. Approachable, in-tune and caring adults were important in the service of meeting selfobject needs. Teachers' ability to connect with participants and their fellow students was among the most common traits found in "good teachers." Teachers needed to be available to participants on an emotional level. This emotional accessibility was brought to light in the way good teachers brought meaningful experiences to the students despite what would otherwise have been uninspiring classroom instruction. Some good teachers would reportedly "help you get ready for life." Others were observed to be understanding and supportive of the needs of participants and their classmates.

Some participants found safety and reassurance through the help of a school counselor or a teacher who sponsored a club or sporting activity. Stan shared that when he became frustrated in class, he would "get a rant on" with a particular teacher to assist in calming down. Venting frustration to a dependable adult assisted Stan in modulating a strong affective state. Later on in high school, Stan was capable of modulating intense affect unaided by another. This self-state was in part made possible through the internalization of a trusted and safe adult (i.e. idealizable selfobject). Kate's safety needs were met via the compassion and sensitivity of her social studies teachers as they connected with their class over the tragic loss of a student. Violet described one of her

favorite teachers as quirky and intelligent. Violet's own peculiarity was mirrored back to her, which supplied her with a sense of worth. Jared cited his experience with a camp counselor as being instrumental in helping to assimilate high school with greater confidence. The rich philosophical discussions and the responsibility Jared was given in overseeing younger campers contributed to a sense of being affirmed and valued.

All participants demonstrated varying levels of success in locating intelligent, compassionate adults beyond those of their caregivers. In doing so, mirroring and idealized selfobject needs were met, which contributed to a matrix of values and sense of purpose. These new positive experiences were synthesized with participants' natural endowments and incorporated into their self-narratives. Evidence of an adequate sense of self can be seen in the post high school career goals participants expressed. For instance, college and career aspirations that matched academic skills and talents were indicative of an organized and integrated self.

Navigating peer relationships and twinship needs.

The narratives in this study demonstrate that adult figures in the high school setting were vital in offering hope and encouragement, and in assisting with emotional regulation. Caring and in-tune adults were also instrumental in "stretching" participants' social capacities in that they encouraged participants to seek peer connections beyond their comfort zone. The majority of participants highlighted difficulties connecting with peers. Large or unpredictable groups of students created for many a sense of extreme uneasiness. Some participants struggled to connect on an individual basis, particularly

early on in high school. Avoiding social situations served as a temporary strategy to keep overwhelming anxiety at bay. However, participants recognized that their reticence to engage with peers would need to be addressed in order to achieve exposure to adequate social sustenance. They employed a variety of methods in order to spearhead social encounters. Once discovered, positive peer connections resulted in a sense of safety, affirmation, and camaraderie. Peer connectedness opened up for participants a more vibrant and enriching world, allowing them to take more social risks and to further discover who they were as individuals. The participants enthusiastically conveyed the sense of satisfaction and enrichment they had obtained from their friendships.

Discovering and maintaining peer relationships is vital to meeting twinship needs. A sense of belonging to a community and feeling essentially like others is necessary for the maintenance of a coherent and cohesive sense of self (Fosshage, 1995). Participants' attempts to connect with peers often left them feeling depleted and frustrated. Upon entering high school, many approached their new environment cautiously. The crowded hallways and fast-paced peer interactions were often exhausting and overwhelming. The use of headphones and watching videos on smart phones were employed by some participants to assist in regulating themselves. Some avoided crowded hallways and at times would avoid school altogether. Narratives informed that social stimulus was something to avoid. Yet, there seemed an intuitive awareness that something was missing. A need to connect with others was palpable for all participants. Such is seen as a motivation to meet twinship needs and to maintain self-cohesion.

Participants often discovered access to potential meaningful relationships through homogeneous groups. As indicated earlier, some participants connected with peers over

similar content interests within the classroom. Others were exposed to like-minded peers through sports and extracurricular clubs. Homogeneous groups were important in establishing a sense of safety. Once adequate safety was established, participants were able to experiment socially. Common interests over technology, movies, sports, video games, etc. were used to break the ice and to help maintain social interaction. Participants prone to high levels of social anxiety often used technological devices to facilitate socializing.

Using technology to facilitate social connectedness is seen as an adjunctive function (Palombo, 2001) in that it serves to complement participants' sense of self. For instance, while at a social function, Becky's anxiety caused her to avoid groups of people. Entrenched in solitude among partygoers, Becky was playing a popular handheld video game, which attracted some peers with similar interests. With one eye on her game, Becky was able to make a connection with several intrigued bystanders. Similarly, several participants maintained close peer ties using networking video game systems. Using these systems they would meet regularly to play games and discuss the day's events. For Jared, listening and talking on a one to one basis was clearly a strength. However, he avoided social situations that required splitting his attention among several peers. Communicating through a gaming device was more conducive to his conversational style, which prevented an overload of social input. Jared shared he would often call on his group of video gaming friends to help him develop solutions to peer-related issues he experienced at school.

Once friendships were established, participants seemed to hold on tightly to that bond. Routine socializing took place in the safety of extracurricular activities and

lunchtime gatherings where groups of peers would play video games and discuss common interests. These important peer connections satisfied twinship needs. They also served to create a sense of safety. Most of all, participants with significant social limitations were afforded social enrichment not previously experienced as a result these deep connections. The enthusiastic narratives of these individuals regarding friendships suggested a sensation of victorious relief. Now that enriching friendships have been established, the narrative script that once suggested, “I am socially defective” was transformed. Granted, these participants remained aware of their social limitations. However, most conveyed newfound confidence in association with the meaningful connections they made. This confidence and enthusiasm is seen as stemming from participants’ capacity to successfully interact with others, as well as in the ability to acquire self-enrichment in the service of maintaining self-cohesion.

Self-Narrative

To experience a sense of self is to have a self-narrative (Palombo, 2001).

Palombo (p. 43) describes self-narrative as a “broad set of communications through which children tell us about themselves that reflect the organization of their experiences.”

He states further:

A self-narrative focuses on the *meanings* the child construes from their experience, on how others in the child’s context *confer meanings* on those experiences, and on how the child *organizes those meanings* into thematic units within the narrative to create a coherent story. Interpretations a child makes of her

experiences are determined by the neuropsychological strengths and weaknesses she brings to the process and by the community or context in which she is raised (p. 43).

Among the tasks facing any high school student is to create a sense of narrative coherence—to make sense out of their experiences. In order to do so they must integrate the meaning they construe from their high school experiences into their existing identities. The high school environment is rich with opportunities to confront and master academic and social vicissitudes. What is unique about the participants in this study is that their experiences are filtered through a SELI. Such impairments limit one's ability to identify and utilize verbal and nonverbal social emotional information (Lipton and Nowicki, 2009). Moreover, neurological difficulties can make organizing and synthesizing a coherent narrative extraordinarily challenging (Palombo, 2017). In order to thrive beyond high school, participants will need to create coherent self-narratives. Findings from this study demonstrate that despite social and emotional limitation, adolescents are capable of constructing a coherent self-narrative.

Toward a coherent self-narrative.

As indicated earlier, findings were expected to uncover a variety of injured and depleted self-states as a result of participants' social limitations. However, the results of this study show that despite neurological shortcomings, participants demonstrated sufficient competencies which gave rise to adequate self-cohesion. The experience of immense anxiety and frustration was clearly visible among participants. In some cases,

stress would result in depressive episodes and temporary states of fragmentation. Yet, participants demonstrated the capacity to refocus themselves and regain a homeostatic state. Resources within the high school environment (i.e. selfobjects, adjunctive, and compensatory functions) were found to provide assistance with self-regulation, and to help participants cultivate feelings of self-worth. Participants' SELIs brought about social frustration and anxiety, and, for many, a paucity of peer connections. Yet, these neurological limitations did not prevent them from pursuing ways to acquire necessary academic and social provisions. In other words, participants were discovered to work very hard in order to get what they needed.

In telling their stories, each participant's narrative made sense of the participant's collective experiences. Participants who expressed dissatisfaction with academic or social competencies were able to convey a cogent plan for improvement. While most participants spoke candidly about their disappointments and frustrations, they were also capable of formulating understanding out of these negative experiences. Some of these reparative insights related to social triumphs, and others were associated with academic victories. Participants' experiences, both negative and positive, were organized in such a way so as to indicate to the researcher a sense of prevailing optimism. They conveyed a sense of competence, agency, and volition which they were prepared to apply to prospective challenges.

Forging understanding.

In line with Palombo (2017), these findings suggest that a level of understanding regarding one's neurological limitations is an important factor in the maintenance of self-cohesion and constructing a coherent self-narrative. In order to maintain adequate self-cohesion, participants drew from self-functions (functions transmuted from selfobjects) as well as the engaged and in-tune adults in their lives. This contributed to participants' development and maintenance of a positive and rational belief system, despite their negative experiences in association with their social emotional limitations. Maintaining cohesion allowed participants to effectively reframe negative social and emotional experiences into a cogent and positive self-narrative. This observation is evident within the results sections entitled Overall High School Experience and Diagnostic Awareness.

Kevin and Kate were among those who demonstrated high school to be an overall taxing and stressful place. Although their storylines were predominantly pessimistic, Kate and Kevin also exhibited the capacity to overcome many of the adverse events that so negatively colored their overall experience. Kevin, who is currently in college, gave the impression that he had traversed beyond his many high school disappointments. In describing himself, Kevin placed emphasis on his areas of competence. Negative accounts of high school were weaved into his narrative as a way of emphasizing the growth he feels he has made in comparison to a more stressful time in his life (i.e. comparing current self retrospectively with old self). For example, Kevin shared, "My mom would help by telling me, 'Don't worry, it's just high school.' But now I am pretty good at diffusing [stress] on my own." This passage exemplifies that although he previously required assistance from a caring other, Kevin presently sees himself as

capable of adequately regulating his stress. Kate was strongly negative regarding the academic demands of high school. Scholastic pressures caused tremendous anxiety and frustration. Despite her stress, Kate emphasized the many successful teacher and peer exchanges she encountered. Her involvement with theater has inspired her to pursue a performing arts degree in college. Kate's narrative demonstrates that her negative high school experiences led her toward an area of competence and satisfaction. Her experiences, both negative and positive, have resulted in a view of herself as a competent performer. Kate's realistic ambition of pursuing a degree in the performing arts is testimony to a cogent self-narrative.

Lastly, many narratives highlighted how participants make meaning out of their neurological shortcomings. Knowledge in regard to how they are affected by their neurological limitations had an empowering impact on participants. It allowed them to constructively address their social and emotional difficulties. As a result, the participants addressed the challenge of socializing through a variety of means. Using technology to buffer social anxiety, setting goals to socialize more, and discovering homogeneous groups with which to connect, are all solutions to the unique challenges that arose from having a SELI. For these adolescents, discomfort related to neurological shortcomings is seen only as something with which to contend. It does not define them. Ultimately, a level of awareness in understanding one's neurological limitations and endowments inspires the narrative, "I am a person with certain challenges that I must overcome. However, I define myself by my strengths."

Chapter IX

Implications for Social Work

Clinical and Theoretical Implications

1. The capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection was discovered to be a strong suit for the youth in this study. They demonstrated that awareness of neurological limitations contributes to a deeper understanding of one's self, and that one's difficulties can be perceived to lie outside of who they believe themselves to be. Moreover, participants' knowledge of their strengths contributed to mitigating difficulties that had arisen from neurological limitations. For individuals with social emotional learning impairments, the therapeutic process should emphasize the rewriting of negative experiences and incorporating positive ones into patients' narrative scripts. Social workers can also assist parents and teachers in helping children with a SELI identify circumstances related to their social emotional limitations.

2. Entering high school is a sensitive period where these youth relied heavily on complementary functions to assist in locating a sense of safety and competence. Establishing a sense of competence and agency early on provided the necessary traction these youngsters needed in order to address further social and academic challenges. The familiarity of the academic process was vital to establishing an initial sense of safety

early on in high school. Social workers should encourage parents and school personnel to provide assistance in establishing routines at home and school, and to highlight areas of strength and competence in order to foster autonomy and motivation.

3. When participants were connected with homogeneous groups of peers, they began to hit their stride. A sense of confidence and safety was established among peers who maintained similar interests. School personnel can facilitate appropriate homogeneous connections in order to “jump start” the process of discovering twinships. Encouraging youngsters with SELIs to join extracurricular clubs that align with their interests can be a helpful intervention for those reticent to seek out social adventures on their own. Qualified individuals such as school social workers are well suited to lead or co-lead clubs and activities to help promote social connections among these youth.

4. Although participants conveyed realistic future ambitions, assistance beyond high school is likely to be warranted. Social workers can assist students with SELIs and their family’s transition to a life beyond high school. It will be important to assess for the readiness of these youth to take on the challenges that await them on the college level. Social workers can assist in determining a proper course of action based on the narrative with which a graduating student presents. For instance, much like their high school experience, youngsters with a cogent self-narrative—one whose experiences have been adequately integrated—are more likely to maintain self-cohesion in the face of the novel challenges and experiences relevant to post high school learning endeavors. In particular, the processes through which social challenges are addressed should merit close attention by practitioners. The most socially resilient youth in this study are those who discovered methods of bypassing social anxiety in the service of gaining friendships. This

process will most likely need to be recapitulated in scholastic and vocational environments beyond high school.

Implications for Further Research

1. This study uncovered the paths that 16 adolescents with SELIs had taken or are taking in order to facilitate a sense of self within the dynamics of the high school milieu. In doing so, these youth used a variety of strategies (e.g. technology, compassionate school staff, being connected to a particular subject area, etc.) to facilitate their high school expedition. Future research will be useful in examining more closely how the use of such complementary functions facilitates the psychological development of children with similar social emotional difficulties.

2. Although not explicit within the narratives of participants, the youth in this study received help from therapists, highly engaged parents, and skilled adults in the school system. Future research can explore more closely the extent to which these individuals assist adolescents with SELI's to prosper in school.

3. This study placed emphasis on the overarching criteria related to impairments of social emotional learning. In doing so, it utilized a frame work that transcended the discrete diagnoses (i.e. ASD, ADHD, NVLD, and SLD) affiliated with SELIs. Since this study explored the broad category of social emotional learning impairments, it did not examine in depth how each discrete diagnosis impacted participants' ability to attain the psychological sustenance they require for healthy development. It would be helpful to conduct a comparative exploration of these

diagnostic categories in order to further improve our understanding of the similarities and differences children with neurological impairments exhibit within the realm of social emotional functioning.

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Do you have an adolescent with one or more of the following?

- Attention Deficit/Hyper Activity Disorder (ADHD)
- Learning Disability
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Social Communication Disorder
- Nonverbal Learning Disability

If so...

Your child may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of the study is to increase understanding of the social emotional experiences of high school students with one or more of the above diagnoses.

WHO?

- ✓ *High school students (age 14 to 18 years old) who have been diagnosed with one of the above conditions*

WHAT?

- ✓ *Through a low-pressure, one hour interview, participants will be asked about their high school experiences.*

Where?

- ✓ *The interview will take place at a convenient location chosen by the participant (e.g. student's home, a private room in a local library, researcher's office etc.)*

A \$20 gift card will be offered to participants. Written parent permission is required for all participants

If interested...

Please contact the researcher for more information

Email: jeffreymoney@comcast.net

Phone: 847-275-3198

Jeffrey Money, LCSW

School Social Worker

Candidate for PhD at the Institute for Clinical Social Work, Chicago, IL

Appendix B

Consent Forms

**Institute for Clinical Social Work
Research Information and Permission Form for Participation in Social Behavioral
Research**

The Impact of Social Emotional Learning Impairments (SELI) on Adolescent Functioning: A Grounded Theory Investigation of How Adolescents with SELIs Experience their High School Worlds

What is the purpose of the research study?

Social emotional learning difficulties are often associated with learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, social communication disorders, and nonverbal learning disabilities. The Purpose of this study is to investigate how students with emotional learning impairments (SELI) experience high school life, It is hoped that through interviewing students with a SELI that this study will provide a richer understanding of how these students experience and deal with the demands of adolescence as experienced within high school.

What will my child be asked to do if I allow him/her to participate in this study?

If you and your child agree to participate in this study, your child will be interviewed by the principal researcher, Jeffrey Money, for approximately one hour. The interview can take place at a location of your choosing such as your home, a private room in a public library, or Mr. Money's office. As a parent, you are encouraged to accompany your child to the interview in case your support is needed. However, in order to minimize interruption, the interview will need to be private and in an area free from distraction. You will be invited to wait in a nearby area. The interview will be recorded using an audio device and erased once Mr. Money has transcribed the recorded interview (put into writing). This process is necessary so Mr. Money can pay close attention to and learn from your child's answers. Mr. Money may later contact you and your child after in order to follow-up or clarify answers from the initial interview.

Parents please be aware that under the protection of Pupil Rights Act.20.U.S.C Section 1232(c)(1)(A), you have the right to review a copy of the questions asked or the materials that will be used with your children. If you would like to do so you should contact Mr. Money at jeffreyoney@comcast.net to obtain a copy of the questions or materials.

What are the risks for my child's participation in this study?

During the interview there is a possibility that in the course of recalling previous experiences, your child (the participant) may encounter some negative feelings. The participant will be reminded prior to the interview to request a break or to stop the interview process completely if they become uncomfortable. If at any point during the interview Mr. Money observes the participant becoming upset, he will suggest a break and ask whether or not the participant is comfortable continuing with the interview. If the participant is too upset to continue, parent contact will be made immediately in order to help calm and reassure the participant. For this reason, it is suggested a parent accompany the participant to the interview location. If it is not possible to accompany your child, a phone number will need to be provided in order to expedite parental contact if the need arises. As the parent, you will be provided with a list of therapists or community agencies that you can access if you want to talk with someone in the future.

What are the costs for my child's participation in this study?

The only cost anticipated are the time spent for the interview and your travel to the interview site, should you choose a location away from your home.

Institute for Clinical Social Work
ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

How kids with Social Emotional Impairments Experience Their High School World

1. My name is Jeffrey Money and I'm a doctoral student at the Institute for Clinical Social Work.
2. I am asking you to take part in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how students with social emotional learning impairments (SELI) experience high school life.
3. If you agree to be in this study I will interview you for about an hour. The interview can take place at a location of your choosing such as your home, a private room in a public library, or my office. In order to minimize distraction or interruption, the interview will take place in an area free from distraction. Your parent will be invited to sit and wait nearby in case their support is needed. The interview will be recorded using an audio device and erased. Once I have finished our talk I will put your words into writing. This process is necessary so I can pay close attention to and learn from your answers. I may also contact you after the initial interview process.
4. During the course of the interview, you might encounter some negative feelings as you recall some of your previous experiences. If you feel uncomfortable at any point during the interview, you can ask for a break or to end the interview process. Likewise, if I see you becoming uncomfortable, I will ask if you would like to stop. In the event you become too upset to continue, your parent is required to be nearby or at least to provide a phone number where they can be reached immediately. You and your parent will also be provided with a list of possible therapists that you can access if you want to talk with someone else.
5. If you choose to participate, your input in this study will serve as a contribution to social science. It is hoped that the results of this study will help inform and support individuals, parents, and professionals such as teachers and therapists so they may better assist children with social emotional difficulties. Lastly, you will be given a \$20 Amazon gift card at the start of the interview.
6. Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. We will also ask your parents to give their permission for you to take part in the study. But even if your parent says "yes" you can still decide not to do this.
7. If you don't want to be in the study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.
8. You can ask any questions that you have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at 847-275-3198.
9. Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form after you sign it.

Subject Assurances

If I have any questions about the research methods, I can contact one or both of the following:

Jeffrey Money, Principal Researcher, at 847-275-3198 or jeffreymoney@comcast.net

Joan DiLeonardi, Dissertation Chair/Sponsoring Faculty, at 847-824-0892 or jdileonardi@icsw.edu

If I have any questions about my child's rights as a research subject I may contact Dr. John Ridings, Chair of Institutional Review Board; ICSW; At Robert Morris Center, 401 South State Street; Suite 822, Chicago, IL 60605; irbchair@icsw.edu.

Name of Subject

Date

Signature

Age _____ Grade in school _____

I certify that I have explained the research to _____ (name of child) and believe that they understand the study and have agreed to participate freely. I agree to answer any additional questions when they arise during or afterward.

Signature of Researcher

Appendix C

Sample Interview Questions

Question/Probe template for SELI interviews

Tell me what school is like for you.

What do you like most?

What do you like least?

Do you have a favorite class? What makes it your favorite?

Do you have a least favorite? What makes it your least favorite?

How do you feel about high school?

Tell me about the best day you remember.

Tell me about the worst day you remember.

Do you have a best friend? Tell me about him/her.

Are you in any clubs?

What is most challenging for you in high school?

How do you deal with some of the challenges school presents?

Have you thought about what you would like to do beyond high school?

If so, what?

Do you have any questions for me before we end?

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