

**A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF TWO EDUCATORS WHO  
PROVIDE LEARNING SUPPORT IN ALBERTA K-9 PUBLIC SCHOOL CONTEXTS**

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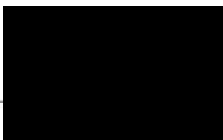
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Date

I dedicate this work to my wife Robyn.

You have been by my side through the ups and downs  
and I will always appreciate the support you have given and continue to give me.

To my sister Camille for sharing her gifts with the written word  
and the many friends and family members that have encouraged me  
towards this lifelong goal.

## Abstract

This research explores the experiences of two Learning Support Teachers (LST's) supporting students with learning needs in Alberta k-9 public schools. Guided by narrative inquiry methodology, this research seeks to illuminate tools, strategies, methods, and practices utilized by LST participants that have, in their experience, been effective in furthering the educational experience of students with learning needs and have supported colleagues. Through rich discussion, reflection, and inquiry, each participant brought to the research unique understandings. Narrative analysis transcripts of research discussion alongside participants revealed six resonant threads, including: wearing multiple hats, leadership role, the use of documentation, relationships with parents, team approach, and partnership with counselling. This research can provide current educators and stakeholders supporting students with learning needs insights and possible implications for their practice.

**Key words:** special education, special education teachers, instruction, ISP/IEP, programming effectiveness

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## **Arriving at the Research**

In hindsight, as a new teacher I believed I was doing a great job supporting all the learners in my classes. They were happy and engaged in my lessons and were rarely absent. In an almost ignorant fashion, I was not aware that being happy and excited about being in my classroom did not directly equate to learning and growth. I had a limited understanding of learning needs and went through the Individual Program Plan (IPP)/Individual Education Plan (IEP)/Individual Support Plan (ISP) building process rather mechanically. This provided positive results in the small, rural school that I was first employed in as I did not encounter any resistance or direction from colleagues to change my practice or understanding. I was also armed with the fervour and zeal of a new teacher freshly educated by the university and not necessarily able to recognize areas within my practice that may have lacked effectiveness. Within this district at this time, schools deployed funding to a teacher as an Inclusive Education Facilitator (IEF) who primarily maneuvered the paperwork and documentation required by the ministry. At this point in my career, I did not see a person in this role as a support for me as a teacher.

The change to a larger urban school with a much more diverse student population proved to be an experience that has shaped and changed me as an educator. I was confronted with classrooms where students presented with needs that I had previously not been exposed to. Students in my classes with severe cognitive, medical, or behavioural considerations had me feeling unprepared for the task put before me. Luckily for me, however, my school in this new division employed a Learning Support Teacher (LST) that I was informed resembled the IEF from my previous experience.

Upon reaching out to my school's LST, I was whole-heartedly surprised at the immediate support offered to me. She was an experienced teacher who became a mentor to me as a

professional and a guide towards ensuring my students with diverse learning needs could be successful. We met during many lunch times, prep blocks, and evenings once the students left and we worked together to find ways to increase the successes experienced by the many students with learning needs in my classrooms. She taught me what differentiation and scaffolding actually looked like when applied successfully by sharing her experiences and stories with me. Our collaboration would ebb and flow from team-teaching, analysis, and reflection. I started to understand that an individual such as my LST could be a gateway towards increasing teacher efficiency, confidence, and student learning.

The fruits of all my hard work became evident in the learning taking place in my classroom. My students with learning needs began to find success more regularly and became empowered in their own learning. Other teachers became interested in the work I was doing in my classroom with students, and I began to work with my LST to share my learning and develop capacity with my colleagues. It became evident that many teachers felt as I did during the start of my teaching career when it came to programming and supporting diverse learners. What they were receiving from their pre-service education was not sufficient in allowing them to feel confident and knowledgeable in their classrooms. I started to understand how important the role of LST is in ensuring students with learning needs are able to find success at school.

Many doors were opened to me as a result of the collaboration and learning that took place between my LST colleague and myself. My LST colleague has since been away on maternity leave for two school years. During this time I was fortunately asked to step out of the classroom and cover her position while she is on leave. As I began to understand the entirety of the LST role, it became clear that an LST teacher in my school has a wide range of responsibilities and duties. My experiences as a new teacher interacting with my LST have

continued to remain at the forefront of my mind as I work within this role and conduct research. I have observed first-hand the positive impact of student learning and overall educational success that can result from collaboration and mentorship with experienced practitioners. This role has a place within schools to provide an experienced staff member the opportunity to work alongside teachers as they navigate the learning needs of complex student populations entering our education system. As I arrived at this research, it has become clear to me that LST teachers often work within the silo of their own buildings. In this study, I seek out the “specialised knowledge of their craft and experience” (Day, 2005, p. 26) possessed by Learning Support Teachers (LST’s) working alongside teachers within their contexts to further make connections and meaning of how to better support diverse students. This research is important and valuable in that it has the potential to provide current practitioners with insights and strategies, ideas, and/or support structures to better help our students find success within our systems.

Providing instruction for students with learning needs within an inclusive classroom setting has become the norm in many schools across the world (Moore, 2017). This reality presents multiple challenges for educators striving to maintain the quality of instruction provided to all students, with funding and support structures (Chartrand, 2019). Relatively new pieces of legislation in Alberta requiring teachers to recognize and respond to students’ specific learning needs result in increased accountability being paired with increased demands on teachers (Alberta Education, 2020). The current response to these new demands in educational contexts in Alberta is highlighted by participants in this research which explores: What are the experiences of two educators who provide learning support in Alberta K-9 public school contexts?

By researching the lived experiences of Learning Support Teachers, the knowledge and skills that they employ to support teachers to excel in learning needs programming is revealed.



Students on individualized programs benefit from this support and may then be able to find more success and achievement in school. Through this research, students – regardless of learning need – will benefit as teachers come to better understand and embrace diverse student learning needs and experiences for increased success in schools.

### **Research Aims and Objectives**

The days of expecting students to be sitting in straight rows with perfect posture, copying off the blackboard have become a distant memory of another world. The world inhabited by educators today is much more diverse and complex, filled with children who do not fit a *one-size-fits-all* student mold (Moore, 2017). Nearly all teachers are required to facilitate learning for students with a variety of needs in a way “in which diversity is respected and members of the school community are welcomed, cared for, respected and safe” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 1). How Learning Support Teachers (LSTs) support programming for students with learning needs directly influences the successes students will experience during their educational journey.

This research aims to discover potential experiential insights that LST educators have developed at the school level. Teachers working in inclusive classroom environments will often have better understandings of which methods for programming for students with learning needs are effective. To access this knowledge, I sought to solicit information from individuals whom Creswell (2019) dubbed “information rich” relative to supporting students with learning needs (p. 206). In the context of an Alberta school, Learning Support Teachers (often also known as ‘Special Education’ or ‘Resource’ teachers) were the target participants for this research. In a variety of school configurations, these practitioners work closely with teachers to create individual learning programs, oversee and assist in implementation, and provide ongoing

support. The lived experiences of LSTs can be correlated to provide potential insights into questions such as: What do participants perceive as supportive and/or barriers to their work supporting classroom teachers and diverse learners?

Through narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I hope to uncover insights into meaningful connections between knowledge, skills, and experiences that can aid in the learning of all students. As a practicing Learning Support Teacher, I am interested in ways in which this inquiry may alter how I understand learning support. My lived experiences will differ from that of my participants in ways that will allow me, and possibly others, to change the lens with which we view supporting student learning.

### **Related Literature**

Alberta Education (2020) defines the primary responsibility of educational stakeholders as having “a strong will to ensure all Alberta students have access to quality learning experiences that enable their achievement of the learning outcomes outlined in programs of study” (p. 1). This mandate is complicated by the reality that educators in inclusive classrooms are responsible for students with diverse learning needs, which ultimately affects access to and achievement of curriculum objectives. For the purposes of this study, learning needs encompass what McLesky et al. (2010) described as the generally accepted categories of “learning disabilities (LD), emotional and behavior disorders (EBD), and [intellectual disabilities] ID” (p. 132). The work undertaken by educators to create pathways to learning for students with LD, EBD, or ID is supported by Learning Support Teachers who suggest and facilitate various strategies, tools, and methods for teachers to support students.

The value of inclusive education for students is well supported. As described by Moore (2017), inclusive education is more than the spaces in which students are allowed to physically

be present and work. It is more clearly defined as “providing opportunities *with* supports for *all* students to have access to, and contribute to, an education rich in content and experience with their peers” (p. 15). Rea et al. (2002) presented findings that students with learning needs are successful in inclusive classrooms as evidenced by higher course grades, scores on standardized tests in mathematics and language arts, and greater school attendance (pp. 219-220). This is further supported by the work of Loreman (2009), who highlighted the substantial “research supporting the approach [of inclusion] in terms of direct and measurable positive gains for students” (p. 44). He described the gains of inclusion to apply to “both children with disabilities, and those without” (p. 45). These findings correlate with the change in educational practices around the idea of inclusive classrooms as the “significant change in placement practices during this time was the increase in the number of students who were placed in GE [general education] classrooms for most of the school day” (McLesky et al., 2010, p. 135). Success in student learning is directly linked to effective strategies employed by the educators working with students with learning needs, primarily general education and special education teachers.

Challenges faced by teachers to accommodate student learning needs through an inclusive model have been well researched. LeDoux et al. (2012) conclude that general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators are all responsible for working together to create “a successful educational opportunity for special needs children” (p. 29). This concept of a shared responsibility is supported by the findings of Rea et al. (2002) related to “shared responsibility for student performance” as an important contributing factor for learning success (p. 220). Further research into how this collaboration between educational partners occurs will illuminate potential effective strategies and practices that can be adopted by other professionals. Similarly, the difficulty of the task of programming for students with learning needs without

adequate supports has quantifiable effects on teachers. Educators give much of their energy to supporting students which, without proper material and administrative support, finds that “high levels of emotional exhaustion were related to less student engagement, which in turn was related to poor IEP outcomes” (Wong et al., 2017, p. 420). Methods that can be utilized to better support practitioners can also be explored through this discussion as they affect student learning outcomes.

The successes experienced by LSTs in supporting learning teams has been noted to be influenced by their personality traits. Specifically, Fernandes et al. (2021) noted “effective communication, collaborative work, and reflexivity” as soft skills that enable special education teachers to work successfully within school contexts and among school-based teams (p. 8). Highly effective teachers of students with special needs have also been documented to demonstrate “understanding and compassion for students with special needs, their disabilities and challenges that they face both in and out of school” (Byrd & Alexander, 2020, p. 76). However, Stark and Koslouski (2021) highlight the relationship between special education teachers leaving the profession and emotional exhaustion. They identify the “complex emotional job demands specific to their roles as special education teachers” as cause for many individuals to leave the profession (p. 65).

Specific areas and/or methods of programming used by LSTs have also been well-documented. Infusing information, communication and technology (ICT) into inclusive classrooms has been shown to assist students in better accessing learning outcomes. Bagon and Vodopivec (2016) contend that students with learning needs are motivated to use ICT for factors such as “higher marks, better grasp of the contents, independence in learning, accessibility of the contents and teacher’s presence” (p. 73). Another key feature of programming highlighted by

Caruana (2015) is developing “standards-based IEP goals and objectives” (p. 238) that are directly linked to curriculum and “incorporate precise language of the standard in the goal” (p. 239). LSTs are often facilitators of the creation of the documents and work in partnership with practitioners. Both the use of ICT and standards-based Individual Education Program (IEP) aid teachers in propelling students with learning needs towards attaining curriculum that will enable growth and progress along their educational journey.

The student, as the focus of the education process, has a key role to play in the success of their program. Jones (2006) outlines the effects of empowered students on the learning process by outlining how “the work of student empowerment became recognized as a necessary investment to promote future academic growth” in students with disabilities (p. 13). The knowledge of self and belief in ability are pivotal to student participation in the learning process. Rose et al. (1999) suggests that if the underlying skills of goal-setting are taught directly to students with disabilities, a “framework within which pupils are playing a more active role in their assessment and learning” can be developed (p. 211). Further investigation into how this work can be facilitated by educators will result in more efficient strategies to engage students with learning needs in their learning tasks.

### **Research Methods**

Through the process of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I was able to explore lived experiences alongside two participants who are currently situated as practicing Learning Support Teachers (LSTs) in Alberta K-9 public school contexts. During our conversations, a focus was placed on the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, described by Clandinin (2013) as being mindful of experiences situated within “the dimensions of temporality, place, and sociality” (p. 12). Both participants were recruited via a mixture of snowball and

purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2019, pp. 206-209) by using the attached information and consent letters approved by the institution's ethics board (see Appendix A). I reached out to through my personal network of educators to inquire if they knew of anyone who would be interested in participating in research of this nature. The criteria for participation was experience in a Learning Support role as a teacher in Alberta K-9 public schools, both past and present. As potential participants were identified, I reached out to potential participants via email or phone to provide a formal introduction and explanation of the purpose and scope of the research project. To avoid any potential conflict of interest, my past or current supervisors and current co-workers were not recruited. I invited Riley and Leah to take part in a series of conversations around their experiences with Learning Support through their diverse careers.

I met with each participant twice between November 2021 and December 2021 for virtual research conversations via Google Meet. Conversations and dialogue were stimulated via open-ended questions (See Appendix B) and rich discussions emerged. Each research conversation lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and was recorded via the recording function in Google Meet. During the dialogue, I took note of key points in our conversations to utilize later as field notes to support my analysis of the data. Using the recordings, I transcribed the conversations and examined them to ensure they were accurate.

During the follow-up conversation, I reviewed some of my understandings of themes that seemed to emerge from our first conversations and asked both Riley and Leah if they felt these ideas were accurate and true representations of our conversation. During the follow-up conversation, I asked both participants if they wanted to clarify or elaborate on any of the key meanings and points that appeared in our dialogues. All transcripts were then narratively analyzed for the emergence of themes or narrative threads within and across the transcripts.

Throughout this process, the data began to weave together, and in some instances unravel, the experiences of both Riley and Leah as Learning Support Teachers.

### **Participants: Riley and Leah**

Riley began her career as an elementary trained teacher approximately fifteen years ago. As a teacher, she has instructed grades three to nine classes, some split-grade classrooms and other formations, in both rural and urban contexts with enrollments ranging from 100-700 students. She completed a Master of Education degree and worked as a Learning Support Teacher (LST) and school counsellor for six years at an urban junior high school. Riley currently works at a school district level alongside school-based LSTs, wrap-around service providers, and other stakeholders to students ranging from kindergarten to grade twelve. Her district is geographically large with a mixture of rural and urban communities. Her passion for supporting all students was evident in our conversations as she shared many stories of experience alongside former students. As a LST, Riley spearheaded literacy and numeracy initiatives, collaborated alongside educational assistants, administered academic achievement testing, and collaborated with teachers to support students with learning needs within her school. Managing student documentation, such as program plans and assessment data, was a regular part of Riley's job working alongside teachers.

Leah came into teaching later in her life after having a family and raising children. After her undergraduate degree in elementary education, Leah began as a substitute teacher and was eventually hired at the same school that she works at today. In her experience, she has taught grades kindergarten to six over her 15 year career. Her school is located in an urban area with a student enrollment of approximately 320 students from pre-kindergarten to grade six. Leah is currently an assistant principal, LST, and school counsellor who works with 17 teaching staff, 20

educational assistants, and other support staff. She has been in the role of LST for eight years and has been a mentor to many colleagues both at her school site and within her district. As an LST, Leah has worked alongside teachers to model instructional strategies and administer small group and individual interventions with students in literacy and numeracy. Preparing and managing student programming documents alongside teachers is a regular occurrence in her role as an LST. Leah's energy and enthusiasm for supporting students was evident as she shared many stories of working as a team and noticing her colleagues excited and inspired after seeing students with learning needs experience success.

### **Narrative Threads**

As we embarked on our research conversations, it became clear that the experiences of both Riley and Leah had similarities that resonated with each other and distinct differences that created space for rich discussion. Both participants' stories shared the commonality of being an LST, but Riley and Leah each progressed towards this role via differing trajectories over time. Throughout and after our dialogue, my key impression from both participant conversations was that they each had a powerful and deeply rooted drive to help students in any way possible. I felt empowered by my conversations with Riley and Leah that there is always something that can be done, changed, or reasoned out to support students.

Riley and Leah's narratives formed threads that wove together as themes that resonated throughout our conversations. The six narrative threads I identified include: Wearing multiple hats; leadership role; documentation as a learning tool; relationships with parents; team approach and partnership with counselling. Many other threads were explored in our colloquy, but these six emerged as present throughout. In the following subsections each thread is explored.



**Thread 1: Wearing Multiple Hats**

From the onset of our conversations it became clear that both participants existed in a space where their roles were complex and multifaceted. Riley discussed that in her experience, “we are asked to wear many hats and I think that sometimes it is not as clear as [simply] providing learning support.” Similarly, Leah recounted asking a coworker before a parent meeting: “What hat am I wearing?” Through our dialogue it became clear that these different hats made reference to aspects of their position that had contrasting requirements, methods, and understandings but shared the primary goal of supporting students with learning needs. Their experiences throughout the course of their career have also shed light on several areas in which there has been positive change in the ways in which students with learning needs are supported. The resulting data from these conversations has illuminated several areas of similarity and congruence between their unique experiences as LST’s.

**Thread 2: Leadership Role**

At the beginning of both conversations, the dialogue centered around the context of being an LST and the responsibilities therein. A thread that became pronounced quickly from the experiences of both participants was the existence of a leadership role within their school community. Although formal leadership in human resources and instructional terms is within the responsibilities of school administrators, both participants identified several areas in which informal leadership has been delegated to them as LSTs. Riley described “leading intervention initiatives” within her school. Leah shared a similar perspective as being a site-based lead for “reading..., math, language arts” interventions with students. Both participants noted that they also provided leadership to Educational Assistants (EAs) in their schools. Riley remarked that she “was given leadership to support them around some of their needs” in terms of professional

development (PD) and supporting students. Leah also explained that an important leadership responsibility placed on her was “modeling how to [help teachers] support their Educational Assistant within the classrooms.” As LST’s, both participants also had autonomy around their schedule when working within their LST time. Riley described having “a lot of autonomy in terms of my own schedule” which aligned with Leah’s experiences of having “complete control” over her schedule, therefore maximizing their ability to support students at a variety of times during typically dynamic school days.

### **Thread 3: Documentation as a Learning Tool**

A third thread that emerged became clear as we discussed the documents used to support students with learning needs. Riley commented that, historically, some educators may be simply “looking at the [support] document as a paper to fill out” or a requirement of the government. There has been, however, a powerful shift towards viewing these documents as “a tool and as something that does grow throughout the year.” Leah also described a shift in mindset towards the mentality that “a good ISP [Individual Student Plan] or IPP [Individual Program Plan] is a specific [and] goal oriented for that particular student, meeting the needs of [that] particular student.” She went further to describe that it is essential that these documents are created to be “meeting them where they’re at” in their learning journey. Riley also mentioned that for teachers “if it’s a document that can help them better understand the student, then they will in turn make it a document that can communicate their understanding and supports of that student to other teachers and parents.”

### **Thread 4: Relationships with Parents**

When asked about their experiences with families of students with diverse learning needs, the conversation around relationships with parents became a clear thread. Leah described

that when it came to working alongside parents, “the biggest thing is [the] relationship.” She provided an example for educators based on the current situation in her school context in the following way:

Get outside at pick up time. I mean, right now with COVID, it’s a little bit more tricky because parents aren’t coming inside anymore for Christmas concert or wherever, but they are still out there. Get to meet those parents. That’s the biggest part. When the big stuff happens, it’s much easier to get that information out there and parents to be more on board.

Riley shared a similar concept based on her experience of working closely with parents of students with learning needs. She recounted that parents are more likely to participate in their child's learning if LSTs and teachers try “using the actual language [parents] use...so that they’re kind of hearing themselves” and their goals in conversations. This collaboration depends on relationships and can result in providing “a really good snapshot to some parents when they're thinking, ‘Hey, what does [my child's support] actually look like?’” Leah reflected on the benefits of deep, authentic relationships with parents resulting in what she described as allowing parents to feel confident simply to “tell me about it” when there is an issue or concern.

### **Thread 5: Team Approach**

Working as a part of a team was a thread that emerged as a result of our conversations surrounding things that were supportive of the work of LSTs. Leah discussed that in her experience the most effective way to support students as a LST was “always a team focus.” She described how rather than seem as a supervisor or an authority figure, she would approach her team members with conversations: “When I come into the classroom, use me! I’m there to support you and your students.” Often other members of the team employed by Leah included

“other LST teachers, ... [and] instructional coaches” and district support personnel. Riley’s perspective was similar:

It’s really important to have a supportive team around your learning support teacher and in that role, because you are supporting others so you need your team as well so you can collaborate, bounce ideas off people, that you’re not kind of feeling like you’re making decisions alone.

As we discussed the benefits of this approach, Riley explained: “I love the collaborative approach and the multidisciplinary approach...when we collaborate and play to our strengths.” When faced with difficult situations surrounding students with learning needs, often “highly functioning, healthy teams support each other and bring the best [solutions] out.”

#### **Thread 6: Partnership with Counselling**

In both Riley and Leah’s context a surprising thread emerged based on the relationship between an LST and school counsellor. Both participants spoke from the experience of having both roles simultaneously within their respective schools. Leah felt “that the learning support teacher and counselling, they almost lend each other together.” In other schools the roles may be separated, but Leah found that while LST’s are often concerned with learning, “it’s not always the academic parts that’s the reason why [students are] not able to necessarily keep up within the classrooms. Sometimes there’s also underlying issues, and that’s more the counselling part of it.” Riley also felt that, at times, students needed her to move beyond the traditional LST role and provide students with support as a counsellor. Often she felt “that [it] was not so much the academic hard skills, but some soft skills around organisation, executive functioning...[and] scheduling” that students needed to find success. She continued by describing that as a school

counsellor as well as an LST, she was “also providing many other things to our students and sometimes those things are actually more important” than academic achievement.

These threads call attention to approaches or experiences identified by participant LSTs as contributing to success for students with learning needs. The themes that emerged from analysis of the narrative threads reinforce the positive impacts the capacity of LSTs can have on student success.

### **Discussion**

The experiences of both Riley and Leah have validated and provided me points of reflection on my own experiences as a practicing Learning Support Teacher (LST). Through their stories, it has become apparent that school communities, including students, staff, and families, benefit from the support and capacity of LSTs within their contexts. Our conversations highlighted several key learnings about the development, deployment, and circumstances of the aforementioned capacity.

My own personal experience as an LST was validated by both Riley and Leah’s conversations surrounding the role of an LST requiring individuals to wear many hats. Leah described that sometimes, “there wasn't a concrete role” for her as an LST and she needed to be able to pivot and respond to student needs. Riley expressed a similar perspective in that “there's so many demands [on a LST] and sometimes it's a push and pull” to provide the support students need. Riley and Leah’s experiences have mirrored what I have come to recognize as the multifaceted nature of a Learning Support Teacher’s responsibilities which requires personal adaptability. To wear all of these different hats, Riley and Leah’s experiences connect to Eryilmaz et al.’s (2020) findings that underscore the idea that “teachers’ career adaptability, both personal and professional, is crucial for students’ well-being” (p. 70).

Riley and Leah's conversations around an inheritance leadership role nested within the overall role of a LST reminds me of an earlier unpublished reflection I wrote for one of my graduate classes in summer 2021:

*Specifically to my current role as a Learning Support Teacher (formally special education lead teacher) for my school, I have to make decisions regarding which students to support, and in which ways. I have conducted assessments of students and reported my findings to them and their families, and have been put in situations in which I am being asked to define what is right.*

This personal reflection portrays a specific example of how a LST often assumes a leadership role. Although the role of LST is not formally recognized as a leadership position, many elements of student programming are directly impacted by LST decisions and/or guidance. Leah described having to often lead by "building capacity with other individuals" within her school context. In this way, LST leadership can be connected to the concept of being a teacher leader (Bush & Glover, 2014) working within a school community.

The correlation between success for students with learning needs and effective documentation was discussed at length during both participant conversations. Riley described that she has "seen huge growth when teachers really dive into CUM files<sup>1</sup> or PASI files<sup>2</sup>" to create support documents that communicate student learning profiles effectively. The result of this way of thinking of the documentation process is "not all documents are going to be exactly the same" and instead are representative of the uniqueness of each individual student. Lucido (2013) describes a document focused on individualized communication as powerful because,

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<sup>1</sup> CUM files refer to a student's cumulative record that was historically located within a school.

<sup>2</sup> PASI files are the current digital storage place for all student records with the Government of Alberta.

The use of this communicative, rather than legal, IEP process should result in more useful IEP documents, which could increase their utility in the classroom as well as result in a significant savings of staff time, which could then be put to better use on tasks related to service delivery. (p. 97)

Similarly, Leah Felt strongly that we perform these processes of documenting our strategies and efforts to support students because “at the end of the day we do this job for the kids ... it’s for them and what’s best for their learning”. Indeed, both participants have observed this massive change in understanding as pivotal to supporting the variety of diverse learners within their contexts.

Establishing authentic and trusting relationships with parents as key stakeholders in student learning was identified by both Riley and Leah. During our follow-up conversation, Riley commented on how often “we are trying to support students, but we don’t always have the ideal tools to do that,” although families may have developed tools that work with their children. Leah felt strongly that it is part of the role of an LST to facilitate these relationships between schools and families. Often through phone calls, emails and informal interactions, Leah underscored that “the biggest thing is relationship” when working collaboratively with families. Carlson et al. (2020) supported these conclusions:

Parents described a number of positive experiences with special education and IEP processes, including appreciating outreach by school staff, proactive and positive communication, when staff showed genuine concern, when they held high expectations for their child, and when the IEP meetings appeared organized and included meaningfully sought parental input. (p. 111)

I had considered these relationships important in my own practice, but primarily from a lens of communication progress and acquiring consent for wrap-around services. It is evident through Riley's and Leah's experiences and the relevant literature that building deeper, more authentic partnerships with parents will improve my capacity as a LST to support students.

As a LST, the benefits of being part of a collaborative team, as explored by both Riley and Leah in our conversations, did not surprise me. In my own experience, I am part of a team that consists of various other interdisciplinary specialists who all contribute to supporting students. Leah provided an example from her experience when struggling to find a solution to a problem being faced by a student she "can go and ask our instruction coaches and they'll [support] me." Riley has also had experience supporting students by "connecting with social services" and trying "to get all of the [relevant] parties together at the same time" to work towards possible solutions. Having had similar experiences, I can see the value in collaborating with other stakeholders and the benefits of encouraging continued partnerships.

I connected with the conversations we had around the intimate relationship between LSTs and school counsellors. As both Riley and Leah inhabited these roles simultaneously, both identified elements of their role within schools that as Riley commented "ebb and flow" together. Pittman et al. (2020) described that educators "have an opportunity to create the climate to support each young person's health and well-being" within their school contexts, which is generally considered within the role of a school counsellor (p. 1043). In many instances discussed by Riley and Leah, students first needed supports for their well-being, which would often translate into improved academic outcomes. LST's utilizing relationships with school counsellors, personally or through collaboration, can potentially improve the learning experience of students.



### **Future Directions**

Journeying alongside both Riley and Leah through this research project has left me feeling empowered and inspired to grow in my work as a LST. Based upon the experiences participants shared with me, I have come to realize that there are many areas in which I can improve my practice.

Riley's and Leah's stories are reflective of their individual contexts which both are firmly grounded in various relationships. As we discussed and dug deeply into our experiences, success and struggles were often mediated through connection and relationships with our peer LSTs, administrators, teachers, and parents. This has left me with understanding that, for me, the major takeaway of this research project is the power of connection and collaboration. Leah eloquently expressed that she feels "our toolboxes are getting full" if we share what we have developed as individuals and work together, as many students across many schools can benefit.

As the scope of this study was narrow and specific, I believe that there is still room for more research into experiences of LSTs. I believe there is a desire for effective strategies to empower teachers to make a difference in the learning of students who need support across Alberta and beyond. The experiential knowledge of LSTs and other professionals working within Alberta schools could uncover potential new ideas that have not been explored in depth.

Riley and Leah's stories have reignited my passion for supporting students with learning needs. Their stories along with the positive outcomes I have witnessed working with students first-hand fuel my passion for supporting students with learning needs. It is my hope that this research may inspire others in my field and education more broadly to increasingly collaborate and support each other for the benefit of our students.

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## Appendix A: Information and Consent Letter

### Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form

**Study Title:** A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Two Educators Who Provide Learning Support in Alberta K-9 Public School Contexts

**Researcher:** Jacob Hendrickson, B. Ed

I am a Learning Support Teacher at [redacted] in [redacted]. I am currently completing a Masters of Education in Educational Leadership at Concordia University of Edmonton. The final requirement of my program is to complete a final project that necessitates I complete a research study. My research focuses on the experiences of educators who provide learning support to students in K-9 public schools in Alberta. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. Before agreeing to participate, please read the following explanation of this study carefully. In the sections below, the purpose and procedures of the study are explained. Also described is your right to withdraw from the study at any time before I submit my final research paper. This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Concordia University of Edmonton.

#### Explanation of Procedures

I am engaging in this research to learn more about the nature of Learning Support in Alberta contexts. I hope to gain insight into your experiences within the role of a Learning Support Teacher to understand how to better support diverse learners. Research informed by narrative inquiry, the methodology I will be using to help me engage in this study, involves telling stories of your experiences and may involve the sharing of personal artifacts, photography and creative work, and/or the creation of life timelines. This study will involve meeting with you two times over the next three months to learn about and reflect upon your thoughts and experiences related to Learning Support. Each conversation will be a maximum of 1.5 hours in length and will be held at a time and location (virtually or in-person) that you choose. Our conversations will be tape-recorded using my smartphone or relevant application and transcribed for analysis.

#### Potential Risks

I will endeavour to minimize potential risks as this research is conducted. Possible risks of participating in this research may include feelings of frustration or sadness while discussing your experiences. If this happens, please contact the AHS Mental Health Support Line at 1-877-303-2642 (Toll free) or the Alberta Primary Care Networks to find a physician to talk to at <https://albertafindadoctor.ca/pcn>.

#### Benefits

The anticipated benefits of your participating in this study include a generative dialogue regarding your experiences as a Learning Support Teacher and may provide insights or connections to improve your practice. This research could provide useful strategies or concepts which could be used by practitioners in other contexts to support diverse students. These results will also inform my own personal practice by expanding my knowledge and understanding of

supporting exceptional students.

### Confidentiality

Your privacy and confidentiality is extremely important to me and I will protect it at all times throughout the research. All material collected will be safeguarded to ensure confidentiality. Study data, including personal information about you, will be securely stored for 5 years after the study is over, at which time it will be destroyed. Only I will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names on any of my research texts, notes, or interview transcripts. Your name and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study, as pseudonyms will be used. The results of the research will be published in the form of a research paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings.

### Withdrawal without Prejudice

As your participation in this study is voluntary, there is no penalty if you choose not to participate. You are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time before the submission of my final research paper for publication without penalty, bias or prejudice. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions asked of you.

### Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask me any questions that occur to you during the research. If you have further questions once the research is completed, you are encouraged to contact me using the contact information given below. If, as a result of participating in this study you feel the need for further, longer-term support, please contact me at any time using my contact information at the bottom of this page or call the AHS Mental Health Support Line at 1-877-303-2642 (Toll free).

If you have other questions or concerns about the study please contact the chair of Concordia University of Edmonton's Research Ethics Board at reb@concordia.ab.ca.

I \_\_\_\_\_ (name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am entitled to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

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Participant Signature

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Date

Please check those that apply to you below:

- I would like copies of my research conversation transcripts
- I would like information about the study results
- I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview

Write your address clearly below. Please also provide an email address if you have one.

Mailing address:

Email address:

**Researcher contact information:**

Jacob Hendrickson

School: [redacted]

Cell: [redacted]

Email: [redacted]

**Faculty supervisor contact information:**

Dr. Muna Saleh

## Appendix B: Open-Ended Questions

### Experiences of Alberta K-9 Learning Support Teachers

#### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

##### Background - Central and Sub Questions:

**Central Question:** What are the experiences of two educators who provide learning support in Alberta K-9 public school contexts?

##### Sub Questions:

- What do participants perceive as supportive of their work?
- What do participants perceive as barriers to their work?
- What changes, if any, would participants make if they had the power to create policy(ies) around their work?

##### Icebreaker/Introduction Questions:

- (After my introduction) Please tell me about yourself.
- How long have you been working in education?
- What contexts have you taught in?
- What got you interested or involved in Learning Support?
- How long have you been working in Learning Support?
- What is the context of the school in which you currently provide learning support?
  - Is it Urban (high population, concentrated) or rural (population not concentrated, more spread out)
  - Grade levels of instruction offered
  - Student Enrollment
  - Other descriptors provided by participant
- What does Learning Support look like in your context?
  - Time (FTE)
  - Leadership responsibilities
  - Schedule
  - Interventions
  - Other descriptors provided by participant

##### Open-Ended Guiding Questions:

- What are the characteristics of a successful student programming document (e.g., ISP/IEP/IPP)?
- In your experience, how have teachers transitioned their programming from acceptable to exceptional?
- What practices can lead teachers/learning teams to view and use programming for students with learning needs as essential and powerful, as opposed to a requirement?



- In your experience, what are the most successful ways to involve students and parents in the process of developing programming for diverse learners?
- Which strategies/methods are most effective for communicating student progress, relative to the ISP, throughout the school year?

**As the conversation flows, some possible probing questions include:**

- What, if any, changes to policy (provincial or local) have helped you support diverse learners?
- In your experience, has the increase in available digital communication helped in building relationships between stakeholders that support exceptional students? (family, school, wrap-around services)
- What are your thoughts on the coding process for students with learning needs?
- Are teachers becoming more comfortable in their capacity to support diverse learners within their classrooms?
  - Through pre-service education or professional development?
- What are some potential barriers to supporting different students with exceptionalities?
- What are your experiences/stories as a student learning alongside peers who had exceptionalities or learning needs?