Developing Grit: A Case Study of a Summer Camp, which Empowers Students with Learning Disabilities through the Use of Social-Emotional Learning

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“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”

–Winston Churchill, who many believe had dyslexia

These past five years have been a journey in personal and professional growth. First and foremost, I must thank my husband, Bill, for his unending support and belief that I could do this. He would not let me quit, even when I begged him. Also high on my list would be my daughter, Ellie, without whom I would not be ensconced in this world of dyslexia. Ellie, your determination, fortitude, and sense of humor inspire me every day. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the role my parents play in my life. Mom and Dad, you always encouraged me and supported me to think deeper and go farther, and by your example, you show me every day that hard work does pay off! Thank-you to David Flink for your deep friendship and mentorship along the way, and for allowing me complete and total access to all the Eye to Eye folks. And finally, to all the campers, camper parents, mentors, and Eye to Eye staffers who participated in this study. What can I say? You are my heroes fighting the good fight every single day, to make the world a better place for future generations of children with dyslexia.
Abstract

This case study examined the process through which Eye to Eye, a national mentoring program for students with the learning disability, dyslexia, uses social-emotional learning strategies to empower and instill positive self-esteem within this population. Further, this study looked specifically at Eye to Eye’s five-day summer camp model. Much more is known today than ever before about this learning disability, and yet the social and emotional characteristics of students with dyslexia are not being attended to in a way that helps these students thrive academically, socially, and personally. This study aimed to provide data revealing how one program that teaches social-emotional learning strategies can empower young people with dyslexia. Through mentorship in its school year program, as well as its summer camp program, Eye to Eye, teaches youth with learning disabilities (LD) how to view themselves positively by using a strengths-based approach, rather than a deficit approach. The overarching research question in this study was: How does the mentoring organization Eye to Eye empower LD youth in their summer camp program through social-emotional learning strategies? The theoretical frameworks this study used included the positive youth development (PYD) framework, and the 5 C’s approach, and Developmental Systems Theory. The data collected consisted of interviews with key stakeholders; document analysis; focus groups with mentees, mentors and parents; and direct observation.

Keywords: mentoring, learning disabilities, dyslexia, social-emotional learning, positive youth development
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

When my daughter was five years old, my husband and I went to her kindergarten open house and noticed that the walls in the main hallway were covered with papers that had addresses and phone numbers scribbled in children’s handwriting all over them. When I questioned the teacher as to what they were, she stated that those kids had successfully memorized their home addresses and phone numbers. I said to the teacher: "I don't see Maggie's paper." The teacher told me that Maggie had not yet mastered that skill, and so her paper was not on the wall. It seemed that my sweet, eager-to-please five-year-old was being publicly shamed because her memory was not equal to that of her classmates. I was angry that her teacher was not capable of seeing the amazing gifts Maggie possessed, such as empathy beyond her years and her sense of humor, and instead focused on her weaknesses. At the young age of five, my daughter was being taught to think of herself in a negative way: less than, incompetent, incapable. It was not until a couple of years later that we had her tested and got the diagnosis that she has a language-based learning disability called dyslexia. And it was many years later still that we came to realize that her gift would come to define her, not her dyslexia and its inherent struggles. It has been hypothesized that social and emotional skills lead to academic success, and studies are showing this to be true. This is what this study examined.

The topic. Research has revealed that social-emotional traits are connected to academic success (Zins, 2004). Social and emotional learning (SEL) has been described as:

…the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and
achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2018).

In the current times of high stakes testing, students are experiencing higher levels of academic stress than ever before (Duan, et al., 2015). Making a conscious effort to institute SEL into the classroom curriculum has the potential to go a long way toward alleviating academic stress and raising well-adjusted children (Zins, 2004).

While school year programs struggle to incorporate SEL programming into the school day, summer programs and camps have been employing SEL strategies for centuries; however, many summer programs for at-risk populations, such as dyslexic students, almost always incorporate an academic component. Programs such as The Forman School summer program in Litchfield, CT, and Camp Dunnabeck, in Amenia, NY, are camp programs for children with dyslexia that teach critical academic skills in the morning and provide traditional camp activities in the afternoon. While focusing on academics helps students keep up their skills during the summer months, it sends the message that academics are of paramount importance, even to the exclusion of social and emotional competencies. This philosophy runs the risk of focusing on weaknesses rather than strengths, or on the deficit model versus the strengths-based approach.

While it is true in general education populations that social-emotional needs should be attended to in order to educate the whole child, it is especially true in populations that are at high risk for dropping out of school, substance use and abuse, and teen pregnancy. Individuals with learning disabilities (LD) have all these risk factors, and more (Mallett, 2014).

Dropping out of high school is a process that begins well before the student actually stops going to school (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). There are warning signs long before the student is completely disengaged; these symptoms include lack of attendance, poor grades, and fewer than
required credits earned each year attending high school (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Other early warning signs include low parent involvement and teachers that are unenthusiastic about teaching (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In one study, 69% of high school dropouts also reported they would have stayed in school if parents or teachers had higher expectations of them (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Being retained in one or more grades, which leads to lower levels of self-esteem and weak peer relationships, also puts students at risk for dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In addition to these startling findings, about 15% of schools nationwide that have high rates of dropping out have only about 50% of the student body graduating each year (Durlak et al., 2011). Dyslexia crosses socioeconomic boundaries, and since it is a neurological disorder, has little to do with books in the environment, or resources that middle- and upper-class families would be able to provide and that lower socioeconomic families would not. Students with learning disabilities have the right, by law, to be educated in public school systems, and yet many are not receiving an appropriate education because of the nature of the disability (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

Students with the learning disability dyslexia are at greater risk for not going to college, not finishing college, and dropping out of high school than youth without it (Flink, 2014). The statistics are bleak for students diagnosed with dyslexia, even with remedial interventions (Eide & Eide, 2011). In this climate of high stakes testing in our public schools, administrators have scant time and/or motivation to implement programs that address social-emotional learning needs in students. However, it has been argued that by focusing on social and emotional needs from an early age, students will be set up for academic success, and ultimately success into adulthood (Flink, 2014).
Eye to Eye, a national after-school mentoring program established in 1998, and summer camp for students diagnosed with language-based learning disabilities like dyslexia and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), has collected data that shows its mentees are staying in school longer, applying to colleges at higher rates than their peers who are not in the program, and exhibiting increased levels of self-esteem and academic stamina (Eye to Eye, 2018). Based on available program data, and given the lack of empirical research in the literature, it is important to know how this program is structured to attain these outcomes. This information can help practitioners create more programs like it within the educational system.

**Definition of key terms.** The following is a list of key terms, which may be unfamiliar to the reader.

**Dyslexia.** Sometimes known as developmental dyslexia, this learning disability is language-based and can include weaknesses in phonologic awareness, phonologic processing, spelling, reading, writing, processing speed, sequencing, and sometimes numeracy.

**Language-based learning disability.** A learning disability that includes weaknesses in the language center of the brain, and typically also includes strengths in the visual/perceptual cortex.

**LD.** An acronym for “learning disability,” “learning difference,” or “learning disorder.”

**At-risk.** “At risk” in the arena of education refers to any student that needs early and frequent intervention to experience success academically, and who without such intervention is in danger of educational failure, and, therefore, of not becoming a successful and productive adult.

**Social-emotional learning (SEL).** Addresses a student’s social and emotional traits, including grit, perseverance, and drive. SEL has been defined as the following: “enhances
students’ capacity to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges” (CASEL, 2018).

**ADHD or ADD.** Attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder is sometimes called a learning disorder or learning disability; it affects a person in several regions of the brain, primarily the frontal cortex effecting executive functions.

**Research problem.** Dyslexia is characterized by weaknesses in reading, writing, spelling and sometimes numeracy (Shaywitz, 2003). Literature has revealed a strong connection between a student’s academic success and their social-emotional status (Zins, 2004). Programs targeting LD students and their social-emotional health are lacking (Flink, 2014). Since now more than ever is known about the needs of the child with dyslexia (Shaywitz, 2014), it is important to better understand and model programs that address the social and emotional needs of this population, since all aspects of daily living are affected by dyslexia, and social-emotional competencies are not typically addressed within the school day (Flink, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative case study was thus to understand how the mentoring program, Eye to Eye, empowers young people with the diagnosis of dyslexia during its summer camp, by using SEL strategies, with a long-term goal of boosting academic achievement and school retention rates during the school year.

**Justification for the research problem.** It has been suggested that up to one in five individuals have some form of dyslexia (Shaywitz, 2003). If this is accurate, then in a class of 20 children, chances are good that approximately four of them have dyslexia, and they will struggle to learn reading and writing through traditional methods alone. This statistic is startling, especially since most children are not tested for learning disabilities until at least the second grade, when the requirements of reading, writing, and spelling begin to become more
demanding. This is too late given that the gap between their current performance and their potential has already begun to widen (Shaywitz, 2003).

Programs that remediate dyslexic students in public schools generally focus on the individual’s weaknesses. Research has revealed that this approach can produce negative outcomes, such as dropping out of school, substance use and abuse, and teen pregnancies, among others (Izzo & Horne, 2016). These negative outcomes are the result of years of being called lazy and stupid by peers, teachers, and parents (Flink, 2014). This kind of bullying can leave students feeling depressed and, at an extreme, even suicidal (Espelage & Holt, 2013). Additional research has suggested that looking at the strengths of the dyslexic student might be more beneficial, in addition to remediating weaknesses (Eide & Eide, 2011). This approach, called a strengths-based approach, aims to produce well-adjusted students that have decreasing rates of depression, increasing self-esteem, and decreasing high school dropout rates. Summer camps and programs that address social and emotional needs of students are in a prime position to utilize a strengths-based approach, since these programs often offer a variety of activities in which students are able to show competence and excel.

Looking at one successful program that works to boost SEL as well as academic achievement, this study aimed to discover how other programs can be developed to work effectively with LD populations to keep students in school longer and boost academic achievement. Since school districts are reluctant to incorporate SEL programs into the school day, this task is left up to after school programs and summer camps like Eye to Eye to address students’ social and emotional needs after the school day and/or year are over.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** The literature that exists about LD learners has typically focused on the academic remediation programs that are available (Kovelman et al., 2015). These
Empirical studies previously published have generally failed to highlight programs that foster social-emotional competencies in LD youth. They have typically focused on strategies to “fix” young people with learning disabilities by highlighting programs that work to remediate the deficits of students with LD, such as Gaab et al. (2007) who studied the processing speed of young children with dyslexia, in order to gauge the efficacy of the remediation program Fast Forward. It has been identified that those with LD are “far more likely than their non-disabled peers to exhibit significant deficits in their social-emotional functioning;” yet, even with estimates ranging up to 75% of students with LD experiencing major social problems (Wiley & Siperstein, 2015), there remains a lack of programs addressing SEL with LD students discussed in the literature. This is evidenced by the statement: “…the lack of adequately researched Tier 2 SST [Student Support Team] interventions for students with LD and MID [Mild Intellectual Disability] is disappointing” (Wiley & Siperstein, 2015).

In this context and to address this gap, this case study focused on exploring how a successful mentoring program was utilizing SEL to empower youth with dyslexia, specifically at its camp in New York State. Since one in five young people have some form of the learning disability dyslexia, looking at an empowerment program that has proven successful with dyslexic youth, might inform other educational programs and workplace environments regarding how to better meet the needs of LD young people. In turn, this has the potential to support a generation of young people to be productive, self-sufficient, and contributing members of society.
**Relating the discussion to audiences.** This case study will benefit anyone that works with, lives with, or teaches individuals with dyslexia, such as: caregivers, teachers, administrators, employers, to name a few. Looking at components of the program Eye to Eye that empower youth with dyslexia can help create summer programs, academic programs, after school programs, and work environments that not only help young people with dyslexia survive, but rather thrive.

The aim of this study was to assist educators in building upon the aspects of this mentoring program to begin to focus on SEL in the classroom. Public perceptions about dyslexia need to be changed in the classroom, on playing fields, in enrichment programs, and in society (Izzo & Horne, 2016). The gifts of dyslexic individuals should not only be recognized, but sought after by employers, because of the positive traits, like creativity and out-of-the-box thinking, these individuals possess (Eide & Eide, 2011). In addition, young people with dyslexia need to be empowered about their learning differences and participate in educating the public to accept that empowerment is key for a society that respects and supports cognitive diversity.

It should be noted here that, throughout this dissertation, the researcher has inserted charts, graphs, and illustrations to illuminate specific points. This was a conscious attempt to appeal to all learners, being cognizant of the fact that the dyslexic brain is uniquely organized to respond primarily to visuals more than to words and text.

**Significance of Research Problem**

The futures of some individuals with undiagnosed or untreated dyslexia are bleak. The prison system is 60%-80% full of men and women with some form of dyslexia (according to some estimates) who likely went undiagnosed or did not receive the proper intervention and/or remediation (Grigorenko, 2006). People with LD can experience severe emotional distress
including anxiety disorders and depression. Family discord can develop as a result of one child having dyslexia while others do not (Snowling, Gallagher, & Frith, 2003), and late diagnosis almost always results in low self-esteem, which can lead to teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, and drug and alcohol use and abuse, among other negative outcomes (Catts, 1997; Svetaz, Ireland, & Bloom, 2000).

Many of these negative outcomes stem from the stigma associated with having a learning disability (Flink, 2014) and the shame young people feel living with this learning disability. Changing public opinion about dyslexia so that there is no stigma attached, which starts with changing the opinions of educators of students with dyslexia, would go a long way toward having a society that is truly inclusive. While dyslexia is common in the general population, it is even more prevalent in the prison population, which has more than triple the incidence of this learning disability than that of the general public (Gallagher et al., 2000). Several researchers have tried to investigate why this is so; it is highly possible that prison is the result when dyslexia goes undiagnosed and/or appropriate intervention is not provided.

The “school to prison pipeline” is a phrase that is used to describe the trend that has been overtaking America’s schools since the mid-1990’s – that is, students entering the criminal justice system at younger and younger ages (Mallett, 2016). This is especially true of students with disabilities, and particularly those with learning disabilities (Mallett, 2014). This trend is alarming on many levels, but perhaps it is most important because studies show that, once a young person becomes involved with the criminal justice system, they are unlikely to re-enter the education system and become high school graduates (Mallett, 2014). In addition, the incidence of recidivism (committing repeat crimes) is high once a person becomes involved with the criminal justice system at a young age (Mallett, 2014). If a young person is arrested, even once, their
chances of graduating high school are cut in half; if an appearance before a judge is involved, the chances of this student dropping out of school quadruples (Owens, 2015). The cycle does not end there: the opposite is true, as well. If a student drops out of school, their likelihood of committing a crime increases (Owens, 2015). The process of dropping out of school does not happen overnight, but rather, it is a lengthy process of school absences and disengagement, all signs that teachers should be able to recognize and subsequently intervene to address.

The cost to incarcerate one prisoner is upwards of $145,000 a year, according to some estimates (Mallett, 2016). The cost to educate one student with a learning disability in a public school is around $11-12,000 a year. Given these dollar estimates, it would seem prudent to invest more in the educational system to alleviate stress on the criminal justice system. Mentors and instruction in social-emotional competencies would go a long way toward thwarting some of the negative behaviors for which children are commonly sent to juvenile detention halls.

**Empowering students with dyslexia through mentorship.** Changing public opinion and striking out stigma on any issue is a little bit like turning around a cruise ship; it takes extreme effort, time, and legions of people working together before the movement can gain traction. One way to institute change in the area of learning disabilities is by looking at programs that have some success empowering young people with dyslexia. By looking at the components of a successful mentoring program for students with dyslexia, perhaps programs like it can be replicated during the school day and within the curriculum. By definition, dyslexia affects individuals that have average to above average intelligence; however, many misconceptions surround this fact (Shaywitz, 2003) More SEL programs like Eye to Eye would go a long way toward changing public opinion and empowering the one in five individuals who learn differently.
**The learning disability movement.** Much can be learned from movements that came before the learning disability movement, specifically, the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement, and to some extent, the physical disability movement. The invisible nature of dyslexia makes it hard for people to understand it. In the aforementioned movements, storytelling was utilized as a way to give voice to the people that were shrouded in stigma, and therefore discriminated against. One of the SEL strategies Eye to Eye uses to empower LD students is storytelling. By teaching young people to tell their LD story, they learn that it is not shameful to have a learning disability. Since dyslexia is so prevalent, once a person with dyslexia tells their story, others begin to tell their stories, and a community begins to form.

Eye to Eye has a motto that states: “You have no idea how able we are.” The marketing team at Eye to Eye created this tag line as a way to start changing public perception about young people with LD. The literature, thus far, has focused primarily on remediation and strategies for accommodating this learning disability. Shining a spotlight on this organization can enable a close examination of the components that are integral to a successful mentoring program that utilizes SEL to empower young people to live up to their fullest potential.

Changing public opinion will not happen overnight (in fact, the learning disabilities movement started in the 1960’s). It would be admirable if the world could be more inclusive and accepting of the little girl in the opening story of this paper when she is an adult, and of her children, which history and genetics have shown have at least a 50% chance of being born with dyslexia.

**Research Question**

How does the national mentoring program, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with learning disabilities through its five-day summer camp model?
Positionality Statement

Qualitative research incorporates the researcher’s personal histories, backgrounds, professional experiences, and personal opinions about a topic to inform research. "Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (Denzin, 1989, p. 12). This holds true especially within this case study, since the researcher has been intimately involved with the organization Eye to Eye and sat, at the time the study was conducted, on its board of directors.

Bias is defined as investigation that includes personal prejudice. Separating the researcher from his or her biases within a research study is almost impossible. Every researcher has a past with a history, which forces the researcher to face elements within the research study that he or she will be biased towards. The key is to be aware of these biases, and to not allow them to color the analysis of the data.

The story that opened this dissertation is a true story from my life. That child is now 18 years old, and she is my daughter. She is now a senior in high school, and a large part of her formal educational journey has been accomplished. Certain biases are inherent in raising a child with dyslexia, through witnessing first hand her challenges, as well as her successes.

I have been a special educator since 1989, so the vast majority of my knowledge about youth with learning disabilities comes from my experience in the classroom. I left public school teaching when my daughter was in the 4th grade, to attend to her needs. Biases related to the needs of all dyslexic children based on my personal experience with my daughter are a slippery slope, and one that I strived to avoid, to the extent possible. I have strong beliefs about what situates my daughter in the most positive environment, and strong thoughts about what she needs to be successful. This is likely not true of all young people with dyslexia. Another example from
my years of teaching is the stereotype that all students with dyslexia are artistic, and this is far from the truth. In fact, many students with dyslexia are offended that they are stereotyped that way, including my daughter.

One strategy used to curb my bias in these situations during the research process was the use of reflective memos, journaling, and recording all data that seemed opposed to my general findings. For example, if one of the mentees in this program reported feeling empowered, but another mentee reported that not only was that not the case, but he or she felt shame at going to the Eye to Eye camp, I considered this noteworthy, and I wrote it down and highlighted it. Recording in detail anything that went against the general opinion or thought about dyslexic children helped balance out researcher bias in this case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

For the past eight years, I have served on the board of directors of Eye to Eye, a national mentoring organization that pairs college and high school students with dyslexia and/or ADHD, with middle school students holding the same diagnosis. This case study examined the components that contributed to this organization’s success, specifically as they related to SEL and the summer camp. I strived to have this examination uncover tips, strategies, and successes that might inform other SEL programs for LD youth. My bias sitting on the board of Eye to Eye had the potential to cloud my vision regarding what stakeholders reported to me. I was careful, therefore, to be vigilant in reporting exactly what was reported to me, and to avoid having my involvement with the organization at the board level color my bias.

I may also have, to some extent, anticipated that all stakeholders would be positive in their feelings about Eye to Eye, when in fact, this was not necessarily the case. In order to keep this bias in check, I incorporated into the interview protocol questions that related to any negatives the stakeholders might have been feeling about the program. Stakeholders in this study
included: the CEO of Eye to Eye, the president of Eye to Eye, the national program director, mentees (also called campers), mentee parents, and mentors (also called counselors).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework drives a research study, and some would say, provides a structure or foundation on which the study can rest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Research studies have the potential to go off course if they do not have a map to follow, or a lens through which to view the study. With signposts along the way, the theoretical framework provides a roadmap, as well as sets up the study for the reader so that the context of the study is clearly understood. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state: “A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of your study” (p. 85). According to Casanave and Li (2015), the frame can be described as “a more or less abstract idea that encircles a study the way a frame encircles a picture and provides a space in which it is situated” (p. 104). This case study uses developmental systems theory (SDT), positive youth development (PYD), and the 5 C’s framework as its theoretical frameworks.

**Developmental systems theory.** The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand how the mentoring program, Eye to Eye, empowers young people with the diagnosis of dyslexia by using SEL strategies. More specifically, Eye to Eye’s summer camp was the focus of this study, since, at the time this study was conducted, it was the only summer camp in the country utilizing mentoring and social-emotional strategies to empower the LD population, focused on strengths rather than weaknesses. To better understand how this camp’s mentoring program was empowering its students through the use of SEL, the frameworks of PYD, DST, and the 5 C’s approach were used to theoretically and conceptually guide the study.
DST is known as a metatheory, meaning that it draws on multiple developmental theories, and provides a framework through which to understand human development throughout the lifespan. DST was designed as a way of looking at the individual from multiple perspectives, and not only from a simple biological or environmental view, but as a result of these two areas intertwining (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, DST has been used to explain the characteristics which make up youth with learning disabilities and how these young people are being taught SEL strategies as a way to develop positive coping skills throughout their educational journey. DST espouses that human evolution blends environment and biology to produce well-rounded individuals. This lens provided a solid context through which a researcher was able to view LD youth and their striving to achieve autonomy with their non-disabled peers. This approach postulates that it is not only a good approach for at-risk youth, but that it is good for all youth.

DST is a theoretical framework that takes into account an individual’s biology, heredity, and evolution in looking at the total person (Robert, 2003). These components sometimes work at odds with each other, going in opposite directions, toward the goal of creating a whole person.

**Positive youth development.** Many researchers and psychologists in recent years have taken DST and come up with new frameworks for working with at-risk youth. One such researcher, Richard Lerner, is the foremost authority on PYD. PYD asserts that “Young people need safe, structured places to learn and links to basic services that, if absent, can prevent them from learning and functioning within our society” (Phelps, et al., 2009). This approach to working with youth shows a basic understanding of the needs of adolescent students that is positive and addresses core needs (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009). The cornerstone of PYD is the belief that adolescents possess plasticity, and therefore have the ability
to change based on circumstance and willingness to change. This component of PYD comes directly from DST, blending nature and nurture, or environment and biology.

PYD is a holistic approach to youth development, and it was founded on the principles of a strength-based approach, rather than the deficit model (Lerner et al., 2009). The deficit model focuses on a person’s weaknesses, which usually produce negative outcomes in school, and in life. It has been suggested that looking at youth through their strengths rather than weaknesses builds a corps of young people that are empowered and well adjusted (Eide & Eide, 2012).

Richard Lerner is a professor and researcher at Tufts University, and a key proponent of PYD theory. Among many other studies, Lerner and colleagues before him have conducted studies to try and figure out why some children of parents with psychiatric disorders grew up without engaging in risky behaviors, while others were not so lucky. What they found was that the children that got by relatively unscathed had something they called “resilience.” Resilience is defined as “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties” (Merriam-Webster, 2004). Psychology Today defined it this way: “…when life knocks you down, you bounce back and keep going. Sometimes lifes challenges can even make you stronger” (Davis, 2018). Some of the personality traits that have been identified as helping individuals overcome adversity are a positive attitude, regulation of emotions, and a growth mindset, or the ability to see failure as something to learn from. These are all traits that can be taught. Resilience has been identified as the key feature in overcoming adversity, without negative outcomes (Lerner et al., 2009). It is this key tenet of the PYD framework that best supports work with LD youth.

Traditionally, programs working with youth have used an approach that focused on what was negative about adolescents, rather than their strengths. These programs also focused on fixing the problem, one problem at a time (Nystrom, Prata, & Ramowski, 2016). This began to
change in the mid-1980’s, and due to some longitudinal studies looking at youth at risk and overcoming adversity, programs began looking at the whole child: focusing on adolescent strengths became a priority. The underlying premise of the PYD approach is that when problems arise, youth are not broken and in need of fixing, but rather they are resources that need to be cultivated, nurtured, and guided in order to reach their full potential (Lerner, et al., 2005).

**The 5 C’s framework.** The authors of this theoretical framework, which grew out of PYD, have state that successful programs instilling PYD in their young people look at the following 5 C’s in youth, which are predictors of youth that are thriving or have the potential to thrive: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring. At its most basic level, “competence” is viewed as a skillset that the young person possesses, “confidence” is the ability to feel good about that skillset, “character” is the core of the individual and their sensibilities and respect toward those around them, and “caring” refers to having sympathy and empathy toward others in their environment (Lerner et al., 2009). When these 5 C’s are taught and internalized by youth, adolescents can thrive. If these 5 C’s are present, a sixth C can emerge; the sixth C is contribution (in their school, home life, and community). Lerner et al. (2005) stated that, for a program to be successful using the PYD approach, it must have what he calls “The Big 3”: positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, opportunities for youth leadership, and life skill-building activities specifically designed for youth (Lerner, 2011).

PYD theory has been implemented in recent years in studies and programs working with adolescents struggling with substance use and abuse, after school programs in disadvantaged areas, and programs in the juvenile justice system working with adolescents involved in risky behaviors, to name a few (Lerner, 2009). The applications of PYD run the gamut from entire states (like the state of Oregon) that are implementing PYD into their youth services (Nystrom,
Prata, & Ramowski, 2016), to school districts and after school programs that are implementing PYD into their programs as a way to empower youth, and avoid negative outcomes (Lerner, 2009).

**Rationale.** This researcher determined that DST, PYD, and the 5 Cs frameworks were a good fit for this study because most LD experts also espouse a strengths-based approach to the education of dyslexic students, and they have asserted that a combination of nature and nurture produces well rounded LD youth. The authorities in the field of dyslexia have suggested that the pedagogies that work for dyslexic youth would also work for their non-dyslexic peers (Flink, 2014), just as the proponents of PYD have claimed that the tenets of PYD would be good for all youth, not just youth at-risk (Nystrom, Prata, & Ramowski, 2016).

The overarching research question in this study was: How does the national mentoring program, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with learning disabilities through its camp model? Through the lens of DST, PYD, and the 5 C’s framework, one can see that positive role modeling and looking at students’ strengths can potentially empower youth, and in turn, raise academic grades, increase school retention rates, and decrease risky behaviors. The long-term goals of PYD and SEL instruction are one and the same: to empower young people to live up to their full potential.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Dyslexia is a neurological language-based learning disability, which includes weaknesses in reading, writing, spelling and sometimes numeracy (Shaywitz, 2003). At the core of this learning disability is the inability to accurately and fluidly process spoken language, as well as process the individual phonemes, which make up the sounds of language (Shaywitz, 2003). Students with dyslexia often require specific methods of pedagogy and intervention (Shaywitz, 2003); while these strategies and programs will also work for students without dyslexia, it does not work the other way around. In other words, pedagogies designed for students without dyslexia, will not work for students with dyslexia (Gaab et al., 2007). This is because students with dyslexia require explicit instruction in reading, writing, and spelling. Because dyslexia incorporates weaknesses in processing spoken language, individuals with dyslexia have trouble understanding multi-step directions and long teacher directed instruction (Shaywitz, 2003).

Youth with learning disabilities (LD) also require attention to their social and emotional development, which often present separate challenges than those students within the general population (Flink, 2014). Students with dyslexia commonly exhibit social and emotional skills levels that make them seem younger than their same aged peers (Eide, & Eide, 2011).

This literature review examines research published to date that focuses on how social-emotional learning (SEL) can support academic success in the general population, and more specifically, how social-emotional competencies can benefit students with dyslexia. It should be noted again here that visuals have been used in abundance in this section to appeal to all learners, those that respond best to visuals with text, like the dyslexic individual, and those that respond more readily to text alone.
Scholars have documented that the development of social-emotional competencies, such as perseverance, grit, and agency is connected to academic success (Flink, 2014; Zins et al., 2004). While this is predominantly true in general education classrooms of typically developing students, this is especially true of students with learning disabilities (Flink, 2014). However, the research is limited in the area of SEL and LD populations. SEL has been defined as those skills related to “social-emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (Taylor & Kilgus, 2017).

Through a case study design, this study aimed to explore how the non-profit organization, Eye to Eye, a national mentoring organization that pairs college students with LD and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) with middle school students with the same diagnoses, and that uses SEL components to empower students with LD. This organization has its headquarters in New York City and has 60 chapters in 22 states, as well as a five-day summer camp, which was the focus of this study.

In general, the academic literature published to date has focused on remedial programs that work to educate students with dyslexia within the school day (Gaab, 2007), with little to no attention to a student’s strengths (Eide & Eide, 2011), or social-emotional traits. Eye to Eye, a mentoring program specifically designed for students with learning disabilities is the only one of its kind in the United States, and there is very little empirical data in the literature linking mentoring programs such as this, to the empowerment of LD students, even though the linkage of these strategies has proven to, in turn, lead to school and life success.

When this study was conducted, a few books had been published that had begun to talk about addressing the social and emotional competencies necessary to navigate the educational setting for LD students (Flink, 2014; Izzo & Horne, 2016). The gaps in the literature at the time
involved documentation of programs that addressed SEL specifically targeting students with learning disabilities, and how these needs were being addressed within the school day, or in after school programs. This study aimed to explore the social-emotional aspects of living with dyslexia, and ultimately factors that lead to becoming successful in school, and in life, by looking closely at one initiative offering a summer camp program for students diagnosed with dyslexia and/or ADHD.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) have adopted the following definition of dyslexia:

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

Interventions to support students with dyslexia have historically focused primarily on providing academic supports with less attention to supporting social and emotional traits that often impact the academic success of students with dyslexia. Statistics are bleak for outcomes for students with learning disabilities in the public school setting. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (Horowitz, Rawe, Whittaker, 2017) reported that 68% of LD students graduate from high school with a regular diploma, while 19% of students with LD drop out of high school, and 12% earn a certificate of completion, rather than a traditional high school diploma. Only 17% of LD students pursue higher education, as compared to 56% of the general education population.
Of those, only 5% complete their higher education program, dropping out prematurely. For black and Hispanic students with LD, the statistics are even more grim (Horowitz, Rawe, Whittaker, 2017). In addition, students with LD are typically academically inferior to those without LD, earning lower grades and failing courses at higher rates than their peers without LD. Students with LD are three times more likely to repeat a grade than their peers without LD which in turn leads to increased behavioral issues, and is highly correlated to school dropout rates Those who have repeated one grade are more likely to drop out of school than those who were not retained, and those who have repeated two grades are 100% likely to drop out of high school.

Researchers have revealed a strong connection between a student’s academic success and their social-emotional status (Denham & Brown, 2010; Zins, 2004). Knowing more about one program that supports the social-emotional needs of students with learning disabilities can assist in the development of programs within the school day targeting these students, thereby decreasing school dropout rates, rates of depression, rates of substance abuse, and teen pregnancy rates, to name a few. Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to examine one summer program for LD youth which was using an art-based curriculum to empower students with LD through mentorship. This program generally teaches social and emotional skills, like perseverance, self-awareness, peer relationship skills, and emotional regulation through a one-to-one mentoring model. The overarching research question guiding this study was: How does the mentoring program, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower LD youth in its summer camp?

This literature review begins with an overview, history of LD, and laws governing those with LD, specifically dyslexia. Other sections covered include: the history of SEL strategies in
the classroom, SEL strategies used specifically with the population of youth with LD, and an overview of mentoring programs and camp programs for K-12 students. This literature review outlines the history and background of SEL strategies in use in schools as they relate to academic success with general education students, as well as with students diagnosed with language based learning disabilities, like dyslexia. These topics are presented chronologically in four sections.

The first section explores the history and laws pertaining to learning disabilities. The second section examines dyslexia, specifically: diagnosis, intervention, academics, and social-emotional learning. The third section explores SEL in general education, and then SEL and dyslexia in and out of the classroom. Finally, the fourth section provides an overview of mentoring programs in K-12 settings, and the potential benefits of these programs to LD populations. By looking at what has historically worked in the schools regarding SEL and academic success, the reader can understand the background of SEL, and specifically how SEL has been used to boost academic success in both the general education classroom, and with special education populations.

History of Dyslexia

Learning disabilities is a general term for weaknesses in learning profiles and specific areas of brain function. The most common types of LD include: dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, executive function disorders, non-verbal learning disabilities, ADHD, and auditory processing deficit (Horowitz, Rawe, Whittaker, 2017). This literature review focuses on dyslexia, because it is the most prevalent of the LD in school-aged children, accounting for 5-17% of that population in the United States (Hoeft, et al, 2007).

The first recorded reports of language disorders date back to the late 1600’s, when physicians were asked to examine patients who were exhibiting unusual signs of unexplained
illiteracy. Most of these patients had experienced strokes and had residual deficits in reading. These early cases were anomalies and left the physicians unable to locate exactly what part of the brain was causing the deficit, until the patient died and an autopsy was able to be performed (Anderson & Meier-Hedde, 2001). At that time, it was discovered that the language portions of the brain were compromised in some way.

Sometime later, three physicians named Broadbent, Kussmaul and Hinshelwood furthered the understanding of dyslexia-like symptoms in patients. Kussmaul, especially, brought forth the idea that reading difficulties might not be related to an underlying language disability, but might, in fact, be a deficit on their own, without prior brain lesions as the cause (Hallohan & Mock, 2013). It was an ophthalmologist named Berlin, in the late 1800’s in Germany, who first introduced the term “dyslexia” to identify a reading disorder (Anderson & Meier-Hedde, 2001). Berlin was the first to hypothesize that dyslexia was neurologically based. These early physicians believed that dyslexia related closely to aphasia, the loss of the ability to produce speech due to brain damage of the speech regions, either at birth or through an accident.

Subsequently, Hinshelwood noticed a surprising development in some of the patients that came to see him at his eye infirmary in Glasgow, England. Hinshelwood has the distinction of being one of the very few physicians who spent his career researching and writing about the disorder coined as “word blindness” by Berlin. The young patients that came to see Hinshelwood, who ranged in age from 7-18 years old, presented as typical in most aspects, but reportedly could not be taught to read, despite having average to above average intelligence, and in some cases, having been in school for as many as 10 years. Some of the families reported that the child affected was, quite possibly, the smartest of the children in the family in all other aspects of development (Hinshelwood, 1917). When the patient seemed to be born that way,
rather than acquiring the deficit as a result of an accident, Hinshelwood called this disorder “congenital word blindness,” and began to publish articles and subsequently books, in which he called word blindness “a subject of considerable interest” (Hinshelwood, 1917, p. 44).

In Hinshelwood’s time during the late 19th Century and beginning of the 20th Century, suspicions as to the origins of “congenital word blindness” could only be confirmed through autopsy after the individual had died. Bennett and Sally Shaywitz, founders of the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, however, discovered that these theories could be confirmed through developments in technology, specifically functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and positron emission tomography (PET) scans of the brain; these are discussed in more detail later on (Shaywitz, Mody, & Shaywitz, 2006).

Dyslexia is what most call a language-based learning disability, and it is neurological in origin. Dyslexia is called “language-based” because it originates in the language regions of the brain, specifically Broca’s and Wernicke’s regions, and accounts for weaknesses predominantly in phonologic awareness and the alphabetic principle (Hynd, Semrud-Clikeman, Lorys, Novey, & Eliopulos, 1990). The academic areas, which are weakened due to this learning disability, are reading, writing, spelling, and sometimes numeracy (Shaywitz, 2003). Some also believe that the social-emotional areas of the dyslexic brain are affected in utero as part of the unique organization of the developing brain, just as the language areas are affected (Williams & Casanova, 2010). Other brain functions, which can also be affected by dyslexia include: short-term memory, working memory, processing speed, and sequencing (Shaywitz, 2003). Short term memory is the ability to recall events of the recent past, while working memory is the ability to hold information in one’s head while manipulating that information to produce new information. An example of working memory would be the demands of long division, where the individual
must hold multiple operations in one’s head while producing new output. Another example would be reading, specifically decoding words, as well as reading comprehension. The process of decoding words involves holding the sounds of the individual letters in one’s head while forming them into words and then ultimately sentences and paragraphs. Reading comprehension requires retaining the information from earlier in the paragraph to the end of the paragraph and synthesizing the information to produce an understanding of what was read. Individuals with dyslexia have deficits in phonologic awareness, which means they struggle to process the sounds of language. This can affect reading fluency, which sometimes also compromises reading comprehension (Moll, Hasko, Groth, Bartling, & Schulte-Korne, 2016).

Figure 1. Language areas of the brain. Reprinted from Mother Nature Network: “Is it ok to swear in front of your kids?” Nelson (2017).

Three areas of the brain have been identified as weakened in individuals with dyslexia: Broca’s region, also called the inferior frontal gyrus, which is responsible for word analysis; the parieto-temporal region, also responsible for word analysis; and the occipito-temporal region, responsible for word form (Shaywitz, Mody, & Shaywitz, 2006). These early attempts to locate
the exact location of the weaknesses in the brain of dyslexic individuals were groundbreaking, and they laid the foundation for further investigation.

![Diagram of the brain](image)

**Figure 2.** The limbic system: emotional centers of the brain. McKinnon (2016)

Just as there are specific language areas affected in the brains of dyslexic individuals, there are social and emotional areas of the brain that can also be affected. The social-emotional areas typically weakened in the dyslexic brain are in the limbic system, which performs the initial processing of emotional information (Elias & Arnold, 2006). Specifically, the hypothalamus and amygdala are responsible for emotional regulation, an area in which many dyslexic children have deficits. The amygdala is also responsible for assigning emotion to memories. The critical job of the amygdala is twofold: first, it is responsible for children learning better when emotion can be attached to the content being presented; the flipside is that children have trouble learning when emotional turmoil is present (Elias & Arnold, 2006). “Thus, a child who is emotionally upset, anxious, depressed, worried, angry, sad, frustrated, traumatized, or otherwise distressed…will find it hard or even impossible to pay attention and concentrate on cognitive schoolwork in the external environment” (Elias & Arnold, 2006, p. 22).

The frontal lobes are also weakened in the individual with dyslexia, and these are responsible for attention and concentration. This is part of the reason so many well-meaning teachers and parents tell children they are lazy and need to try harder, words that are so
damaging to children that are trying their hardest to fit in and do what the teacher is asking of them (Flink, 2014). The social-emotional areas of the brain in the individual with dyslexia can be weakened from birth as part of the unique organization of the dyslexic brain, or can be damaged through repeated feelings of inadequacy experienced by the individual either by ongoing bullying or by comparing themselves to their typical peers (Eide & Eide, 2011). Whichever avenue through which the social and emotional areas of the brain experience trauma, attention needs to be paid to build up these areas, in efforts to educate the whole child (Elias & Arnold, 2006).

**Law and practice.** Disability law and policy started being written in the 1930s, with laws protecting veterans of war, senior citizens, and some individuals with physical disabilities, such as blind and deaf individuals.

![Figure 3. The history of educational laws protecting students with learning disabilities. (2018)](image-url)
In the 1950s, students with learning disabilities and cognitive disabilities were often excluded from school because they were thought of as uneducable (Read & Walmsley, 2006). “Prior to the 1970s, millions of children with disabilities were either refused enrollment or inadequately served by public schools” (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996, p. 26).

The history of the learning disability movement (and laws relating to learning disabilities) date back to around the middle of the 1960s. For 150 years, children with learning disabilities struggled in school to even progress at a minimal level with basic reading and writing skills. And for more than 50 years, groups of educators and parents have been fighting for the rights of students with learning disabilities. For the past 50 years or so, laws have been in place to protect students with learning disabilities from being discriminated against in schools by providing accommodations and modifications to curriculum; however, school districts are not providing the accommodations and modifications these students are legally entitled to and required to receive to access grade level curriculum (Wright, 2004).

Although educational programs directed at LD students (like remedial programs) were slow to advance, advancements in the area of identification of children with learning disabilities have been made. In 1970, Congress passed a piece of legislation called the Children with Learning Disabilities Act. This would lay the groundwork for service delivery for individuals with learning disabilities in the years to come; it was established as part of The Education of the Handicapped Act of 1970 (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2013).

As shown in Figure 3, in 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ushered in a groundbreaking piece of legislation that stated that any school receiving federal funding was required to accept all students, regardless of disability. However, these federal laws leave much up to individual states in terms of enforcement, which is where the disruption and
misinterpretation occurs (Karanxha, Zirkel, 2014). Despite these challenges, section 504 was one of the first legislative measures that provided protections to people with disabilities. It also set a precedent for future laws and policies to take hold, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 (Bloomfield, 2007).

Public Law 94-142, also known as the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (in 2004, this law became known as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA), built on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, stating that all schools receiving federal funds must provide children with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This means that to the fullest extent possible, all children must be educated in the general education classroom (Boxall, 2002). This law also brought with it the development of the Individualized Education Program (IEP), which includes goals and benchmarks that each student must attain annually, and to which public schools are legally responsible to implement.

“Childfind,” a component of P.L. 94-142, states that students must be screened for disabilities in preschool, free of charge, through a family’s public school system. This law grew out of a growing need for further legislation for students with disabilities, which built on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. However, providing a FAPE as P.L. 94-142 states has proven to be tricky, and most school districts will not screen for dyslexia or other learning disabilities as early as preschool, as they do for cognitive or emotional disabilities, even though screenings for dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities have been available since 1985 (Everatt, Smythe, Adams, & Ocampo, 2000). These are in the form of checklists and phonics/phonemic awareness tests, such as those that are given in most kindergartens around the country. Family history inventories and the Phonemic Awareness Screener Assessment are two such screenings. Currently, there are also free, online screenings available to the public.
The first year that records were kept after the passage of P.L. 94-142 (1976-77), 1.8% of school-aged students were served under this diagnosis. At the time this study was conducted, almost two million school children in the United States were being regularly classified as LD in public schools before 12th grade, totaling about 5% of school enrollment and almost 50% of the children receiving special education services (Bloom, Dey, & Freeman, 2009). After P.L. 94-142 was passed, states were slow to gain traction because while the letter of the law was clear, the spirit of the law was left up to the states for individual interpretation, and this was somewhat of a quagmire, as it would turn out. Even President Gerald Ford, who signed the bill into law, stated that he was concerned about its efficacy, and said, “This bill promises more than the Federal Government can deliver” (Davis, 2007, p. 2). Other complications came in the form of the LRE requirement, because although it sounds like a good idea, the “least restrictive environment” presented problems that were not anticipated with mainstreaming certain students with disabilities. For example, in an attempt to meet the needs of all students, curriculum can become watered down, grading does not accurately reflect what the student knows, and individualized instruction becomes difficult, at the least, and non-existent, in the extreme (Pugach & Warger, 2001).

Teaching students that are placed into the mainstream or included in general education classrooms without the proper social-emotional supports can result in students with anxiety, lowered levels of self-esteem, and depression (Horne, 2016). Due to this, the requirement of a FAPE as a result of this law is hard for states to interpret and implement (Wright, 2004). For instance, “appropriate” in the case of students with learning disabilities, it could be argued, should be a program that includes social-emotional competencies, as is the case of those with
non-verbal LD and those on the autism spectrum. The FAPE clause requires that all children with disabilities be provided an education at no cost to the child’s family.

A standout case that illustrates the nuanced implications of the FAPE clause was the case of Amy Rowley v. Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District in 1982. Amy Rowley was a profoundly deaf first grader who was denied an interpreter on the grounds that she did well without one in kindergarten. Her parents, both deaf themselves, argued that Amy was being denied an appropriate education because of all the language she was missing, having to rely solely on lip reading for content in her classes. They fought their case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and lost (Hocker, 2015).

The implications of the Rowley case were far reaching for all public-school districts and for all disabilities. The interpretation of the law as to what constitutes “appropriate” is especially relevant to students with dyslexia, whose disability is invisible and oftentimes misunderstood by the vast majority of the public (D. Link, personal communication, November 15, 2016). One could argue that social-emotional skills are an integral component to educating the dyslexic student, especially since LD students need to be included in the general education classroom as much as possible, to satisfy the LRE clause in the law (Itkonen, 2007). This sometimes becomes problematic when a child needs a substantially separate remedial program in reading, such as is the case when the dyslexia is so severe that it does not allow the child to progress using the mainstream reading program with the rest of the class, which in turn leads to lower self-esteem, related depression, and other negative outcomes. Laws and policies created to support academics without attention to social-emotional learning competencies of the LD student show negligence on the part of public schools and the judicial system. The Legal Information Institute defines negligence as: “A failure to behave with the level of care that someone of ordinary prudence
would have exercised under the same circumstances” (Cornell Law School, 2018). One could certainly view the potential for substance abuse, incarceration, and dropping out of school as “unreasonable risk of harm.”

After passage of P.L. 94-142, there was no real movement in disability law until the ADA came to fruition in 1990. This was a groundbreaking piece of civil rights legislation that prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in public life, including: in the workplace, public housing accommodations, and public transportation (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996). The law states that individuals will be provided their civil rights in all areas of public life, including (but not limited to) ramps into buildings, and telecommunications devices for the deaf.

After the ADA was signed into law, some time went by before President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act in 2001. This piece of legislation was created to provide “standards-based education reform” (McLaughlin, Shephard, & O’Day (1995), and it allows parents to request information from the schools relating to their child’s education and progress. This would include: parent notification of teacher qualifications, and status of a student’s mastery on certain sections of state standardized tests.

After NCLB, IDEA became law, which constituted a renaming of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, or P. L. 94-142. The most significant contribution that IDEA made was in the area of parental input and due process. Parents were entitled to receive “notice of proposed actions, attendance at meetings concerning the child’s placement or Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the right to appeal school decisions to an impartial hearing officer” (Martin, Martin & Terman, 1996).

Individuals with dyslexia are protected under the ADA, which was signed into law in 1990. This was a huge step forward for the learning disability movement. The law states: “The
Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, State and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation” (National Network, 2018).

There are also states that have dyslexia-specific laws and that provide intervention and early diagnosis to children. These laws are relatively new, and they vary in terms of what the law covers, but most include early diagnosis. These states include: Texas, Louisiana, Colorado, Mississippi, Washington, Wyoming, New Mexico, Kentucky, Missouri, Illinois, California, Tennessee, and Ohio (Retrieved from https://www.dyslegia.com/state-dyslexia-laws/, December 7, 2016). Despite a handful of states passing laws that require screening for and provide intervention for dyslexia only California, Oklahoma, and Texas include language in their laws for training educators to know what dyslexia looks like in their students. Scholars and practitioners alike have asserted that training educators to know what to look for will be the gold standard for states in the future, in terms of diagnosing dyslexia earlier (Ridley, 2011).

The intersection between the states that have dyslexia laws, and those that are served by Eye to Eye is interesting to explore. For instance, Wyoming has one chapter which incorporates several mentee schools. Eye to Eye also has a strong relationship with the Wyoming Department of Education (DOEd), and Wyoming is one of the states that has early diagnosis laws. This suggests that possibly Eye to Eye’s presence in this state, and the organization’s involvement in lobbying efforts on behalf of dyslexic students, has some effect on this state passing laws regarding early diagnosis and earlier intervention. Of the states listed above that have dyslexia laws, eyetoeyenational.org lists these Eye to Eye chapters: California has seven chapters, Colorado has five chapters, Washington has two chapters, Wyoming has one chapter New Jersey has one chapter, Nevada has one chapter, New York has thirteen chapters, Pennsylvania has five
chapters, Illinois has three chapters, and Virginia (which has some of the newest and most progressive laws) has two chapters. These numbers represent 38 of the 60 Eye to Eye chapters nationally; in addition, Eye to Eye is in eight of the 37 states which have dyslexia laws.

There is no universal mandate for diagnosis, and federal law leaves it up to individual states to determine best practices for identifying and diagnosing learning disabilities like dyslexia in their students (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Will, 1986;). However, the ADA protects students with learning disabilities, and many families have brought lawsuits against school districts for not providing appropriate interventions to their children (Wright, 2002). Further, the infrastructure supporting students with disabilities in general, and learning disabilities specifically, varies district to district. For instance, some public schools districts have a special education director at each school, while others have one that works district-wide, which causes further delays in diagnosis. Other disruptions and breakdowns in the system include special education teachers that have caseloads as large as 40 or 50 students, and general education teachers that are also stretched thin.

Having laid out an overview of disability law, it seems clear that current policies are not sufficient to meet the social and emotional needs of LD students. Therefore, it is essential to look toward programs outside the school day, including summer programs, which address these needs in the LD population. The next section discusses the definition of dyslexia, dyslexia diagnosis, and interventions for remediation of weak academic areas.
Dyslexia: Diagnosis, Profile, and Interventions

Dyslexia, sometimes called developmental dyslexia (DD), specific learning disability (SLD), or language-based learning disability (LBLD) can be defined as “…a persistent difficulty in learning to read that is not explained by sensory deficits, cognitive deficits, lack of motivation, or lack of adequate reading instruction” (Hoeft, et al, 2011, p. 361). The profile of an individual with dyslexia also includes average to above average intelligence (Shaywitz, 2003). Dyslexia is the most prevalent learning disability in schools today, meaning more students receive the diagnosis of SLD or LBLD than ever before. Earlier reported statistics might have shown the incidence of SLD to be lower, perhaps because as the understanding of this learning disability evolves, more children are receiving this diagnosis. In the past, these individuals might have received a health impairment diagnosis or cognitive disability diagnosis; these are now known as LBLDs or dyslexia.

Figure 4. Incidence of specific learning disabilities in the United States for the 2013-14 school year (the most recent year for which data is available). US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, (2016).
Dyslexia is also often a co-morbid disability with ADHD, meaning that it appears in as many as 60% of individuals who have the diagnosis of dyslexia (Flink, 2014). ADHD is usually put into the category of “Other Health Impairment,” as in Figure 3 above, making the incidence of “specific learning disability” even higher than reported here, by combining the numbers in those two columns.

Screenings for dyslexia and other language-based learning disabilities have been available since 1985, in the form of checklists and phonics/phonemic awareness tests, such as those given in most kindergartens around the country. Family history inventories and the Phonemic Awareness Screener Assessment are two such screenings. However, screenings like these are not often used until kindergarten or first grade, when students begin to fall behind their peers academically (Shaywitz, et al., 1999). Currently, there are also free, online screenings available that parents can access. Formal testing is not usually conducted by school districts until the end of 2nd or beginning of 3rd grade, when the gap in academic performance between these students and their peers has grown wide.

Sally and Bennett Shaywitz began using fMRI technology to scan the brains of children with dyslexia in 1996 (Shaywitz, Mody, & Shaywitz, 2006). Functional MRIs were developed so that the scientist could see which parts of the brain were activated, and lighting up, when the subject was performing specific tasks while in the machine. For example, some tasks asked the subjects to determine if pairs of pseudo words, or made up words, rhymed, a task that is relatively easy for typically developing children, but which we now know is challenging for children that have compromised language systems, such as with dyslexia (Gaab, 2011). The results of these early fMRIs confirmed what the Shaywitzes suspected: the language regions of the brain were compromised in children with dyslexia.
When this study was conducted, Gaab, at Boston’s Children’s Hospital, among others, had been conducting longitudinal fMRI studies on very young children to provide evidence that these children were born with a brain formed in this unique manner, and to try and confirm the hereditary component (Gaab, 2011). Figures 1 and 2 show the regions of the brain which are most effected by dyslexia, specifically, the language portions of the brain, and the emotional centers of the brain. Although fMRIs have shown increased improvement in identifying dyslexia in younger children, they are still not used as a tool for identification by schools. This is largely due to the extreme costs related to this kind of diagnostic tool, and a lack of personnel trained in this technology. There is also some degree of uncertainty with these imaging techniques, because they constitute a relatively new use for this kind of imaging technology, having only been used since the mid-1990’s. Neuroscience researchers are currently refining this technique so that they are more accurate in having this kind of test be more predictive of dyslexia; however, due to the high cost of sophisticated technology such as MRIs, it is unlikely that schools will use it to diagnose dyslexia within the school setting in the near future.

Some dyslexic individuals have a double deficit, which means they have weaknesses in phonologic awareness as well as weaknesses in visual naming speed, which requires the individual to rapidly and fluidly recall names for written symbols (Lovett, Steinbach, & Frijters, 2000). When a double deficit is present, the individual can present with severe reading difficulties (RD), making it hard to access grade level curriculum in the general education
classroom with their non-dyslexic peers.

![Diagram of Left Brain and Right Brain](image)

**Figure 5.** Strengths and weaknesses in the dyslexic brain. Gilles, (n.d.)

As shown in the right side of Figure 4 above, dyslexic individuals also have marked strengths, such as visual-spatial abilities, strengths in the visual arts, and “out of the box” thinking (Eide & Eide, 2011). Some experts believe these strengths are as a result of the dyslexia and are developed in utero as part of the distinct organization of the dyslexic brain, and not developed as a compensatory strategy, as others believe (Eide & Edie, 2011; Gaab, 2011). However, these strengths are not taken into account when testing is conducted. Some believe these strengths should be part of the core battery of testing given to children referred for testing (Eide & Eide, 2011). Along these lines, as part of initial evaluation, an observation is performed within the child’s classroom and sometimes in less structured environments, such as the playground or lunchroom. These observations give the evaluator(s) a more complete picture of how the child functions in a variety of settings.

Federal law mandates that a child referred by a teacher for suspected learning disabilities, or referred by the child’s parent(s), be tested free of charge by the school district within 30 business days of the referral. The school personnel responsible for testing is a team consisting of the school psychologist, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, the principal of the school, and sometimes a speech-language pathologist (SLP) and occupational therapist (OT).
If a child’s parent(s) opt to have testing done outside the school at their expense, they might seek out a neuropsychologist.

If the parent(s) opt to have an outside evaluation conducted by an independent neuropsychologist, he or she should evaluate a child as early as possible. Signs of a learning disability might include: weaknesses in phonemic awareness, weaknesses in language skills such as rhyming and “late talkers,” and sometimes poor peer relationships. Research shows that the sooner the dyslexic child can receive intervention, the more successful the outcome is likely to be (Eide & Eide, 2011; Shaywitz, 2003). Interventions might include: remedial reading work that is multisensory, such as the Orton Gillingham program; Wilson Language System, or Linda Mood Bell; as well as sessions with a speech/language pathologist to strengthen language skills. Some students also participate in social skills groups to address social-emotional needs as a result of the dyslexia.

Dyslexia is diagnosed through a series of cognitive tests, which comprise the psychoeducational assessment, sometimes called a “core battery” of tests. As the foundational test, the Woodcock-Johnson is usually administered, because it comprises many of the domains tested for cognitive functioning. In addition, other tests might include: an IQ test like the Wisc-V, a test of language skills like the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test, and a test of reading ability such as the Grey Oral Reading Test, among others. The entire battery can take up to five days to administer, totaling approximately 12 hours of testing. This battery should be updated at least every three years (Shaywitz, 2003).

In the past, the discrepancy model was used to determine eligibility for remedial services provided by the school district. The discrepancy model states that there must be a discrepancy between a child’s IQ and current functioning to qualify for special education services. In 2011,
this way of diagnosing was eliminated by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), a division of the National Institute of Health (NIH), because it was determined that it irrelevant whether or not a child has a low or high IQ, if they are struggling to learn to read, they are entitled to services to teach them to read -

Testing for learning disabilities by the school district typically will not commence until the child has reached second or third grade. This is because other techniques must be tried first, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), employing a tiered system of trial and error to see if the student is able to progress using increasingly more structured supports. The problem with RTI lies in the fact that while interventions are being tried, which are usually successful with typically developing students, but do not work for the student with dyslexia, the gap widens between current functioning and the student’s potential (Schatschneider, Wagner, & Crawford, 2008).

Interventions for dyslexia. On the heels of Hinshelwood’s publication of *Congenital word blindness*, Samuel Orton wrote his groundbreaking work *Reading, writing, and speech problems in children* in 1937, in which he stated that “there are striking inherent and constitutional differences in certain children, apart from those of general intelligence, which influence their acquisition of the language function” (Orton, 1937). Orton’s understanding of this disorder formed the basis of one of the foundational remediation programs used by teachers and tutors working with students with dyslexia today, called the Orton-Gillingham program (OG), which was first called the Orton-Gillingham-Stillman method (Dunson, 2012). This method is strictly a reading program that utilizes multisensory modalities like kinesthetic, oral, and visual aids to teach the sounds of the English language and how to blend those sounds into
words. Interestingly, Hinshelwood proposed using a similar method called the “Old Fashioned Method” which seems to have been a precursor to Orton’s OG method.

The Wilson Reading System, the Linda Mood-Bell system, and the Fast Forward program are also evidence-based programs that have been proven to be successful with dyslexic students (Shaywitz, 2003). Most of these programs need to be administered by a teacher certified in these methods, which makes them expensive and time consuming, however, some public schools systems provide the Wilson Language System or Orton-Gillingham in resource rooms for LD children who are functioning well below grade level, and these cannot be taught reading in the general education classroom.

Intervention timeframes can vary, and they depend on the severity of the dyslexia, the age at which intervention began, and the age of diagnosis. Some students respond to intervention easily and quickly, requiring only a few months to a year of remedial work; others take quite a lot longer, requiring years of intervention, and might never be able to read at grade level (Shaywitz, 2003). These students use accommodations in the classroom to access grade level curriculum, such as: extra time on tests, audiobooks, and copies of the teacher’s notes, to name a few (Horne, 2016).

Diagnosing and intervening at an early age are critical to the success of the student, and long-term outcomes for literacy (Lovett, Steinbach, & Frijters, 2000). And still other students might have academic needs met, but they remain unsupported in social and emotional areas. These students require additional interventions in the area of social and emotional functioning, such as social skills’ groups and cooperative learning strategies.

Some experts in the field of learning disabilities, such as LeDerick, Horne, David Flink, and Brock and Fernette Eide advocate using a strengths-based approach to educating students
diagnosed with dyslexia. A strengths-based approach incorporates building on the students’ strengths to teach the weaker areas, like reading and writing. For some students this would mean an emphasis on an art or music program or incorporating a love of sports into the child’s programming. For other students, this might mean using their advanced problem-solving skills to attack academic tasks. Some advocates of this approach support individualized programming for all children, since all children have unique learning profiles, and therefore require individualized programming, rather than a one-size-fits-all model (Flink, 2014; Horne, 2016; Mooney, 2000).

The interventions outlined in this literature review are reading programs, given that this is the primary focus of intervention strategies for students diagnosed with dyslexia. Other interventions not mentioned here would include: speech-language therapy with a certified speech and language pathologist, and programs that boost social-emotional skills, like social skills groups run by qualified school psychologists. SEL programs linked to academic success for are rare in the literature (Greenberg, Kusche, & Riggs, 2004), and SEL programs specifically designed for dyslexic students and leading to academic success are absent in the literature.

Therefore, after-school SEL programs designed for LD students, such as Eye to Eye, which focus on these skills and competencies should be a priority for school districts.

**Social-emotional learning.** Social-emotional learning has been defined as those skills related to “social-emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg (2004). Elias and Arnold (2006) have been studying social-emotional learning since the mid-1990s, and stated that “…a combination of academic learning and SEL is the true standard for effective education for the world as we now face it” (p. ).
**SEL in the general education classroom.** SEL has roots that date back to Ancient Greece and Plato’s teachings (Elias, 2014). More recent developments of SEL in the classroom introduced the Jigsaw Classroom in the early 1970’s. Designed by Elliot Aronson, these early cooperative learning groups had the potential to blend races, socioeconomic statuses, and other diverse groups (Williams, 2004). The Jigsaw Classroom was developed as a strategy to integrate the races at a time in the south when racial tensions were high. At the foundation of the jigsaw strategy, teachers formed five to six diverse learning groups. Each group was given part of a lesson to learn, and after studying their part, “expert” groups were formed by combining all the members that learned the first two parts, and so on, until they were ready to present their piece to the rest of the group. As the final segment of the lesson, the teacher assessed the students on the entire unit. The Jigsaw Classroom proved to be the beginning of the cooperative learning movement, which swept across American classrooms in the early 1970’s (Williams, 2004).

Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger (2011) have identified four key areas that comprise successful SEL programs. These include:

- a SEQUENCED step-by-step training program for teachers
- incorporating ACTIVE learning into the curriculum
- FOCUSED time on task in the classroom
- EXPLICIT, clear, and concise learning goals

These four areas combine to form the acronym SAFE: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011).

As the SEL movement began to gain traction in the early 1990’s, the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was born in 1994. Now called the
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, CASEL defines social-emotional learning in this way:

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Durlak, Weissberg & Gullotta, 2015).

CASEL’s mission is “to establish social and emotional learning as an essential part of education” (CASEL, 2016). In order to accomplish its mission, CASEL has identified five key competencies for student success. These competencies include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (as illustrated in Figure 6 below).

![Figure 6. SEL core competencies. Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (2017)](image)
CASEL has identified these five competencies as leading to students having strong connections with others, experiencing school success, engaging in less risky behaviors, and having healthy relationships in school, in the work place and in their personal lives. CASEL has created partnerships with schools around the country to achieve its goal of integrating academic, social, and emotional learning into as many school districts as possible.

In a report funded by CASEL, and authored by Bridgeland, Bruce and Hariharan (2013), only 44% of teachers surveyed were at the time teaching social-emotional competencies in their schools, while 77% of teachers who responded claimed they believed the instruction of SEL to be important in the classroom to improve academic performance. Some of the structured programs implemented in schools include the Peace Paths program, the Human Ware Initiative, The Responsive Classroom, and SEL programs embedded into and aligned with common core standards. These programs, and others, address aggressive behaviors, social isolation, and teach emotional regulation, among other social and emotional competencies (Bridgeland, et al., 2013).

In today’s climate of high stakes testing, many educators and administrators believe it would be difficult to fit one more area of instruction into their already tight schedules, however, recent research shows that the direct instruction of SEL boosts academic performance considerably (Bridgeland, et al., 2013; Kauffman, Davis, Jakubecy, & Lundgren, 2001) including a meta-analysis (combining data) of 213 studies which showed an average academic increase of 11 percentile points in academic achievement (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Johnson & Johnson (1976), who were conducting novel research in the 1970’s, found that cooperative learning, one of the foundational skills of SEL, leads to greater student engagement, higher achievement among students, and more empathy among the student body. They stated,
“The way in which teachers structure classroom learning determines the way in which students interact with each other and with the teacher, which in turn affects the cognitive and affective outcomes of instruction” (Johnson & Johnson, 1976, p. 446). Although admittedly the results of this study are limited, given that the subjects were exclusively White, middle class, and engaged in language arts curriculum at the time of the study, these researchers began a discussion on cooperative learning that continues even today. Johnson & Johnson (1976) stated, “The impact of cooperative learning on achievement means that if schools wish to prepare students to take proficiency tests to meet local and state standards, the use of cooperative learning should dominate instructional practice” (Zins, Weissberg, Wang & Walberg, 2004, p. 43).

**Successful SEL programs.** Two indicators of a successful program in education is the longevity of the program, and the extent to which the program is school-wide (Zins, 2004). The programs discussed in this section all have these components, in addition to having data to support academic achievement and increased student engagement.

**The Three C’s Program.** Over recent years, programs have cropped up that have shown to successfully teach SEL. These range from partial-year programs, to multiyear programs; however, the most successful programs in this area are programs that incorporate the whole school, and these range from one year to multiple years in length (Johnson & Johnson, 1976). One such program is the The Three C’s Program (Johnson & Johnson, 1976), which stands for cooperative community, constructive conflict resolution, and civic values. According to its authors, these are critical components for a successful social and emotional learning curriculum. This program is based on conflict theories and was adapted from several programs that teach pro-social behaviors to enhance peace-making and cooperative behaviors in children, adolescents, and young adults. Data from this program has been collected in this country, as
well as countries across the world, including Third World countries, which makes it extremely generalizable.

**Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving.** One of the most prolific researchers and writers in the area of SEL is Maurice Elias. Elias’ writings on the SEL program created by CASEL, titled Social Decision Making and Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) are particularly thought provoking, and they build on the work conducted by Johnson & Johnson (1976). The SDM/SPS program utilizes skills which have been shown to foster student cooperation and success: peer acceptance and social competence (Elias, 2004). By focusing primarily on these two competencies, students come to the realization that success in these two areas carries over into all areas of their lives, to produce competent, productive citizens. Much of this program focuses on book talks and character analysis as a way to encourage students to empathize with various perspectives in a variety of real-life situations (Elias, 2004). Although SEL strategies are taught explicitly to students where direct connections are made regularly between competencies and outcomes, helping students to generalize to other situations needs to be reinforced daily for optimum success and carryover long term.

**The PATHS curriculum.** The PATHS program, or Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, is unique among the SEL programs in that it not only aims to teach SEL competencies to elementary aged students, but it also aims to boost neurocognitive functioning, with a secondary effect of boosting academic achievement levels. Since the field of SEL has been around now for 20 years or more, and the idea of social cognition or meta-cognition – knowing how you learn – has been a concept in education since before that time, it seems a logical bridge should be readily made between the two, but this has not been the case (Riggs, Zins, Weissberg,
Wang & Walberg, 2004). Until the design and implementation of the PATHS curriculum, these fields had not been integrated in this way.

Over the past 20 years, this program has been tested and piloted with a variety of populations, including general education students, special education students with emotional and learning disorders, and deaf students. The PATHS curriculum uses peer interactions, teaching of emotional regulation skills, and problem solving to make progress toward the goal of integrating the social, cognitive, and academic domains.

The PATHS program is based on psychoanalytic theory and contemporary research in the field of neuroscience. Additionally, it utilizes key tenets of emotional intelligence theory, first made popular by Daniel Goleman in 1990, in his book, *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. The foundational skills of emotional intelligence (EI) are self-awareness, and the ability to regulate emotions.

In short, the PATHS program uses a holistic approach to educating children. Through its 131 lessons that can span a five-year time frame, children are taught through all subject areas, and in all disciplines to problem solve, regulate their emotions, and strengthen peer relationships, skills which in turn boost cognitive skills and scores on standardized tests (Greenberg, Kusche, & Riggs, 2002). Other SEL programs that have been proven successful are listed in Figure 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence-Based SEL Programs</th>
<th>Skills addressed</th>
<th>Authors associated with approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meditation K-12</td>
<td>Anxiety reduction, mindfulness, improved peer relationships, increased attention and time on task</td>
<td>(Schonert-Reichl &amp; Lawlor, 2010; Black, Milam &amp; Sussman, 2009; Barnes, Bauza &amp; Treiber, 2003; Napoli, Krech, &amp; Holley, 2005; Zylowska, et al., 2008; Semple, Reid &amp; Miller, 2005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roots of Empathy K-8</td>
<td>Decreased aggression and increased prosocial behaviors, immediate and long-term effects (as long as 3 years after program ended)</td>
<td>Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait &amp; Hertzman, 2012; Santos, Chartier, Whalen, Chateau, &amp; Boyd, 2011; Cain &amp; Carnellor, 2008</td>
</tr>
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*Figure 7. Successful SEL programs. (2018)*

*Resolving Conflict Creatively Program.* One program listed in the table above needs further highlighting, because it is one of the oldest and most successful programs for SEL in this country: the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. This program was first piloted in New York City in the 1980’s and has since been implemented in dozens of districts around the country, from Alaska to New Jersey, serving hundreds of thousands of children annually. At the core of this program is teacher training, which gives teachers skills to implement the program across their curriculum.
The programs discussed in this section show that SEL has been used successfully with general education populations in recent years. While SEL in the K-12 classroom is important for school success with general education populations, it is critically important for students with learning differences, due to social and emotional weaknesses. The next section focuses on this critical need for SEL instruction with LD populations, and it discusses the work that still needs to be done.

**SEL and dyslexic students.** Dyslexic individuals are a marginalized population due to public perceptions about those that have a learning disability (Flink, 2014; Horne, 2016). Students with learning disabilities are at greater risk for social skill weaknesses than those without learning disabilities (Flink, 2014). The causes run the gamut from repeatedly being bullied because of their differences, to not being included during unstructured social times because of perceived differences by their peers, to organically weakened areas of the emotional centers of the developing brain (Haft, Meyers, & Hoeft, 2016). Whatever the cause, students with dyslexia are at a disadvantage academically as well as socially, and this, in turn, has the potential to weaken reading skills further, due to lower levels of self-esteem (Haft, et al. 2016; Flink, 2014).

**After-school programs.** Society has an obligation to educate the whole child, including developing social-emotional traits, which in turn leads to empowerment. However, LD students are not having their needs met due to the current climate of high stakes testing and pressures on administrators to show “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) in their schools, therefore leaving it to programs outside the school day to meet the SEL needs of LD students.

The literature is scant in the area of after-school programs specifically addressing the social-emotional needs of students with disabilities, and specifically those with learning
disabilities, but anecdotally, at least, the benefits are great when LD students participate in these programs. “Sadly, students with special needs, especially learning disabilities, typically hold positions of lower social status than their non-disabled peers. However, when these students participate in after-school programs, they gain many social benefits that can’t be achieved anywhere else” (Afterschool Alliance, N. A., 2008, p. 2).

In their book *Emotional intelligence and academic achievement*, Elias and Arnold (2006) presented a program called I Can Problem Solve (ICPS), which teaches children as young as preschool to problem solve so that they can resolve issues that arise in the classroom and on the playground, without teacher intervention. These are life-long skills that children need to learn in order to become successful, well-adjusted, productive adults. While this program seems to work well with typically developing children, many children with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, will not be able to problem solve using this approach. The reasons are many, but the primary two reasons are: slow processing speed and weak expressive and receptive language skills. Most LD students require considerable repetition in order to internalize a new skillset (Shaywitz, 2003); therefore, they would benefit from after-school programming that is targeted and structured to their specific needs. According to the After School Alliance (2008), students with disabilities gain many benefits in after school programs where they have the opportunity to interact with their peers. Some of these benefits include increased self-esteem, improved academic achievement, increased academic motivation, and decreased negative and risky behaviors.

David Flink (2014), author of *Thinking differently*, Brown University graduate, founder of the non-profit Eye to Eye, and dyslexic himself stated: “Beyond their efficacy for different learners—quality social and emotional learning methods have been proven to increase academic
achievement…” (Flink, 2015. The cost savings is great when employing SEL strategies; for every dollar spent, the return is more than eleven dollars (FLINK, 2015). Flink (2015) further asserts that the strategies recommended for different learners are the same strategies to which all learners should be exposed. Despite this claim, school districts are reluctant to incorporate SEL programs into the school day for fear of not being able to fit in the required academic instructional programs that students need, and the (perceived) risk to students of not doing well on state mandated tests. Since targeted SEL instruction is not happening during regular school hours, this job is left up to after-school programs and summer camp programs to fill this need.

While SEL instruction is especially beneficial for those that have a learning disability where reading social cues features prominently in the disability and poses challenges to their learning, such as with a non-verbal learning disability or NVLD and those on the autism spectrum, this is also true of those individuals with language-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (Elias, 2004). Language can bind friendships or tear friendships apart, and if children are lacking in the area of language skills, this can lead to catastrophic outcomes, such as dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse, among others (Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). Students with learning disabilities also often have associated weaknesses in the areas of emotional self-regulation, and anxiety, both areas that successful SEL curriculums address (Horne, 2016; Elias, et al., 1997; Heoft et al., 2006).

The following programs mostly focus on students with physical disabilities, where physical access might be the only barrier to services and programs; however, the similarities with students with learning disabilities are lowered levels of self-esteem and higher than average levels of depression (Blake & Rust, 2002):
• Real Kids Program: a Harlem RBI program, with its small student/teacher ratio, is designed to meet the needs of a diverse group of students. They address social-emotional skills as well as academic skills.

• Jack Nadel Social Services Center in New York runs social skills groups for students with diagnosed disabilities. This program fosters independence through arts and crafts, music, and science activities.

• Kids Included Together (KITS) is a recreational program for children of all abilities. The program’s business model is to partner with other organizations that work with children with disabilities to provide comprehensive services to their youth.

• Public schools in Orange County, Florida have started a fund to pay for the inclusion of students with disabilities in their after-school programs. Any program that is provided by the school district for non-disabled youth is open to those with disabilities. Staff is given the opportunity for training to include these children.

After a rather thorough search for after-school programs that serve students with learning disabilities, the findings are minimal. While there are several after-school tutoring and remedial programs for LD students, the only program that has a targeted empowerment program for students with learning disabilities is Eye to Eye. Headquartered in New York, with a second office in San Francisco, Eye to Eye is an after-school empowerment program and summer camp program for students with diagnosed learning disabilities, and it is the subject of this case study. Eye to Eye is a national mentoring organization that uses one-to-one mentoring to empower this disenfranchised population. Eye to Eye is the only national mentoring organization that pairs college-aged students with diagnosed learning disabilities with middle school children with
similar diagnoses. One approach Eye to Eye uses to empower youth is through an art-based curriculum to help mentors and mentees engage in conversations about navigating their school and home environments with an LD. Another important way Eye to Eye empowers LD youth is by building on the dyslexic strengths their mentors and mentees typically possess, strengths such as empathy, problem solving, visual arts, and storytelling, to name a few. Eye to Eye is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Current relevant research was underway in San Francisco at the time this study was conducted, by the neuroscientist, Fumiko Heoft, at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF). Heoft was conducting groundbreaking research through a pilot study that used 58 Eye to Eye mentees as its participants, aimed at investigating whether social-emotional learning and mentoring played a role in increasing academic achievement among LD youth. Results had not yet been published when the present study was completed; however, initial findings from the pilot study were promising that programs like Eye to Eye indeed raised self-esteem, social-emotional resilience in LD youth, and in turn, had the potential to increase grades and academic achievement (F. Heoft, personal e-mail communication, January 11, 2017).

**Summer camp programs.** Eye to Eye is the only summer camp program for LD youth in the United States that uses SEL strategies to empower this population, and that also does not incorporate traditional academic programming. Summer camp programs have the potential to focus on social-emotional competencies, while using a strengths-based approach. However, most programs for LD youth also incorporate an academic portion of the program to stave off slippage during summer of academic skills. Academic research literature focusing on traditional summer camp programs for LD youth without academic components was non-existent when this study was conducted. A search using Northeastern University’s library search engine produced
numerous newspaper articles, but literature from peer reviewed journals did not surface. Also absent at the time was literature focusing on the effect of camp on academic achievement and academic motivation. However, several programs for the general population with academic components have been mentioned in the literature.

In the Burger ‘N Fries Chemistry Camp, fourth through eighth-grade students learned about nutrition by engaging in hands-on chemistry and problem-solving activities (Skluzacek, Harper, Herron, Bortiatynski, 2010). Like the Eye to Eye camp, this camp ran for five days in the summer. Students were given pre- and post-surveys to identify their knowledge of nutrition, and findings from this study showed that students did make gains in their knowledge of nutrition and healthy eating habits. One finding of note was that students who chose the camp for themselves, rather than following parental recommendations, did better on the post-camp survey across the board. Whether or not there was carryover into the school year was not addressed, and it was not a primary goal of the study.

Another program that aimed to increase motivation and achievement in math with female students was the Options Summer Camp program (Bischoff, Castendyk, Gallagher, Schaumloffel, & Labroo, 2008). This program ran for five days in Shelby County, Tennessee, and provided 58 girls entering high school with experiential activities in math with the goal of changing attitudes toward math, while also creating enthusiasm and motivation for the subject. The study found that 75% of program participants were more motivated and had greater confidence in studying math. There was no follow up conducted with these participants after the school year commenced.

Another summer program had the goal of boosting reading levels for disadvantaged youth: the Summer Reading Day Camp (Schacter & Booil, 2005). This study was implemented
as an alternative to “summer school” for students falling behind, since summer school historically does not have a good track record of bringing students up to grade level (Schacter & Booil, 2005). The Summer Reading Day Camp randomly selected 162 exiting first-grade students in Los Angeles, and placed 72 in the intervention group, and 90 in the control group. These students then participated in a seven-week day camp, where two hours every morning were spent engaged in reading activities with certified teachers, and the rest of the day was spent in traditional camp activities. The researchers found that students in the intervention group boosted their reading scores significantly; however, long-term effects nine months after intervention diminished in the area of decoding; gains in the area of reading comprehension were maintained after nine months, however.

In one study of note, researchers collected data on campers and their parents from a large sample of camps accredited by the American Campers Association (ACA) about their attitudes toward camp. One of the most interesting findings from this large-scale study was that over half the camps reported that their one-week sessions were the most popular (Henderson et al., 2007). This is surprising because one week is a short amount of time in which campers might show lasting changes in attitude in the area of social-emotional competencies, which this study was measuring. This study showed the biggest gains in campers in the areas of leadership skills, peer relationships, and independence.

The study which is the most closely aligned with the Eye to Eye camp is called SEE Blue STEM Camp, which looked at a five-day camp for middle school-aged students that provided experiential learning activities in an “informal learning environment” as a way to increase interest and motivation in the fields of math, science, engineering and technology (STEM) (Mohr-Schroeder, et al., 2014). These researchers concluded that if students were exposed to a
variety of STEM activities by eighth grade, they were three times more likely to pursue STEM careers than those who did not have this exposure.

**SEL and academic success.** Denham and Brown (2010) investigated the relationship between SEL and academic success; their findings suggested that in the elementary years at least, children’s perceived self-awareness and self-reported competence in the classroom led to academic success in later years. If one considers the self-perception of LD youth as they progress through their school years, having experienced repeated failure at academic tasks, these findings would indicate that the SEL skills of LD youth in the area of self-awareness and competence in the classroom would negatively impact their academic performance in subsequent years.

The need for instruction of SEL skills for LD students is not limited exclusively to the absence of specific social skills. It is also necessary in the academic areas of language arts and history. For instance, students with dyslexia are sometimes lacking the ability to empathize with characters in a book, because they have trouble seeing multiple viewpoints. The same is true in history class, where students are asked to look critically at past events and make connections to current events (Elias, 2004). While many SEL studies exclude students with learning disabilities in their subject pool (Durlak et al., 2011), the programs listed below are specifically designed for students with LD.

**The Supported Literacy Program.** Elias (2004) outlined several ways SEL can be taught to LD students, incorporating it into the instruction of academic skills. He concentrated on one academic area in which SEL can be embedded, as well as two pedagogies, or teaching strategies, that encourage the use of SEL in the classroom; these strategies will work for all students, but work especially well with LD students (Elias, 2004).
The program in the area of language arts he outlined, called The Supported Literacy Program (Morocco., 2001), has been used with urban 7th and 8th graders to boost social and emotional skills, with a focus on their everyday lives outside of school. The program uses persuasive writing, as well as journaling, to encourage the students to understand perspectives other than their own. Community share sessions, peer discussion circles, and whole class discussions are integral parts of this program.

**Technology: Multimedia autobiography and Personal Problem Solving Guide.** One of the pedagogies that supports SEL mentioned by Elias is the use of technology to engage diverse learners, such as those with learning disabilities like dyslexia. One advantage to the use of technology is that students are able to work more independently on a computer, than they are able to work while doing paper and pencil tasks for which they might need a teacher’s assistance. Encouraging independent work is one way to foster higher levels of self-esteem in students. Reliance on teachers to help a student reach the next level academically sometimes causes students to feel bad about themselves, as they recognize their peers working independently and being successful (Shaywitz, 2003).

Another clear advantage to computer-aided instruction for dyslexic students is the blending of visual/auditory/kinesthetic modalities, and the probability of retaining the material beyond the current session (Elias, 2004). A good example of computer-aided instruction is multimedia autobiography, in which the student uses programs that sync sound with pictures and videos so that students can tell their life stories through a slide show, with a focus on strengths, not weaknesses.

Another successful computer program that has been used with LD students is the Personal Problem Solving Guide software. This program is an eight-step guide that teaches
students critical thinking and problem-solving skills, in addition to building confidence in students in preparation for their participation in mainstream environments.

**Taming Tough Topics.** Another pedagogy implemented successfully with LD students is called Taming Tough Topics (Elias, 2004). This strategy uses a worksheet to guide students to explore academic topics. Students are asked to write down their problem or goal, questions they have about the topic, and places where they can look for information, as well as ways they might present their findings. This strategy is tied to SEL in more nuanced ways; while students are engaged in researching topics, they are guided to look at varying perspectives and others’ viewpoints, which is a foundational skill of SEL. Another example of an application of Taming Tough Topics is to have students research reading disabilities, in preparation for having a dyslexic student join their class. The students can research how to best help this student in the classroom, to ease the transition for the LD student (Elias, 2004).

**Mentoring Programs K-12**

Mentoring has been defined as: “a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee” (Lawner, Beltz, & Moore, 2013). Some studies have shown that successful mentoring programs are the primary intervention that can produce the most positive outcomes in at-risk youth (Kamosa-Hawkins, 2012; Gutman & Schoon, 2015). These authors defined “successful” as those programs that provide ongoing supervision, a consistent and caring bond between mentee and mentor, and longevity of the mentoring relationship (Gutman & Schoon, 2015). This is especially true for at-risk populations like those struggling in school, and at risk of dropping out of school.
The National Mentoring Partnership has published a list of best practices for mentoring programs (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). These include: top-level recruitment practices, screening candidates appropriately, appropriate training, use of appropriate matching strategies between mentors and mentees, ongoing monitoring and support of mentors, program evaluation strategies, and closure procedures for the inevitable end of the mentor/mentee relationship. Other considerations would include family involvement and program visibility within the school.

Most experts concur that the mentor relationship should last six months to a year for long-term effects to occur, especially in at-risk populations (Gutman & Schoon, 2015). Jean Rhodes, a professor at University of Massachusetts Boston, and director of The Center for Evidenced-Based Mentoring, stated that mentor relationships should last at least a year, otherwise one risks negative outcomes to the mentee (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Given the challenges that many mentoring organizations experience in recruiting and retaining good volunteer mentors, this is one of the most challenging aspects of running a successful mentoring program. Since transient mentor/mentee relationships can be harmful to the mentee, caution must be exercised when implementing a mentoring program with at-risk and emotionally fragile populations, such as those with learning disabilities.

Most mentoring programs state as a goal of the program that grade point average (GPA) will be positively affected by the mentoring relationship. While GPA might not be a direct outcome of some mentoring programs, as it is hard to measure GPA without other factors interfering, many mentoring programs have shown that mentees do show up to school more after they enter the program (Durlak et al., 2011). Many agree this has a positive effect on grades and GPA (Kolar & McBride, 2011), and therefore can claim GPA as an indirect benefit of the mentoring relationship.
Fostering social-emotional competencies in youth is one of the long-term goals of many school-based mentoring programs, especially if the children are living in circumstances that put them at risk for school dropout, substance abuse, and/or poor academic performance (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012). As Komosa-Hawkins (2012) stated: “…fostering resilience in adolescents by providing the necessary social support may empower students to make smoother transitions/adjustments, stay in school, prepare for their future, and perhaps seek higher education, thereby portending a positive life trajectory” (Kamosa-Hawkins, 2012, p. 394).

One of the largest mentoring organizations in the country, Mentoring USA, offers many mentoring programs that work with marginalized populations, such as LGBT youth, youth at risk of dropping out, and “young men of color,” but they do not have a program specifically designed for working with youth diagnosed with learning disabilities. Perhaps this is due to a lack of expertise in the area of LD, but whatever the reason, it signifies the dire lack of mentoring programs for this population.

While SEL instruction has been implemented in classrooms of typical students in the general education setting since the mid-1980’s, the literature is scant in the area of SEL instruction and LD students, especially beyond the middle school years (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). This is a gap in the literature this study aimed to address.

**Conclusion**

This literature review has examined the history of dyslexia, laws supporting individuals diagnosed with dyslexia, SEL and mentoring programs designed for general education population, and also programming specifically designed for LD youth. One can see the arc of services provided and what is still needed in the classroom to support students with dyslexia.
Topping the list of programs that are lacking for LD students are programs targeting social-emotional learning.

One in five students have the diagnosis of a language-based learning disability, and nearly half of all students with disabilities receiving special education services have learning disabilities (Bloom & Freeman, 2009). Programs supporting SEL competencies in LD are lacking, however, and yet these skills are crucial to school and life success; therefore, more programs targeting SEL competencies in LD youth need to be implemented and documented.

Given what is known about how the brain works, what students need in order to be successful, and the alarming rates at which students are becoming disengaged and dropping out of school, it seems prudent to invest in programs and strategies for keeping students in school longer, and for boosting academic achievement. Since evidence has shown these programs work for general education populations, it is vitally important that more of these programs be implemented specifically with special education populations, and particularly with students with learning disabilities.

Successful evidence based SEL programs do exist and are showing success toward the long-term goal of keeping students in school longer and boosting academic achievement. Yet, one must wonder why these programs are not implemented in more schools across the country. Further, students with disabilities are more vulnerable and fragile than general education students in today’s educational system and are at higher risk for school dropout and incarceration in young adulthood (Mallett, 2014). Perhaps if some dollars were spent implementing SEL programs targeting special education populations, many of whom are disenfranchised in our public schools, LD citizens would be staying in school longer, obtaining higher education degrees, and becoming fully contributing members of our society.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Dyslexia is characterized by weaknesses in reading, writing, spelling and sometimes numeracy (Shaywitz, 2003). Literature has revealed a strong connection between a student’s academic success and their social-emotional status (Zins, 2004). However, some children with this learning disability continue to flounder despite interventions targeting social-emotional areas. More must be known about programs that support social-emotional learning (SEL) for youth with learning disabilities (LD). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how one program for LD youth was using SEL strategies and an art-based curriculum to empower students with LD through mentorship in its summer camp program. This program, which runs the summer program as well as a school-year after-school program, teaches social and emotional skills like perseverance, self-awareness, peer relationship skills, and emotional regulation. The focus of this study was this Eye to Eye summer program, a 3:1 mentoring model in a group setting.

This case study examined the factors that contribute to successful outcomes for young people with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. This study aimed to take steps to understand how to empower students with learning disabilities by teaching social-emotional learning skills and using mentorship toward this end. The central research question in this study was: How does the mentoring program, Eye to Eye, use SEL strategies to empower youth with the learning disability, dyslexia in its five-day summer camp?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to understand how the program, Eye to Eye, uses SEL to empower middle school students with dyslexia in its summer camp.
**Research Paradigm**

The research paradigm is a belief system or worldview that provides the reader a window through which to view the research (Merriam, 2015). Different researchers utilize various paradigms through which to accomplish this. This qualitative study used the interpretivism paradigm, also known as constructivism. Interpretivism was developed to challenge positivism in the social sciences, and to provide a lens through which to view research relying heavily on the participant to craft a story, and the researcher to bring that story out of the participant. This approach involves the researcher interpreting the data produced by the participants within the research setting, and within this paradigm is the assumption that the data is fluid. In other words, the data is interpreted at that moment, within that context, and can and likely will change if parameters change, such as societal changes (Merriam, 2009). This paradigm is a good fit for this study because its goal is to provide an in-depth view of one program, specifically relating to the overarching research question: How does the program, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with learning disabilities? The goal of this study was to discover the method the program was using to accomplish this. The role of the researcher within this paradigm aligned with the role of researcher within this study, as an observer intent on creating meaning about empowering youth with learning disabilities through SEL strategies (Ponterotto, 2006).

**Research Design**

This study used a qualitative research methods design. Qualitative methodology could be said to date back to Greek and Roman times, when philosophers would observe and record human behaviors. According to Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), “Qualitative research is conducted through intense and/or prolonged contact with participants in a naturalistic setting to
investigate the everyday and/or exceptional lives of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations” (p. 9). By looking at the interrelated parts that comprise the entire organization, in this case, Eye to Eye, the researcher is able to gain a holistic view of the organization. In turn, the researcher gains a close up look at how each of the parts effect each other and the larger workings of the organization, as well as how the parts work together to produce a whole that functions seamlessly. In this way, the researcher becomes the main tool through which comprehensive understanding is gained about the organization. Through interviews, document analysis, and observations, the researcher can gain an in-depth view of the organization, as themes and patterns emerge.

The qualitative method was believed to be the best fit for this study project since this study examined one program that empowers LD youth to shed light on how this program was empowering LD youth by teaching SEL competencies through mentorship. Through qualitative methods, such as focus groups, 1:1 interviewing, direct observation, and video analysis a rich view was obtained of this organization using thick description.

**Research Tradition**

This research study utilized a case study approach. As with any approach to research, the case study approach has strengths and weaknesses. Case studies are a way of simplifying the process of investigation by which one looks at a specific organization or phenomena – the “case” – that can shed light on one aspect that will help to explain certain behaviors or facts of observation. The case in this study examines how social-emotional learning can empower youth with learning disabilities.

Robert Yin, and Robert Stake are two key theorists associated with qualitative case study design. The case study approach is typically used to investigate “complex social phenomena”
(Yin, 2015, p. 4). In an attempt to do so, the researcher looks at a problem, organization, or individual holistically and in its entirety, and looks at the situation with an eye toward real world applications. In this proposed case study, the researcher examined in depth how a mentoring organization for youth with learning disabilities was using SEL strategies to empower these youth beyond the classroom. This was accomplished through interviews with key stakeholders including mentors and mentees, parents of mentees, and the CEO and president of the organization. Other data collection methods, such as video analysis and direct observation, were also be used.

While Yin (2015) placed more emphasis on the methods used in case study design, Robert Stake (1995) emphasized the “case” and looking at the object of the study. This focus was adopted for this case study, because through this lens, the researcher was able to gain an intimate look at the organization being studied. “Stake has depicted the case study approach as possessing the ability to grasp the intricacies of a phenomenon” (Stake, 2005, p. 28). Stake (2005) also asserted that too much preplanning of research questions might prove to be problematic, as so much of the case study research changes as the research progresses.

Critics of the case study approach have claimed that it is not scientific and that the data is not analyzed in a quantitative manner, as the researcher is the main instrument of data collection. However, case study research has increasingly become more and more useful and prominent in the literature (Yin, 2015), especially in social sciences research. A perceived negative aspect of this approach could be that the researcher’s bias can creep into the data collection and analysis process. Great effort was expended by the researcher conducting this study to limit this negative aspect. Proponents of this method have stated that the case study approach brings the researcher closer to educational practice, and therefore closer to educational application. This case study
has the potential to empower the stakeholders interviewed and offers the reader a more in-depth view of the issue being studied, in a way that quantitative data might not provide.

This study explored how a summer program, Eye to Eye, was using SEL strategies to empower young people with the learning disability dyslexia. Through the case study design, several key stakeholders were interviewed, and documents analyzed, in order to gain the richest perspective possible of this organization. A rich, thick description of the organization and how they empower LD youth was the goal, which was achieved.

**Eye to Eye**

Eye to Eye runs an after-school empowerment mentoring program, as well as a five-day summer program for students with a diagnosed LD such as dyslexia and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); the organization’s summer program was the subject of this case study. Eye to Eye is a national mentoring organization run by and for youth with learning disabilities; it uses one to one mentoring to empower this disenfranchised population. Eye to Eye was founded in 1998, by founder and CEO David Flink, with a colleague named Jonathan Mooney. Mooney left Eye to Eye soon after its inception to pursue other professional interests, and Flink, at the time this study was conducted, continued to lead this organization that had grown from one chapter, or site, as they are now called, in Rhode Island, to 60 chapters nationwide in 22 states.

Eye to Eye, at the time of this study, was the only national mentoring organization that paired college and high school students with diagnosed learning disabilities with middle school students with similar diagnoses. The program was using an art-based curriculum to help mentors and mentees engage in conversations about navigating their school and home environments with an LD (Eye to Eye, 2018). The organization was using an “artist-in-residence” model to inform
and create their art curriculum. The art projects were being designed to facilitate a conversation between the mentors and mentees about what it means to have an LD; an example might be the struggles and challenges they face in their everyday lives, inside and outside the classroom. The original idea behind using visual arts versus the performing arts is the ease with which it can be used, as well as the cost-effectiveness. It can also be taught by relatively untrained mentors to the mentees. Art continues to be the vehicle through which the mentors and mentees bond and engage in discussions about their learning differences and the social-emotional tools they need to be successful in school.

Eye to Eye’s financial model is unique in that the organization has the capacity to run each chapter for only $12,000/year. The cost is split between Eye to Eye and the mentor school. Within two years, Eye to Eye requires the mentor school to be self-sustaining, so monies can be freed up to establish new mentor sites. Every so often, a school is underperforming, or for other reasons does not hold up their end of the contract and will be closed by Eye to Eye. This financial model allows Eye to Eye to be free for participating mentees, and available to students of all socioeconomic levels. Camp Eye to Eye is a bit of a different financial model, in that it charges a tuition for campers to attend. There are scholarships campers can apply for and several are awarded every year. The tuition only covers Eye to Eye costs, however, so Camp Eye to Eye does not generate any income for the school year program through its summer camp.

The summer camp runs for five days, in Rockland County, NY, and employs Eye to Eye school-year mentors, and Eye to Eye employees, as their camp counselors. The school-year mentors receive a structured five-day mentor training during the summer prior to being a camp counselor, at Brown University in Providence, RI, where the organization began in 1998. The Eye to Eye school-year program now has 60 chapters in 22 states, and serves 1350 students.
annually through direct service, and 16,000 students, faculty, and adults in the community through advocacy and indirect service such as lectures and workshops.

Eye to Eye also has a speaker’s bureau, called the Diplomats, which consists of Eye to Eye college mentors and recent graduates who travel the country speaking to students, educators and administrators on their experiences growing up with LD. This “arm” of the Eye to Eye organization is part of their commitment to change public opinion, promote advocacy and culture change around including LD individuals in all aspects of school and work life. Future plans for the Diplomats include increased lobbying efforts (this group has visited the White House twice in 2016 on behalf of LD youth), and professional development with teacher education to raise awareness of the challenges LD students face (D. Flink, personal communication, November 5, 2016).

Research conducted by Teacher’s College at Columbia University revealed that students in the Eye to Eye program showed up to school more, stayed in school longer rather than dropping out before graduation, and had increased academic achievement. Data collection involved pre- and post- self-report surveys. A surprising finding is that the mentees were found to not be the only stakeholders in this program that showed substantial benefits: the mentors also benefited greatly. Data collected from mentors on self-report surveys revealed that:

- 89% were better self-advocates as a result of participating in Eye to Eye;
- 81% agreed that being part of Eye to Eye improved their metacognitive skills and helped them to better understand their learning style;
- 90% agreed that they thought more about their strengths since joining Eye to Eye;
- 95% reported feelings of increased self-esteem due to belonging to a community (sometimes for the first time).
The social-emotional competencies this program addresses include meta-cognition (knowing how you learn), self-advocacy (advocating for oneself), academic empowerment, developing grit and perseverance when faced with challenges in school and at home, and community building. These competencies are at the core of Eye to Eye’s work (Eye to Eye, 2018).

Most of the literature focused on empirical research does not include programs that are successful with LD students in the area of SEL; however, two anthropologists have included Eye to Eye in their study of successful programs working with LD students. Ginsburg and Rapp (2013), in referring to interviews they conducted with Eye to Eye mentors, revealed: “Many of the approximately thirty student activists we interviewed felt empowered to create their own representations that challenge purely medical understandings of their circumstances” (p. 191). This concept is the foundation of the Eye to Eye mission. Eye to Eye is not a remediation program or a tutoring program, as so many other programs for LD youth are. It does not focus on the weaknesses of people with this learning disability, but rather, Eye to Eye exists solely to empower young people with LD, to show them through mentorship what is possible, and to help them envision what their futures might hold. Eye to Eye’s mission is “to teach youth with LD/ADHD how to develop the agency, community and support they will need to make their environment work for them” and this is done through a one to one mentoring relationship.

**Participant Diversity**

Eye to Eye’s school-year program operates using a clustering strategy. Eye to Eye has found that it is more financially feasible to cluster the school sites so that when Eye to Eye staff go out to do training, there is less geographic area to cover. These chapters that are close to each other geographically can also provide support and a community for each other.
Eye to Eye was operating in 22 states nationwide when this study was conducted, serving a diverse socioeconomic student population. Eye to Eye’s school year sites can be found in every type of geographic location, including inner city, urban, rural, and suburban, and in every type of school, including: private, public, private LD school, and charter. Camp Eye to Eye also has socioeconomic diversity among its mentors and mentees, although the camp population is not quite as diverse as the school-year population for a variety of reasons, including its location on the Upper East Side of New York City. Among the five campers that were interviewed for this study, the range of socioeconomic status was wide. One camper was from a lower socioeconomic background from the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, one was from a middle-class neighborhood in Chicago, one was from an upper socioeconomic background in the Netherlands, another was from a working-class family in Brooklyn, NY, and another camper was from a middle-class family in rural Pennsylvania. This diversity is believed to be typical for this camp. The opportunity to uplift students with dyslexia and ADHD is an opportunity to also uplift other groups in society that have historically been marginalized. Doing this specifically around learning drives to the heart of the human condition, as humans are born to learn. Eye to Eye is making strides to remove barriers for all to not just survive, but to thrive.

**Recruitment and Access**

**Sampling strategy.** This study used a purposive sampling technique, which is a non-probability sampling technique. The organization studied was purposely chosen because of its ability to answer the research question: How does the mentoring program, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies (SEL) to empower LD youth?” Given that this is the only national organization that uses SEL strategies to empower LD youth, it was the only choice to
answer this research question to gain a thorough understanding of SEL and LD youth empowerment.

Purposive sampling is used when the researcher wants to fully study particular characteristics of a person or organization, in an attempt to thoroughly understand the workings of such an individual or organization. This type of study can be quite small, and therefore, might not have the ability to be generalized. Generalization is not the goal in these studies, but rather, the goal is to fully and thoroughly understand the nuances of the thing being studied (Merriam, 2009).

The participants in this study were comprised of the chief empowerment officer (CEO); the president of Eye to Eye; the national program director; several national program coordinators (NPC) who also functioned as counselors/mentors at the camp; mentees; parents of the mentees. Combined, these individuals which provided a total sample size of 20 individuals. This sample size was representative of key stakeholders in the organization, Eye to Eye, and was thought to constitute enough representation to provide all the necessary information to answer the central research question.

Recruitment of participants began after Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted for this study (see attached IRB consent form in Appendix A). In addition, the researcher successfully completed the online training, Protecting Human Research Participants through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research (Appendix B). Permission was granted by the governing organization, Eye to Eye, to use their key stakeholders for this study (see letter of permission in Appendix C). The researcher actively recruited participants from the key stakeholders of the national mentoring organization, Eye to Eye. Since the researcher was serving on the board of directors of Eye to Eye, access to
participants was relatively easy to obtain. According to Seidman (2013), caution must be exercised against access that is too easy, and pitfalls that can arise therein; the researcher was diligent in this regard.

Since the only minor children in this study were the mentees, and the interviews took place at Eye to Eye camp, access to participants was uncomplicated. Mentees, mentors, and parents were interviewed as part of focus groups. Parents of mentees signed a consent form for their children. This consent stated that they were aware their children would be interviewed as a group, in a room with only the interviewer, to facilitate an appropriate comfort level for answering questions about their dyslexia.

The participants were recruited by camp administrators the first day of camp and were given a brief synopsis of the study and a short bio of the researcher, as well as the requirements of the commitment, including timeframe and incentives (see Appendix D). All participants signed an informed consent (Appendix E), which will be kept on file for the duration of the study, and for three years after the study concludes. At the conclusion of the study, the mentor and mentee participants were offered a $10.00 gift card to their choice of Dunkin Donuts, Starbucks, or Amazon, in exchange for their time. At the conclusion of writing Chapters 1-3, and receiving approval from advisors, approval was sought from the IRB at Northeastern University in Boston, MA.

Protection of Human Subjects

Protection of human subjects is always of paramount importance when conducting research, especially where minors and vulnerable populations are involved. Minor children constituted a very small part of this study; however, many of the subjects in this study had learning disabilities, which makes them more “vulnerable than the general population. Extra
steps were taken so that these subjects were protected, such as assigning pseudonyms to each participant, as well as filing all data in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home office to protect confidentiality. Participants were also told at the beginning of the study that they could withdraw without repercussion or explanation needed at any point in the course of the study. If they chose to finish the study, they were given the opportunity to review their transcribed interviews, a practice known as “member checking,” and correct any inaccuracies, as well as to delete any data they were not comfortable having included in the final transcript.

**Data Collection**

The researcher used a variety of data sources for this study. One of the benefits of conducting case study research is the wealth of information that can be collected through a variety of methods, such as interviews, observations in a variety of settings, field notes, and document analysis, to name a few (Yin, 2009). Triangulation of data was used to minimize bias and enhance trustworthiness and generalizability: “Data source triangulation is an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances” (Stake, 1995, p. 113). Therefore, observations were conducted on several days at camp. In this study, data consisted of interviews with key stakeholders of the organization Eye to Eye, document analysis such as newspaper articles, and observations of the Eye to Eye camp where the mentors and mentees work together for a week. The interview protocol included 6-8 questions for each category of participants, pertaining to the problem of practice (see Appendix F), with follow-up interviews conducted when necessary.

**Interviews.** “The interview is the main road to multiple realities” (Stake, 1995, p. 64). A semi-structured interview protocol was adhered to. The semi-structured interview is a combination of open-ended questions, and predetermined questions that allow for follow up
questions, with room for flexibility. This kind of structure is ideal for studies where the researcher has a general idea of the information he or she is trying to elicit from the participants but does not want too much structure as to leave no room for new ideas and thoughts to emerge (Merriam, 2009). “Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). This style of interviewing is less formal, and more conversational, which is believed to yield the best results for this type of study. Since the interviews were conducted at the Eye to Eye camp during one week in the summer, the researcher was afforded the opportunity to observe any changes that occurred in mentees’ social and emotional states during that time. Follow-up interviews with mentee parents were conducted by phone one to two months after the initial interviews took place.

One-to-one interviews were held with key stakeholders of the organization, Eye to Eye. These included: the CEO/founder of Eye to Eye, the president of Eye to Eye, three NPCs, who also served as counselors and mentors, focus groups with five to six mentees, and a focus group with mentee parents. The CEO of Eye to Eye was interviewed at the organization’s headquarters in New York City. The mentees were interviewed at the Eye to Eye camp in the state of New York, mentee parents partook in a focus group at the 92nd Street Y in New York City while their children were at camp, and the mentor/counselors were interviewed together via a telecommunication technology called Zoom. Follow-up interviews with parents were conducted via phone at mutually agreeable times. All places, dates, and times of interviews were chosen based on participant preference, or mutual agreement.

All interviews were conducted in person, unless otherwise noted. Mentee, mentor, and mentee parent interviews were conducted as focus groups. Each focus group lasted about 45 minutes. This was the most thorough of the interviews, covering the main portion of the data
collected. If a second interview was necessary, it took place over the phone for the purpose of follow-up questions and clarification. Mentee parents were sent an e-mail approximately a month after camp ended to request a follow-up interview with the purpose of finding out how the children were doing at the start of the new school year. Approximately seven parents responded to this e-mail, and six participated in follow-up interviews. One parent, who lives in Amsterdam, responded to questions through e-mail, due to time difference constraints. These interviews were conducted throughout September and October, and they consisted of questions relating to the children’s preparedness and state of mind as the new school year got underway. This follow-up interview was crucial in gauging whether or not and how the camp alleviated some anxiety for the students as a new school year approached.

Interview protocols were established, a separate one for each group of stakeholders. All interviews were audio recorded, contingent on participants granting permission. These audio recordings aided the researcher in recollecting tone of voice and other nuances of the interview process, which might have affected data analysis. The interviews were then transcribed via an online service called Rev.com. The focus groups were difficult for the transcriber to report accurately, due to people talking at the same time; therefore, the researcher was required to methodically go through each transcript while listening to the audio recording and correcting any inaccuracies. Some of these inaccuracies were so pronounced that they changed the entire meaning of the sentence or thought.

Field notes and analytic memo writing was done immediately following each interview to capture researcher thoughts and perceptions. It is important to note that all NPCs at Eye to Eye had previously served as mentors with the organization. This gave the NPCs a dual perspective to share with the researcher, having come up through the organization as a college student
mentor, and then being employed to train and manage the mentors across the country. It is thought that this perspective enriched the data tremendously.

**Interviewing members of the executive committee.** Prior to interviewing mentors and mentees, the researcher interviewed the CEO, at the Eye to Eye headquarters in New York City. The purpose of this interview was to gain an overview of Eye to Eye, and to gain an understanding of the origins of Eye to Eye. The president of Eye to Eye who was also the first hire at Eye to Eye, was also interviewed for his perspective on the evolution of the organization. Additionally, the national program director was interviewed to gain perspective and overview of how the organization had grown over the years.

**Interviewing mentors/mentees, mentee parents.** During the mentee and mentor focus group interviews, the researcher was aware of the unique language processing styles of individuals with dyslexia. As reported in Chapter 2, the profile of the individual with dyslexia includes weaknesses in short-term memory, processing speed, and following multistep verbal directions (Shaywitz, 2003). These weaknesses might have had an impact on these students during the interview process, and some participants required additional time to prepare an answer, or they needed the question rephrased.

These focus groups were conducted in the middle of the Eye to Eye camp week in New York. The researcher took field notes and audiotaped interviews to capture nuances of the interviews. The mentor and mentee participants were asked to share with the researcher their favorite art project and to describe its creation and why it was their favorite project.

**Observations.** Observations were utilized to supplement the information gathered through interviews. Merriam (2009) stated “Observation is a research tool when it is systematic, when it addresses a specific research question, and when it is subject to the checks and balances
in producing trustworthy results” (p. 118). In this study, observations were conducted on multiple occasions and during various activities at the Eye to Eye camp. They served the purpose of gathering information that would not otherwise be collected, in order “to increase our understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 60). For example, specific moments were noted during observation that directly related to development of social-emotional skills in campers. In her book, *Qualitative research*, Merriam (2009) outlined four possible roles an observer can take, based on Gold’s (1958) classification system; the role this researcher assumed was that of the “observer as participant” (p. 124). This was an overt role, rather than covert, due to the casual nature of the camp setting. In this role, the researcher had access to all participants, interacted with members if she chose to, but she also maintained strict observer status, if needed. To facilitate and streamline ease of observation data collection, a field note/observation log was used (Appendix G).

**Documents.** Stake (2005) made the following claim: “One needs to have one’s mind organized, yet be open for unexpected clues” (p. 68), when analyzing documents. Seidman (1998) stated that the researcher must be vigilant and judicious planning for the time it might take for document analysis, so as to not waste time during this part of the data collection phase. The documents that were collected and analyzed during this study included newspaper articles and the Eye to Eye budget (see samples in Appendix H). The organization’s growth plan was read but not analyzed, because the camp is not mentioned in any section of the growth plan. Newspaper articles provided an additional perspective, perhaps providing observations where the researcher was not able to be present, as Stake (1995) suggested (p. 68).

**Reflective memos.** Reflective memos, also called analytic memos, are a supplemental form of data collection. They are a way for the researcher to turn field notes into a more
objective form of data, in that they can be coded, just like other forms of qualitative data.

Reflective memo writing is usually associated with studies using grounded theory, but it can be used in other types of studies, as well (Yin, 2015). When referring to memo writing, Yin stated: “The compilations would help you to sort your evidence more methodically to determine the strength of the empirical support for these themes and ideas” (Yin, 2014, p. 126). The researcher kept reflective memos throughout the entire process of data collection and analysis.

Data Storage

All data collected during this study was stored on the researcher’s laptop, which is password protected. This laptop was with the researcher most of the time, and when it was not, it was kept in a locked office in the researcher’s house. Digital audio tape recordings were stored in the researcher’s laptop, iPhone, and zip drive, which were all password protected. Only the researcher and study participants had access to the study data. Upon completion of this study, all data will be kept for the period of time prescribed by the researcher’s university, at which time it will be destroyed in the manner that is mandated by the university. Signed consent forms must be kept for a period of three years and will be locked in a filing cabinet in the researcher’s home office for that period of time. Any links to participant identifying information will be deleted once the study is concluded and dissertation is successfully defended.

Data Analysis

Robert Stake (1995) summed up the role of data analysis in this way: “Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as final compilations” (p. 71). Data analysis began the moment the researcher had her first interactions with the organization Eye to Eye, taking field notes and coding them from that initial meeting forward. Coding was the process through which short labels were assigned to interviews and observations, as a way to categorize
information and organize the data. Patterns and themes in data are more easily seen through coding. Successful coding is more than just labeling, however. Coding is a way of tying data together through multiple data collection sessions (Saldaña, 2015).

Data analysis began with transcription of the interviews and field notes from initial meetings with key stakeholders. The researcher used an online service called Rev.com, for transcription of the interviews. The ease of Rev.com allowed the researcher to record the interview through the iPhone’s Rev app, and she seamlessly sent the recording to be transcribed, with a turnaround time of 12 hours or less. This allowed the researcher to begin coding and analyzing the data soon after the interview or observation had been completed, which is recommended (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

**Coding.** The researcher utilized a three-cycle coding system for analyzing data. This method allowed for a robust and thorough analysis to take place. The first cycle took a general look at the data and generated words or phrases; the second cycle looked more critically at the data and refined codes, placing them within themes; and the third cycle put data into broader categories. It was important to code and analyze data in an ongoing manner as it was collected, otherwise, the researcher ran the risk of the data becoming overwhelming (Miles et al. 2014).

Coding for this study was inductive; codes developed organically, so that themes emerged, and subsequently superordinate themes, and ultimately categories, emerged. In Miles et al.’s (2014) *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (2014), the authors lay out 15 types of codes a researcher might use in qualitative research (Chapter 4). These can be used alone or in combination to fit a researcher’s needs. In this study, a combination of the following four types of codes was useful: descriptive codes, in-vivo codes, process codes, and simultaneous codes. Descriptive codes were comprised of labels or short phrases the researcher assigned to passages;
in-vivo codes used words or phrases from the participant’s own words, such as “hated school” or “this year’s better” (Miles et al., 2014) p. 74). Process codes involved words or phrases that depicted action, and simultaneous codes involved multiple codes used for one section of data (Saldaña, 2015).

Second cycle coding, sometimes called pattern coding or axial coding, is a way to categorize initial codes into larger units or themes. This has multiple purposes: it condenses the data into more manageable chunks, and it allows the researcher to begin analysis right away, thereby allowing further in-depth data collection and analysis. A Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis (CAQDAS) was useful in this phase of the data analysis because it provides many benefits when doing qualitative research. A CAQDAS is a computer program that allows the researcher to look for patterns and themes in his or her coding; there are several CAQDAS programs available online (Saldaña, 2016, p. 31). For this study, the researcher used MAXQDA in the beginning, but found that coding manually was more beneficial.

Axial coding was used as a way to actively connect themes and patterns. Axial coding allows the researcher to eliminate any redundant codes or to identify codes that may have been split up during the initial coding phase (Saldaña, 2016). “The ‘axis’ of Axial Coding is a category (like the axis of a wooden wheel with extended spokes) discerned from first cycle coding” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 244). This type of coding is appropriate for studies like this one, where multiple types of data were collected, such as interviews, observations, artifacts, and documents.

Selective coding was used during the second cycle of coding as well, in order to selectively code the core themes. A combination of other codes was also used as the researcher deemed necessary, such as emotion coding, values coding, and process coding (Miles et al.2014).
Examples of selective codes that were used in this study included: social-emotional behaviors, making friends, dispelling stereotypes of dyslexia, as well as other social-emotional competencies such as perseverance, self-awareness, self-management, self-advocacy, and responsible decision making (Domitrovich, Durlak, Goren, & Weissberg, 2013).

The third cycle of coding was provisional coding. This allowed the codes to be organized into themes and categories. Merriam (2009) stated: “In effect, categories are the answers to your research question(s)” (p. 185). Manual coding in this study proved useful during third cycle coding when the researcher could spread out all the data and codes, cut them apart, and put sections into baskets or bins labeled with more refined codes, as suggested by Merriam (2009). This technique for coding is especially useful to people who have a kinesthetic or hands-on learning style, as is the case with this researcher. Another useful method was to create a large chart, in which all categories were listed, with the purpose statement written at the top. This is a way to ensure the researcher has “category congruence,” as Merriam (2009) called it, and that the categories answer the research question. A coding log or book, which had a color-coded component, was also created to aid the researcher in seeing patterns and themes emerge from the individual codes. A matrix or matrices were also helpful toward this end, as Miles et al., (2014) suggested.

**Observations.** Observations comprised a critical part of the data collection for this study. They were conducted at the 92nd St Y facility in New York City at arrival time before campers boarded a bus to camp, as well as at camp during various times. The observations had a targeted goal, with the intent of noting anything pertaining to the social and emotional development in the campers. The researcher wrote field notes and used analytic memo writing during the observations to aid with recall of what was observed.
Trustworthiness

Member checking and triangulation were used to increase trustworthiness in this study. Since bias exists in any study, explaining the researcher’s biases to participants aided in trustworthiness. Since the researcher was serving on the board of directors of Eye to Eye, the organization under study, this bias was disclosed to obtain an atmosphere of full disclosure with the participants. However, this ran the risk of affecting the openness with which the participants disclosed information to the researcher. Threats to trustworthiness were minimized by gaining a level of comfort with participants before initial data collection began.

Limitations

Internal validity can be defined as the process of cause and effect, and it is most prevalent in explanatory case studies (Yin, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) stated: “Internal validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality” (p. 213). If an event can be said to have occurred because an earlier event caused it to occur, this is referred to as internal validity. If a researcher claims an event occurred due to the earlier event, but that earlier event was not directly observed, this can be thought to be a threat to the internal validity of a study. Many explanatory case studies rely on inference, which occurs every time an event cannot be directly observed, and the researcher makes a claim that x led to y without direct observation. In the case of this study, it was important to be vigilant during the data analysis phase to do four things, following Yin (2014): pattern matching, explanation building, address rival explanations, and use logic models, also called theory of change models (Yin, 2014, p. 45, 155). To diminish threats to internal validity, these guidelines were adhered to.

External validity refers to the ability of a study to be generalized, or its findings transferred, from a small sample to a larger sample or the public. Threats to external validity can
be reduced in the research design phase of a study, by crafting research questions that allow for transferability. In this study, it was important for the findings to be generalized to other programs, in order to empower many more youth with learning disabilities through the use of SEL. One way to accomplish this was by creating a robust, rich description for the reader of the program being studied.
Chapter 4: Report of Findings

Interventions to support students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities have focused primarily on providing academic supports with less attention to supporting social and emotional traits that often impact the academic success of students with learning disabilities. Statistics are bleak for outcomes for students with learning disabilities attending public schools, with many of these students at higher than average risk for dropping out of high school, not enrolling in and/or dropping out of college, and engaging in risky behaviors, such as alcohol and drug use (McNamara & Willoughby, 2010). The literature in the field of learning disabilities (LD) shows an absence of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs being implemented specifically with LD populations. In the absence of proper supports and interventions, these young people with LDs become involved with the criminal justice system at higher than average rates (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014).

This study looked at the only national program with the primary goal of empowering students with language-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) through SEL. The central research question in this study was: How does the national mentoring program, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with learning disabilities through its five-day summer camp model? Through interviews with the parents of campers, this study aimed to find out how and in what ways the students were feeling empowered as they began the new school year, if at all, and the degree to which they employing the SEL strategies they learned over the five days in the summer camp program. The SEL strategies examined include skills such as: self-advocacy, metacognition, and developing grit and perseverance, among others. The superordinate themes of Social-emotional skills, Telling your story, and Community emerged from inductive analysis, as well as three to
four subthemes each, which are outlined below. The conclusion of Chapter 4 provides a synthesis that addresses the central research question.

This study utilized data collected from a combination of focus groups, 1:1 interviews, direct observation, and video analysis to answer the research question. Focus groups were conducted with the campers, also referred to as mentees, at the camp in Rockland County, NY, and counselors, also referred to as mentors, through the computer telecommunications applications software, Zoom.

Parents of mentees were interviewed through a combination of a focus group and follow-up phone interviews. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with several Eye to Eye staff members. Extensive follow-up phone interviews were conducted with parents of the mentees, and one mentee, to find out about the social-emotional health of the mentees as they were approaching and beginning the new school year. In addition, two videos, and one podcast specifically focused on the summer camp were analyzed and coded for common themes relating to the central research question.

**Methodology**

The research design for this study was a qualitative, case study design, specifically Stake’s (1995) case study design. Case study is a manner of viewing an organization or persons, in an attempt to view the subject(s) holistically. In Stake’s (1995) case study design, emphasis is primarily placed on the “case” rather than on methods used. The goal in this type of research is to define the boundaries, sometimes called “the bounded system,” one is looking at, and constantly and consistently keeping these boundaries in view. Further, the case study design undertaken here is an intrinsic design; in other words, the case under study, the organization Eye to Eye, is intrinsically interesting unto itself because of its ability to shed light on the use of SEL
to empower LD youth. Since this is the only organization in the country undertaking this work, it was the only choice of organization for this study.

This type of research design usually requires multiple methods of data collection for triangulation. In the case of this study, data was collected and triangulated through focus groups, 1:1 interviews, studying artifacts in the form of art projects, and direct observation.

**Participants**

A number of focus groups and 1:1 interviews were conducted to answer the central research question in this study. Three focus groups were comprised of campers (also called mentees), parents of mentees, and counselors (also called mentors). Additional interviews were conducted with the Eye to Eye CEO & founder, the president, and the national program director. Each of these key stakeholders provided a unique lens through which to view this innovative program, and each informed the central research question from their specific perspective.

Purposive sampling, rather than random sampling, was used in this study to recruit participants with a common trait. In this case, that trait was children with learning disabilities and/or ADHD who were enrolled in a summer camp program for children who learn differently. Each family enrolled in the camp was given a verbal and written explanation of the study by a camp staff member on the first day of camp and was asked about their interest in participating in the study. This yielded six signatures on release forms. One camper did not want to be interviewed, and one camper wanted to be interviewed 1:1 rather than in a group, which left four campers in that focus group. Parents also participated in a focus group, which consisted of nine parents. Five of these parents also participated in follow-up interviews on the phone one to two months post-camp.
**CEO and founder.** In 1998, David Flink founded Eye to Eye when he was a student at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Flink was diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD when he was in the 5th grade. The beginnings of Eye to Eye formed when Flink and his friend and co-founder Jonathan Mooney were mentoring local elementary school students with learning disabilities for a school project. They wanted these children to realize that anything was possible for their future, because Mooney and Flink were attending an ivy-league school, and they have learning disabilities. Eye to Eye was founded the fall after Flink graduated from Brown, and it has grown to become a national mentoring organization serving 60 schools in 22 states in early 2018.

**Eye to Eye president.** Marcus Soutra began his involvement with Eye to Eye when he was attending Keene State, in Keene, NH, as an undergraduate. He volunteered to be a mentor for Eye-to-Eye, later became a chapter coordinator, and upon graduation, was hired as the first full time employee, alongside CEO Flink. Soutra also started the first Eye to Eye camp, then called Camp Vision, which was also housed at Keene State. Several years later, Soutra started two more camps under the Eye to Eye brand; one at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, NY, and one in San Francisco, CA. Today, the camps have been consolidated into one camp in New York, housed at the Rockland County, NY’s campground owned by the 92nd St. Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).

**Eye to Eye national program director.** This participant was the third national program director hired for Eye to Eye, and he joined the team in 2016. He was the only senior member of the team when this study was conducted that did not have a learning disability, and he was bringing a wealth of experience from the educational non-profit world. He came to Eye to Eye from one of its partner organizations, a non-profit called City Year, in Boston, MA. His work
with Eye to Eye was informed by passion and personal experience working with people with learning disabilities, and he was able to relay many anecdotal stories regarding how Eye-to-Eye campers do after camp, and throughout the school year.

**Eye to Eye mentors.** A focus group was conducted with three of the mentors from the camp: Annie, Erin, and George (pseudonyms). Two of these three mentors, Annie and Erin, had previously served as mentors in the Eye to Eye school year program. Annie and Erin had been with Eye-to-Eye for several years, and George was a recent hire. In his first summer with Eye-to-Eye, George had a steep learning curve being at camp for the first time, and he had never having mentored in the school year program, like the other counselors at camp. All three of these participants were serving as national program coordinators with Eye to Eye during the 2017-18 school year, and they were traveling the country training the mentor coordinators at colleges and high schools. George had served previously as a volunteer with City Year Denver, a service learning organization in the education sector, with whom Eye to Eye has a partner relationship.

**Parents of mentees.** This focus group consisted of nine parents of the campers, and it convened at the 92nd St. YMCA while the campers were at camp. One parent left the group about halfway through, leaving eight remaining parents. Of those remaining, all eight contributed to the discussion. The families were from a variety of areas of the United States, and one family was from the Netherlands. The U.S. cities that were represented included: San Francisco, Chicago, Washington D.C., and New York.

Follow up interviews were conducted by phone with five of these families. One couple was living in Chicago, two of the moms lived in the New York City area, one mom was living in the San Francisco area, and one mom was from the Washington D.C. area. The families enrolled in Eye to Eye camp the summer the study took place chose this camp because it is the only camp
in the country that provided mentors who have LD to students who have LD. One parent stated: “We wanted him to realize you can have ADHD but still be productive, have fun, and be with other people that have this and know that he’s not different.” This parent also stated: “We wanted him to find friends and to see that he’s not alone in this.”

Eye to Eye mentees. The mentee focus group consisted of four campers/mentees, and was held at a campground in Rockland County, NY. There was an additional camper that was interviewed 1:1 on the bus ride back to New York City, totaling five campers/mentees participating in this study. Of the five, one was in his third year with Eye to Eye and was a junior counselor-in-training; he only had access to Eye to Eye during the summer camp, and not during the school year program. One was in his sixth year with Eye to Eye participating in the school year program and camp, and three were in their first summer with Eye to Eye.

The campers/mentees ranged in age from 10-15 years old. In general, about a third of the campers overall came to camp from other parts of the United States, and two-thirds came from the New York metro area. Just one camper came from another country. The campers also came from a wide variety of school settings. Two were from the New York area with one in public school, and one in a private school; one was from Chicago, and attended a Catholic private school; one came to camp from Amsterdam, and was being homeschooled; and one was from Bucks County, PA, and went to public school. The following chart shows the camper breakdown by age, geographic area, years in Eye to Eye, and school setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Camper</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in Eye 2 Eye</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>School setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camper #1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1=summer</td>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>Homeschooled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camper #2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1=summer only</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Private, Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camper #3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3=summer only</td>
<td>Bucks County, PA</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camper #4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6=summers and school year program</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camper #5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1=summer only</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Eye to Eye’s school year program serves students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, the camp tends to draw from a more homogeneous pool. However, several campers were receiving financial aid to attend camp, and these individuals were from geographic areas with fewer financial resources available to them. This enriched the camp experience for all, given the diversity of the student body.

**Setting Context**

The reason the organization, Eye to Eye, was chosen as the focus of this case study is that Eye to Eye is the only national mentoring organization that is run for and by people with learning disabilities. The organization exists solely to empower LD youth, and they do this by explicitly teaching students self-advocacy skills, metacognition, grit, and perseverance through the use of an arts-based curriculum.

The organization’s main program is its school-year program, that runs for 40 weeks from September-May, and pairs high school or college students with a diagnosis of LD, with middle
school students with similar diagnoses. The school year program observed for this study was a 1:1 mentoring model within a group setting and was using an art-based curriculum to facilitate discussions about the mentees’ learning disabilities. The president of Eye to Eye said this about himself and his co-creator of Eye to Eye: “What made us successful was our ability to advocate for ourselves and our ability to understand how to accommodate for our learning.” And in referring to the mentors, he said: “We teach them [the mentees] about accommodations, advocacy, and metacognition. And that was how we framed it.” They accomplish this by using art projects as a catalyst to talk about learning disabilities and struggles in school. For example, one of the art projects the researcher became aware of was an “Advocacy Ladder,” where the students learned tools to use as building blocks to advocate for their needs. Another project was the “Utility Belt” project, through which the students created a belt similar to superhero belts, upon which they attached tools that aimed to help them in the classroom to enable them to succeed. Throughout all of these projects, mentors used storytelling to engage students in conversations about social-emotional tools and strategies, which might work for the students in the classroom.

The focus of this study was Eye to Eye’s five-day summer camp program. This was a 3:1 mentoring model within a group setting, and as was the case in the school year program, it consisted of art projects designed to facilitate conversations about LD and challenges within school. The camp program represented a condensed version of the school-year program. The President of Eye to Eye said this about the original thought process behind the camp:

...what the kids experience throughout the school year [program] is about 40 hours and the camp is about 40 hours...could you experience it in a condensed version? I don’t think
we ever thought that the camp could completely supplement the experience that the kid would have throughout the year.

The camp also incorporates traditional camp activities, such as a ropes course, swimming, and group games. The camp takes place in Rockland County, NY, where Eye to Eye leases part of the campground from the 92nd St. YMCA, in New York City, which also runs other camp programs on the same grounds.

The environment on the day of the observation for this study can only be described as lively, at best, and chaotic, at worst. Upon questioning the camp staff about the environment on that particular day, they stated that this was pretty much the norm. The camp takes place about an hour outside of New York City, in Rockland County, NY, on a beautiful, rural, wooded piece of land, owned by the 92nd St. YMCA in New York City. Eye to Eye has an agreement with the YMCA that Eye to Eye can lease part of the campgrounds for five days every summer to operate their summer camp. This had been the arrangement for four years.

**Eye to Eye art projects.** Art has the ability to bring people from diverse backgrounds together, and it provided a foundation and backdrop for conversation for the camp children. As the founder and CEO of Eye to Eye, David Flink, stated, “Art is a common language that we all share.” Eye to Eye began using art as a way to engage children in a conversation about their learning differences, the ways in which they are unique and simultaneously the same as their peers and mentors. Art projects that bonded these students together permitted them to open up about their challenges and successes in a way that would not have been manifested through them talking alone. Originally upon founding Eye to Eye, Flink used art because it seemed to be a catalyst for these conversations, but also because it was cost effective, and he discovered that the children he was mentoring responded positively to the art. As time went on, the art curriculum
became more formalized; the camp now hosts an artist-in-residence (who has a learning difference) selected each year to create the art curriculum for Eye to Eye. The summer camp is a training ground for the art projects to be pilot tested for the school-year Eye to Eye program.

On the day of the first observation of camp, which was the third day of a five day camp week, the sun was shining brightly, it was a warm July day, and the campers were excited to be with each other and their counselors and to start their day. The campers arrived at the 92nd Street YMCA in New York City, had 20-30 minutes to play games and greet each other, and around 9 a.m. walked to the bus that would transport them to the campground about 30 miles north of New York City. On this particular day, the trip took approximately one hour to arrive at the camp site. The mood on the bus trip was animated and upbeat, with campers talking and laughing excitedly.

Upon arrival at the campground, the campers put their lunches away and got organized for the day. The campground included acres of woods, with other areas for a ropes course, swimming pool, and buildings for cooking and other indoor activities. On this day, the camp setting was noisy, but the campers were focused and involved. There were about five other camp groups involved in activities in the area, including one group of about a dozen members that was engaged in a drumming circle, three yards or so from one of the Eye to Eye groups. Although it was loud, the drum beat did not seem to be intrusive to the campers. There were also large, colorful inflatable slides and jump houses in the distance, but the campers never veered from their focus on their counselors and art activities.

The first activity was underway within a half hour and involved creating a “Grit Kit.” This art project was led by the counselors/mentors, and was precipitated by a discussion on what a student would need in order to overcome challenges, in other words, to persevere. The group
was encouraged to think about challenges that might be difficult to overcome in a classroom for individuals with learning differences, and what might make these challenges easier for them. Mentors shared what had worked for them in the past. After the project was completed, campers were encouraged to share their projects. Positive language was used by the counselors throughout the process, and confidence seemed to trickle down to the campers. This statement was overheard during the sharing time, from one camper to another, when referring to her project: “It’s so beautiful! You have to share!!” This kind of positive reinforcement was frequently observed between campers and between counselors and campers. In another instance, a camper was saying negative things about another camper, and after repeated attempts on the counselor’s part to ignore the language used by this camper, the counselor finally said “We’re not going to talk that way,” and the negative talk stopped.

The second project they undertook was their “Self-Advocacy Ladder.” Self-advocacy is a skill that all students need, but it is especially important for students with learning disabilities. It is vital for students with LD to express their needs to their teachers and classmates to clarify misunderstandings, ask for repetition of directions, and request accommodations, among other things. This art project had the students focus on areas in which they were struggling in the classroom, and brainstorm ways in which they could advocate for their needs to their teachers. Throughout this project, the counselors/mentors spoke about appropriate advocacy skills by volunteering stories about when they had come across situations that required these skills, and how they successfully advocated for their needs. One counselor said: “I have trouble reading with my eyes, so what do you think I asked for from my teachers? I asked for audio books so I could listen to my text books.”
Themes

The data analysis in this study yielded three superordinate themes, and three to four subthemes for each. These themes are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social-emotional skills</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Telling your story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-advocacy</td>
<td>Finding allies</td>
<td>Dispelling myths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework struggles</td>
<td>Right environment/fit</td>
<td>Owning your label/feeling empowered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognition</td>
<td>Staying connected</td>
<td>Finding a safe space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social-Emotional Skills

The overarching question in this research study asked: How does the national mentoring organization, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with learning disabilities through its five-day summer camp model? SEL can benefit all students, but LD students require these skills to be explicitly taught to them, just as they require content area subject matter to be explicitly taught. The CEO and founder of Eye to Eye described SEL by stating:

I started shining as a student because I was advocating for myself. I was getting accommodations based on those advocacy skills, which was altering the curriculum, which was honing my strengths and mitigating my weaknesses. And all of that is social-emotional learning. One reason it is so important that LD children be taught these skills is that for a variety of reasons, they tend to be socially and emotionally behind their same aged peers.

One couple, whose daughter is 10 and who attended Eye to Eye camp for the first time this summer, put it this way: “She’s developmentally, I think, younger than a lot of these kids.
We talked about that a lot at Eye to Eye, how our kids can sometimes appear less mature.” A former national program director for Eye to Eye described the social-emotional aspects of the camp this way, in a podcast interview: “The campers and counselors together do Eye to Eye art projects throughout the week that focus on skills like metacognition (an understanding of their own mind), self-advocacy skills, and sense of belonging.”

**Self-advocacy.** A 10-year-old camper was able to articulate what he thought the camp’s goals were, and what camp meant to him: “I learned strategies by working as a team. In different ways, we’re together. They work with you. If you need help with something, or you couldn’t finish your thing in time, you could ask them and then they’d help you.” This camper was talking about using self-advocacy skills to receive the help he needed.

Interestingly, the mom of this camper reported that in her opinion, he did not gain any skills from this camp, and was not using skills like self-advocacy within the classroom during the school year. Self-advocacy skills are considered social-emotional skills, and are critical tools the LD student needs in order to be successful. Sometimes, LD students need repeated exposure to certain skills before they begin incorporating these skills into their daily routine, especially in the school setting (Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000). Being able to articulate the meaning of self-advocacy is the first step toward incorporating it into a student’s skillset in the classroom.

Another parent reported:

I kind of can’t believe it…this year, it’s like a completely different child. She’s chosen...I mean, I have mixed feelings about this...she’s chosen not to do things like extracurricular activities so she can work on her homework, or finish work in class, maybe that she needs extra time for.
This camper embraced camp fully, engaging with counselors and other campers wholeheartedly by asking questions and listening intently to mentor stories. Her strategy appeared to be paying off.

**Homework struggles.** Many families reported having struggles at home with their children over homework during the school year. Homework issues are magnified with LD students, and parents commonly battle with children over getting it done. Teaching LD students social-emotional skills can help ameliorate the negative aspects of homework struggles. This is one way that a mentor can be helpful, because often, an LD child will not listen to a parent when it comes to things like homework and schoolwork. One parent said: “She wanted to be completely responsible, and do it on her own, but she couldn’t do it. She was really resentful if we were involved. It was horrible.” Another parent echoed these sentiments when she said: “I can’t do this anymore. This is wrecking my home life, my relationship with my child, and I didn’t become a mother for her not to like me, and we not to like each other.” Another parent reported: “We were spending all our time on homework. He didn’t have a life. I didn’t have a life. And my other children’s grades went down because of the time I was putting into this child.” The importance of teaching children social-emotional skills cannot be emphasized enough; the stress that homework and schoolwork places on the family dynamic in families with LD children can sometimes cause parents to divorce, and children to withdraw from school and from home life.

After camp, at the beginning of the school year, one parent reported that while they were doing homework, her child said: “But I want to do it this way and I want to be empowered to do it this way.” Using vocabulary like “empowered” and “advocate” was new for many of these children until they attended the camp. One camper reported that he had never heard the word
“accommodation” before coming to camp; now he uses the word “accommodation” to get his needs met in the classroom.

**Metacognition.** Metacognition means knowing how you learn. This is a critical skill for all children, but is especially crucial for LD students, as it is the foundation upon which they build self-advocacy skills. One student, who had been an Eye to Eye camper for three years, said this:


One parent was thrilled that after her daughter attended camp for the first time, she (the daughter) began seeing things differently, in terms of her school environment. She said her daughter came home from school one day and announced: “Ms. Scott (pseudonym) played a game today in Social Studies, and I actually remembered what we learned! Can you believe it?” This proclamation shows that this child understood how she learns best, and this was a new perspective for this child, according to the parents.

**Self-esteem.** Many LD youth have endured years of being bullied and of feeling inferior to their peers. Many parents stated that raising self-esteem was one of their main objectives in enrolling their child at Eye to Eye camp. They wanted their child to feel like they were not alone, and several parents said they felt that connecting with a mentor could go a long way toward achieving this goal. Feelings of isolation are common among LD youth, and decreasing feelings of isolation is a major objective of the Eye to Eye program. The founder and CEO of Eye to Eye spoke eloquently on this subject:
...we’re giving these kids armor. We’re not fixing these kids, because they’re not broken. We are giving these kids affirmations about how great they are, and then we are giving them tools to go out and fight for what they deserve.

These “tools” are the social-emotional skills that Eye to Eye is explicitly teaching their mentees. These skills include: metacognition, finding community, telling your story, self-advocacy, and using accommodations. When asked about the effects of camp, another parent stated: “We feel that her confidence is higher. We feel that she’s calmer. I mean, it’s sort of blowing our minds…we’re sort of afraid to believe it.”

Self-esteem is very hard to raise in children that have learning issues, mainly because coming up against your weaknesses day in and day out causes individuals to doubt themselves inside the classroom. Flink, founder of Eye to Eye, observed:

It’s all about strengths, and it’s all about recognizing those strengths. These are great minds that come out with incredible things. And I never liked the superhero analogy. I don’t think that every LD kid has the potential to be bound for greatness, but I do think every child has strengths that need to be developed and recognized. This is how you raise self-esteem in children, in my opinion.

When asked about how the environment might affect a child’s self-esteem in the classroom, Flink responded:

So the environment…the smart kids are the ones who read. That’s the set up. That’s the game. And so, when you have a disability, especially when I was undiagnosed…when you ask a bunch of kids to sit down…here’s the assignment and the instructions are on top, and do the thing. I don’t remember getting to do the thing. I can’t read the instructions on top. So, I’m looking around. So, then what ends up happening is I quickly
realize ‘Oh my God, everyone around here knows what they’re doing, I don’t know what I’m doing, so I’m stupid.

What Flink related is indicative of countless LD students around the country and around the world. One camper, in a soft tone, said this about why she loves the camp: “Here, I feel like I don’t have to hide anything from my friends or anything.” What this camper was describing was the safety of finding a peer group, a community, that understood her, and in this way, she explained that she felt better about herself.

Community

A sense of community is important to most people but is especially important to individuals who are part of a disenfranchised population, such as people with learning disabilities. The community that LD individuals thrive in is one in which they are understood, and in which there is a comfort level based on commonalities, such as type of LD, school environment, and/or home life. Eye to Eye provides this type of community for its mentors and mentees through its mentorship program. The founder and CEO of Eye to Eye said: “I didn’t have anyone…I didn’t know anyone who had a learning disability until I got to college.” Eye to Eye staff believed so strongly that every LD person should have a community, that they hired a full time staff person whose title is “community engagement coordinator,” and her job is to keep Eye to Eye alumni connected.

One of the national program coordinators, Annie (pseudonym), said this about the sense of community at Eye to Eye:

I would just say that my experience as a mentor definitely changed me, but I think the community aspect for me was the biggest, like being able to hang out with people who were going to a university, who also struggled in school. Whereas, in my day to day life,
I had a lot of friends who school was really easy for them and we never really talked about how they got on, getting bad grades or being afraid to fail a test or do poorly on a project.

She went on to say this about community in the workplace: “I think a lot of the NPC’s [National Program Coordinators], we work for Eye to Eye full time, so we’re used to having that community.”

One parent said this about her daughter finding a community:

It’s not just the sense of community, I think, that the Eye to Eye camp creates in these kids, but they really do use a curriculum that targets developing social and emotional skills in kids. It’s really a very well thought out curriculum, and it’s amazing that the kids engage in it and have fun without even realizing that they’re actually learning stuff.

The President of Eye to Eye shared that when he was in college, he told one of his professors:

Well if you’re going to get self-esteem, you’d have to solve this community issue, and this closeted issue, way before you worry about any of this other stuff, because I’ve been on this campus for four years and I’ve never met anybody else with LD. How the heck am I supposed to feel good about my learning experience or my LD?

It was immediately after this that that his professor introduced him to David Flink, founder and CEO of Eye to Eye.

**Finding allies.** One of the core benefits of being part of a community is that it affords individuals the opportunity to find their allies. Finding allies is another way of making connections within your community. Allies are those people that are like-minded and can help an individual advocate for themselves because they truly understand the struggles that individual experiences.
One mother struggled with helping her daughter find a peer group at school. She said: “It’s heartbreaking to me, because it’s clearly apparent to me that it’s hard for her to find her way in.” This kind of sentiment is not uncommon among the LD population. One camper stated: “It [camp] made me feel like I wasn’t alone and that there were people who could help me understand what I could do.” This camper was referring to mentors who were part of his community when he attended camp. It was his third summer attending, and he clearly saw the value in finding his community. This camper had also sought out community in his school environment, due to recognizing the value of it through camp. This camper’s mother also echoed this sentiment during the parent focus group, when she said: “...reflecting back on year one, it was an overwhelming sense of belonging, and knowing that he wasn’t the weird kid.” A number of parents commented on this fact that their child felt different and therefore felt isolated. One parent, when asked what her goals were for camp for her son, replied: “We kind of wanted him to get some kind of insights into his diagnosis. Not feel alone. Not feel stigmatized.”

Finding allies can lift a child out of isolation and give them a sense of belonging in a healthy way. Indeed, the danger of not finding a community and therefore not gaining a feeling of belonging is that these youngsters face a high risk of engaging in risky behaviors, like drinking. Finding allies within a community can be extremely powerful for LD children. One parent, whose child had been attending Eye to Eye camp for several years, put it this way: “Fifty-one weeks out of the year we’re fighting the school, but for one week, it’s golden.” One parent, whose child was attending for the first time said: “A lot of times, he feels he’s very different from everyone else. He feels that things are harder for him, and he doesn’t understand why.” One of the national program coordinators for Eye to Eye said this about camp: “Whatever label they
have or stigma they faced at school, they don’t get here. It’s a place where everybody accepts each other.”

Finding a community has many benefits, including increasing self-esteem and decreasing feelings of isolation and depression, as well as improving skills in the classroom. Eye to Eye’s internal research has shown that the mentors are experiencing these gains as much as or more than the mentees, likely due to the community they are part of when they are mentoring. On the Eye to Eye website, they make the claim: “95% of their mentors reported that because they felt like part of a real community (often for the first time) their self-confidence and self-esteem improved, as did their ability to advocate for themselves.” (Eye to Eye, 2018).

**Right environment/fit.** The right environment sometimes is also referred to as a good fit for the student. What is meant by a good fit, or right environment, is that the student is understood and can thrive. Eye to Eye has a standard saying that is one of the tenets of the work they do: “Make your environment work for you.” One way to make an environment work for you is to advocate for your needs and break down stigma. Having a teacher and classmates that understand your needs can make it a lot easier to be in the school environment every day.

Campers observed at Eye to Eye camp were presented with an environment that was custom made for their needs. Counselors and other campers constituted part of an environment that created a culture of understanding of LD. An example of this was the constant redirecting the counselors engaged in when campers were off task. Another example observed was how the campers were allowed to complete art projects in whatever way worked for them. For example, if they were not comfortable writing, a counselor could scribe for them. If they did not want to sit on a bench, they were allowed to sit on the floor to do their art project. There were enough counselors at Eye to Eye so that if a camper needed to take a walk in order to better participate in
activities, he or she could take a walk with a counselor, and rejoin the activity when he or she was ready.

One camper said this about being at camp: “...you’re just a whole new person...you’re meeting new people and stuff like that. And you can just be yourself and be whoever you are, and it’s much better.” Another camper who was in his third year at camp during the study said: “It made me feel like I’m not alone...and that there were people who could help me understand what I could do.” A very quiet, soft-spoken girl, meanwhile, said: “I don’t have to pretend who I am here. I can just be myself.”

**Staying connected.** One of the most surprising findings that came out of this study was that many parents felt disconnected from other parents with similar experiences, because of a lack of a parental community in their school or town. Often, parents of students with special needs feel the isolation and depression just as strongly as their children do. Having a community for parents is extremely important, and it can sometimes lead to the parents being empowered to get their children the services they need by sharing resources. This desire to be part of a parental community is so strong that one parent, in talking about the parent focus group, said: “Also, I want to just add that the parent piece was phenomenal for my husband and me.”

Many parents reported that they found Eye to Eye camp through a website called Understood.org. Understood.org is a partner organization to Eye to Eye and is a website that helps parents of special needs children find information on various disabilities, as well as help them to connect with other parents in the same situation. This is a wonderful resource for parents that are feeling isolated and might not have these resources in their own communities.
**Telling Your Story**

Many movements, such as the gay and lesbian movement and the civil rights movement have gained traction and garnered international attention by telling their stories (Neal, 1995). The LD movement has begun to its members’ stories, as well. Once an individual tells their story, they find others with similar stories, and thus, they find their community.

**Dispelling myths.** People with learning disabilities are often afraid to tell their story, for fear of being stigmatized, because of the shame that surrounds them, and due to myths that are rampant about people in this population. The CEO of Eye to Eye explained, commenting about perpetuating LD myths:

I mean, I’m amazed that I graduated high school. Statistically, I shouldn’t have. And it’s not because kids who learn differently are stupid. It’s because the system continues to perpetuate this myth, that these kids are stupid. And then the kid believes it and they drop out in 10th grade.

In talking about a classmate of his in the resource room, he continued: “But still, the stuff that he was challenged by was not the same stuff that I was challenged by. It was just the misconception of ability.” This can be harmful, in that neither of these children was likely receiving appropriate help, because of the misconception that their brains were wired in the same way. Dispelling myths has the potential to lift stigma and erase shame. This is critical if these students are to become empowered students who someday could change the world with their out-of-the-box thinking.

**Owning your label and feeling empowered.** One of the most powerful ways to become empowered in school and at work is by owning your label. Owning your label means you are able to tell your story, and can call your LD by whatever term you are comfortable with
(dyslexia, ADHD, learning disability, learning difference, for starters). One 15-year-old who was attending Eye to Eye camp for the third year, said: “I feel like I am still learning things. I’m learning how I can talk to younger kids...I’m still learning things involving asking for help, and growth mindset.” Growth mindset is a term coined by Carol Dweck, and this camper learned the term in his first summer in Eye to Eye camp. He has since incorporated it into his approach to schoolwork and homework. When this camper was asked how he identified his learning disability, he said: “I identify myself as just learning a different way. I don’t identify it as something that limits my abilities. I just identify it as a way I learn differently.” It’s important to note that this camper only had access to Eye to Eye through the camp, since his school did not have an Eye to Eye chapter during the school year. This past summer, he was a junior counselor at camp, and he was becoming a leader at his school.

The president of Eye to Eye reported that a past camper, who attended camp for several years, had just received a senior leadership award at her high school, for being an outstanding leader. Her mother claimed that attending Eye to Eye camp for several years was responsible for her daughter developing these leadership skills. Another mother whose daughter was attending camp for the first time, reported that her daughter had begun to shift how she was interacting with teachers at her school. “I think she definitely has more ownership in how she was going to approach the school year,” the mother observed. “She sees a therapist, as well, and she brought up to the therapist that she wanted to know how her accommodations were going to be met.”

Finding a safe space. One of the main reasons finding a community is so important is that it provides an individual with a safe space. This sentiment was echoed by multiple families when asked what their main goals were in signing up their child for Eye to Eye camp. Some LD people term this safe space a “no judgment zone.” It’s a space where the LD individual can feel
that they can be themselves, because they are understood, and where there is no stigma or shame associated with who they are. One camper put it this way:

Being in school is basically, you’re standing in front of your friends, they might be goofing around, you might laugh around with them, but you’re still presenting. But then in camp, you’re a whole new person, you’re meeting new people and stuff like that. And you can just be yourself and be whoever you are, and it’s much better.

What this camper was describing is the mask he felt he must wear at school when he was “goofing around” with his friends, putting on a false facade. Another camper shared about how she felt about telling her friends about her learning difference: “I don’t really like the feeling that I don’t have the ability to tell them, cause like….I really don’t like sharing it with anyone.” This camper’s mom related: “She’s not as outgoing about it as some of the other kids, that the parents have told me about. She just really wants to stay under the radar.” After following up with this family once the school year started, the student was making small steps toward telling her teachers and other students about her LD, and she was planning on attending camp again the following summer. The mom reported that her daughter was completing her schoolwork and homework in a timely manner, a big improvement over the previous year.

One of the national program coordinators explained why it is so important for LD children to have a mentor that understands first-hand what it’s like to be in their shoes: “...for students with learning differences or ADHD, the tendency is to feel alone, so to have a mentor who can say ‘I’ve been there…’ is very powerful.” Further, to have a space, like the Eye to Eye camp, where everyone is openly LD, is extremely empowering for children.
Conclusion

This study uncovered the three superordinate themes of Social-emotional skills, Community, and Telling your story, to answer the central research question: “How does the mentoring organization, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with LD in its five day summer camp model?” Between three and four subthemes are embedded within the main themes. A total of 19 participants joined a combination of focus groups, 1:1 interviews, and direct observation. Videos, a podcast, newspaper articles and blogs were also analyzed, and these provided valuable context for the scope of camp and information about the benefits to campers.

The findings in this study showed that providing a mentor to whom the LD child could relate because of the same LD diagnosis empowered the LD child and raised self-esteem. At camp, this was accomplished through art projects explicitly teaching the child strategies to advocate for themselves, what they needed to be successful in the school setting, and what their strengths were, rather than focusing on weaknesses.

One of the most surprising findings in this study was that parents shared that they benefitted greatly from the community provided to them through Eye to Eye. Many parents reported needing that community, and that it was extremely powerful for them to be able to talk openly in a group forum about their LD child, and to have other parents nodding in agreement. Several parents also reported wanting this kind of community connection in their schools.

By learning social-emotional skills like advocacy and perseverance, a child becomes empowered, and in turn learns to advocate for him or herself. The parents then become empowered. This situates the LD individual in a better place to be able to find his or her community. Eye to Eye’s school year program empowers youth in this way, and the focus of this
study was to learn how the summer camp program also empowered LD youth through its five-day summer camp model. The curriculum in the school year program has been designed to explicitly teach LD youth social-emotional skills, such as grit, perseverance, and self-advocacy. This is accomplished through the use of modeling by mentors and art projects specifically designed to encourage conversations about LD struggles in school and ways to overcome these struggles. The summer camp studied was a consolidated version of the school year program, in that it compressed the 40 hours during the school year into five days in the summer. This research contributed to a growing body of research that is showing that finding a community, and becoming empowered through mentorship, can put the LD individual on a path toward a fulfilling future.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Children with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are often the last ones to receive help in the social-emotional area, and they are often the students who most need support in that area. Due to their needs with academic skills, teachers and administrators are more likely to focus on those factors, sidelining social-emotional needs. This population often ends up not finishing high school, not entering college, and involved with the criminal justice system at higher than average rates. The academic literature in the area of LD youth is lacking in documentation of programs that promote social-emotional competencies. Eye to Eye, the subject of this case study, empowers LD youth through the direct instruction of social-emotional skills like grit, perseverance, and self-advocacy.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study was: “How does the mentoring organization, Eye to Eye, empower LD youth through the use of social-emotional learning in its five-day summer camp program?” This question was answered through 1:1 interviews, focus groups, and direct observations. Follow-up interviews were conducted with parents of campers to ask how their children were feeling as they approached and entered the new school year after camp, and if there was evidence that the children were incorporating skills they learned over the summer into the school day during the 2017-18 school year. Three superordinate themes emerged through inductive analysis. The student is at the center of the three themes, which are cyclical, and interact with each other constantly. Camp counselors consistently used positive reinforcement and role modeling to build camper self-esteem; direct instruction of social-emotional skills (like self-advocacy, and perseverance) was also used to help students overcome roadblocks in their learning environment.
Synthesis of Findings

The three superordinate themes of Social emotional skills, Community, and Telling your story emerged as an answer to the central research question: How does the mentoring organization, Eye to Eye, use social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with LD in its five-day summer camp model? Within these larger themes, 3-5 smaller themes surfaced for each, which further gave voice to these LD young people and painted a picture of how they became empowered during a five-day summer camp.

The findings in this study clearly show that by helping a young person with LD envision what his or her future might look like by providing a mentor with a similar diagnosis, and additionally by explicitly teaching the mentees self-advocacy skills, perseverance, and grit, the mentees become empowered. This empowerment is a process that happened, in this case, through art projects which explicitly taught each the child strategies to advocate for themselves, what they needed to be successful in the school setting, and what were their strengths, rather than focusing on weaknesses. When an LD child becomes empowered, they voice their needs to teachers and peers, and they subsequently find their community. Once an LD person finds his or her community, their future opens up.

Discussion of Findings and Relationship to the Literature

Throughout the academic literature in the area of social-emotional learning (SEL), there is a scarcity of research focusing on students that learn differently – in other words, students whose brains are wired differently, and who therefore require different pathways of instruction. Within the literature that does focus on different learners, there appears to be an abundance of programs emphasizing remedial pedagogy with a goal of boosting academic performance. This case study focused on the only national program with the sole purpose of boosting self-esteem in
students who have learning disabilities; the program does this through a carefully constructed, thoughtful, mentoring model within a group setting. The group setting was revealed to be imperative for helping LD individuals find their voice, and subsequently to find their community. Three major themes emerged in this study in the area of empowering LD youth through the use of SEL. Through inductive analysis, the themes of, *Social-emotional skills*, *Community*, and *Telling your story* emerged.

**Community.** The literature in the area of “community” has primarily focused on building and finding community within the online domain. Many scholarly articles have explored finding community through blogs and chat rooms, for instance (Chin & Chignell, 2006; Wakita & Tsurumi, 2007). This lends credence to the point made earlier, that the organization, Eye to Eye, is unique in its approach to empowering LD individuals. Eye to Eye, in its school year program, uses a strict 1:1 mentoring model within a group setting. In the summer camp program, the ratio is 3:1, students to mentors. The group setting is critical to empowering youth, and enabling them to find their community, while the 1:1 or 3:1 aspects allow children who are more introverted to connect with one mentor, which in turn empowers the mentee.

Another approach in the literature has supported finding community within the family unit (Jarrett, Jefferson, & Kelly, 2010). The study by Jarrett, Jefferson and Kelly (2010) showed how some African Americans found community in their neighborhood, where family lived nearby. This is a valid way to find a community, and in fact, if others in the family have learning disabilities, this approach would work for children with LD. However, many people with learning disabilities do not have known family members that have diagnosed LD, despite the fact that learning disabilities are highly genetic. In the case of adopted individuals, it is even more critical that these children are provided with a mentor in the LD community, since most adopted
children cannot point to an immediate family member with LD, therefore contributing to feelings of isolation and difference.

Finding community within the LD “family” is a critical element of empowering youth with LD, and of revealing to them what is possible in their futures. Community is so important to LD youth that 90% of campers interviewed in this study reported wanting to go back as campers in future summers, and many inquired about being counselors-in-training (CIT) in future years. Eye to Eye has reported that in their school year program, 18% of mentors and 18% of mentees participate in multiple years of the program. This translates to roughly one in five students returning in future years to continue the mentor/mentee relationship. Compared with national statistics, which show the average mentor/mentee relationship lasting nine months, this is a promising statistic (Brondyk, & Searby, 2013).

**Telling your story.** The literature is lacking in the area of *Telling your story* and community, both themes that clearly emerged in the analysis of the data collected for this study. *Telling your story*, or developing a unique narrative, is paramount to finding community, and therefore, it is essential to becoming empowered from within a learning difference. Dimond et al. (2013), addressing storytelling and social movements, asserted: “Storytelling and narrative have long played a part in social change and social movements. According to scholars of social movements, storytelling is how people learn and exercise agency, shape identity, and motivate action” (p. 477). When a young person with a learning disability is taught to tell his or her story, other individuals with learning differences trickle to the surface, thereby forming a community of LD individuals. When a community is formed, the LD individual begins to feel strength in numbers, and senses the power of the group dynamic.
The power of telling your story exists in the impetus it has for others to tell their stories, others who may feel stigma and shame around who they are, or the group of people they belong to. This is especially true if these groups live in areas that are not well connected to others that might be part of the same group or are not inclusive of those in these groups. One group that is historically ostracized and disenfranchised is gay and transgendered individuals. “Transgender people face systematic oppression and devaluation as a result of social stigma attached to their gender nonconformity” (Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013, p. 943). The invention of the internet has changed how people tell their stories, and how they find support. Shirly Bar-Lev (2008) described creating an online support group for people diagnosed with HIV and/or AIDS:

Since the advent of the Internet, social critics have debated its effects on intimacy and social relationships. I show how, by writing detailed descriptions of their illness experiences, participants in online support groups create emotionally vibrant, empathic communities in which emotional rhetoric frames various moral dilemmas (p.1)

While online support groups are abundant, online mentoring groups are not as widespread, perhaps due to the nature of the mentoring relationship. One study of an online mentoring program called Digital Heroes Campaign observed of the mentor/mentee relationship: “Despite youth’s generally positive self-reports, deep connections between mentors and mentees appeared to be relatively rare” (Rhodes, Spenser, Saito, & Sipe, 2006, p. 497).

Examples of people telling their stories and finding their community throughout history abound, and include Martin Luther King for the civil rights movement, Gloria Steinem for the equal rights movement, and Chaz Bono for the transgender movement. Perhaps the most striking example of how telling your story can prompt a movement is Bill Wilson’s story, the founder of
Alcoholics Anonymous. By telling his story, he formed a community and broke down stigma for alcoholics like himself. There are others, who are not as prominent in the public eye, also promoting movements. An example would be David Flink, co-founder of Eye to Eye, telling his story on behalf of the learning disabilities movement. Everyday, Flink is fighting for the rights of young people with LD so that they do not have to face the discrimination and misunderstanding that he faced growing up. Through telling his story at Brown University, he found his community, met the co-founder of Eye to Eye, and together they began to mentor children at a local elementary school. This is the power of telling your story.

Social-emotional learning. The research is clear that SEL boosts academic achievement. Zins and Elias outlined strategies and successful programs that will do just that. They argued that because of the current stress on teachers and students, SEL needs to be built into the school day, for students to not only be successful within school, but throughout life (Zins & Elias, 2007). These stressors include things like: standardized tests, single parent families, substance abuse, and technology use, among others. One stressor that is not mentioned in their list but that it could be argued is one of the most pronounced stressors within families, is the presence of a learning disability. Families that have one or more children with learning disabilities experience stress at a higher than average rate than other families (Johnson, 2005). The reason this is true directly relates back to the other stressors on Zin’s (2004) list as mentioned above; students with learning disabilities are at higher than average risk for substance abuse, school delinquency, suicide, and teenage pregnancy.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leader in the SEL field, outlined five competencies, which are thought to be the top SEL competencies youth should be taught. These are: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-
making, self-management, and relationship skills. Each of these competencies is reflected within the themes delineated through the data analysis and coding for this study: Social-emotional skills, Community, and Telling your story. Self-awareness and social awareness lead to telling your story and finding community, while responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills are all components of strong social-emotional skills and are necessary for successful future outcomes.

The literature in the area of SEL with general education populations is abundant; however, the literature is lacking in the area of learning disabilities and SEL. The population that needs it the most, students with learning disabilities, has a hard time accessing curriculum that incorporates SEL strategies. This could be because this population has other needs that are so pronounced in the classroom, including specialized, explicit instruction in reading, writing, and sometimes mathematics (Shaywitz, 2003).

Another reason SEL instruction is so critical for the LD population is that this group of young people are more prone to engaging in risky behaviors than the general population (McNamara & Willoughby, 2008). Most likely, this is a result of their feelings of isolation, and their desire to want to belong to a group, therefore, they are prone to engaging in negative behaviors. It is normal adolescent behavior to engage in some behaviors like drinking and smoking, but adolescents with LD feel even more isolated than the average teen because of their learning disability, and belonging to a group, even a group engaging in negative behaviors, looks more appealing to them than feeling like an outsider (McNamara & Willoughby, 2010).

Students with learning disabilities are not diagnosed with mental disorders such as anxiety at the same rate as their non-disabled peers (Cooray & Bakala, 2005). This might be due to features of the learning disability masking other mental health diagnoses, and yet, people with
learning disabilities often have co-morbid diagnoses, such as anxiety and ADHD, along with their learning disability. In 2003, a study conducted on children with dyslexia discovered what percentage of LD children had other disorders. The researchers found that 66.2% of a sample of 77 students had co-occurring disorders (Johnson, 2005). In another study, researchers found that 79% of children with learning disabilities also had co-existing psychological disorders (Johnson, 2005). These statistics argue in favor of embedding social-emotional learning strategies within the school day for all students, and yet, the majority of school districts have not implemented SEL curriculums with any of their students.

**Discussion of Findings and Relationship to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study involved the 5 C’s model of positive youth development (PYD), which focuses on a strengths-based approach to educating youth, rather than a deficit model. The five C’s are defined as: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner et al., 2005). This framework is informed by developmental systems theories.

Historically, programs developed to work with problem youth, or youth facing challenges, were based on a deficit model, and focused on the individual’s negative behaviors. In contrast, the 5 C’s model of PYD focuses on the individual’s strengths, and programs utilizing this approach teach students through their strengths. This framework was chosen for this study because of its alignment to the goals of Eye to Eye in working with young people with learning disabilities. While many in the field of learning disabilities have focused solely on the deficits of LD youth – such as struggles with reading, writing and math – and are working toward remediating these, Eye to Eye focuses on LD strengths. Many LD individuals possess strengths in the areas of visual-spatial abilities, athleticism, and art. Eye to Eye has built a program which
instills self-esteem and self-advocacy skills in LD students by focusing on these strengths and by getting students to recognize their individual strengths inside and outside the classroom.

The superordinate themes that emerged in this study were: Social-emotional skills, Community, and Telling your story. Each of these themes can also be viewed through each of the competencies in the 5 C’s of the PYD theory: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. These 5 C’s are social-emotional competencies, which made this framework a good fit for this study.

Community equals connection. Finding a community is a process through which an individual identifies qualities that are similar in others, voicing one’s needs or self-advocating, and doing it to enough people that his or her community emerges. Underlying all of this is the connection formed with those people that have similar experiences or qualities within their own lives. One singular connection to one other person with similar experiences is what the mentorship relationship encompasses. This is what Eye to Eye provides to its mentees in the summer, and the school year program, and in this way, mentees and mentors alike find their community.

Telling your story equals character, confidence, and connection. Telling one’s story is a practice that dates back to Greek and Roman times, and one which requires both confidence and strong character. In order to tell one’s story, the individual needs to already be empowered, and be able to voice their story in a way that others can connect to it. This is often done by “hooking” the audience with an anecdote (often humorous) that the audience can relate to on some level. After the initial hook, the individual then lays out sufficient detail to allow their audience to envision and potentially relate to the story being told. Telling your story has multiple benefits, including connecting to others with like beliefs and values, helping one find his or her
community, and possibly the greatest benefit of all: it has the potential to raise awareness for issues that are abundant, such as dyslexia and ADHD.

**Social-emotional learning equals competence and caring.** Social-emotional learning is what CASEL defines as:

…the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2018) -

In order to acquire social and emotional skills, young people with learning disabilities need to be directly taught these skills, just as they require academic skills to be explicitly taught. Eye to Eye teaches these skills through art projects that target the learning of social and emotional skills, such as grit, perseverance, and self-advocacy. These skills are critical survival skills for the LD student. Through building SEL in LD youth, competence and caring will be strengthened, and, therefore, self-esteem will be cultivated, which in turn keeps school retention rates up.

**Implications for Practice**

The numbers of students dropping out of school, not applying to or dropping out of college, and becoming involved in the juvenile justice system seems to indicate the need to increase teacher training in the area of SEL. Most teachers are not incorporating SEL into their curriculum in a formal way, unless it is required of them by administrators. Professional development in this area could go a long way toward helping teachers incorporate more SEL programming into their curriculum.

The information learned from Eye to Eye’s summer camp has the potential to inform instruction during the school year in the area of SEL, not only for LD students, but for all
students. While engaging in Eye to Eye art activities with a mentor trained in a strengths-based approach, LD students become empowered through direct instruction of tools they need to become successful inside and outside the classroom. General education students also have the potential to become empowered in this way, and ultimately to take charge of their learning in the same ways as LD students who have gone through Eye to Eye. Students who understand how they learn best, also called metacognition, are more successful in the workplace, studies have revealed (Leather, Hogh, Seiss, & Everatt, 2011).

This research study has the potential to influence other programs working with at-risk populations in the area of SEL as well as with students not at-risk, but who might need a little extra help to be successful. By shining a spotlight on SEL, it is hoped that other programs will follow suit, and schools will begin to implement SEL instruction during the school day for all students. This is the same argument that the creators of PYD espouse: what is good for at-risk students is good for all students (Lerner et al., 2005).

The information gained from this study will also allow practitioners, such as this researcher, to design and implement other programs that not only focus on SEL, but that also have a mentoring component. This study illuminated the need for all students to have a caring, attentive mentor who has been in their shoes, and who can show them what might be possible in their futures. Mentors have the potential to connect with students on a level that teachers, in charge of sometimes upwards of 30 students at a time, are not able to.

One of the most tangible outcomes of this study thus far is that Eye to Eye founder and CEO David Flink is considering changing Eye to Eye’s school year program model from a 1:1 mentee/mentor ratio in a group setting, to a 3:1 ratio in a group setting, as is the case in the camp. This ratio would be more cost effective, Flink has claimed, and he has expressed that he believes
that since the campers seem to become empowered with this ratio during the camp, the same might be true in the after-school program. At the time this study was completed, a pilot school-year program with this ratio was planned for the 2018-19 school year.

If America’s school systems are going to produce young adults who are well adjusted, contributing members of society, teachers need to be teaching SEL skills to their students, both in general education and special education classes, on a daily basis.

**Areas for Future Research**

This case study suggested the need for further studies, including a longitudinal study, which would answer the question: Do students who participate in a five-day summer camp program, aimed to instill social-emotional learning to increase awareness and empower LD youth, experience success throughout subsequent school years? This study showed that most of these students started the new school year more knowledgeable and empowered than the previous year, but the question still remains as to the extent to which these students continue to grow and feel good about how their brains are wired, and what pedagogy they require in subsequent years. In addition, it would benefit the LD community to conduct further research that aims to find out if instruction in SEL cuts down on LD adolescent engagement in risky behaviors, such as drinking and smoking, and how it affects the development of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety.

Eye to Eye has data that suggests that their school year program empowers these young people, and the camp certainly shows promise toward this same end. The current study revealed that at least some of the students were transformed in the five days from the beginning of camp to the end of camp, in their advocacy skills, and vocabulary around learning disabilities. This
was evident in stories from campers that reported that they were using terms like “accommodations” and “tools for success” within the classroom at increasing rates, post-camp. While numerous studies have focused on the importance of SEL for general education students, this study is the first of its kind focusing specifically on LD youth, who have specific needs in the area of SEL. The potential exists for educators of LD youth to learn from this study and incorporate social-emotional skills into curriculum for LD students during the academic school year. The literature surrounding general education students and programs addressing social-emotional learning show promise in boosting academic grades, student retention, and standardized test scores (Zins, 2004); however, further research is needed in the specific area of students with learning disabilities and SEL.

Limitations

Every study has limitations, despite the researcher’s efforts to limit these. In the current study, limitations included generalizability, parent empowerment, LD limitations, and researcher restrictions. In the case of generalizability in this case study, the information learned here is limited since Eye to Eye is the only program in existence in this country with the goal of empowering youth with learning disabilities through the use of social-emotional learning. Given this fact, it is not likely the information learned in this study will generalize to other populations, or to programs with other parameters.

Parents in this study started out being fairly empowered, since for most of them, there was a concerted effort on their part to seek out the camp. This required a certain degree of knowledge and networking to find the right fit for their child (especially since many of the campers hailed from other parts of the country and the world). Given this, the campers in this
study have parents that are already supporting them at home and finding the right school and camp programs for their children. This, in turn, empowers the children.

Another limitation of this study is the restrictions that were put on the researcher in recruiting participants. The researcher requested access to families on the first day of camp in order to explain the study, but the request was denied based on the organization’s feeling that there would be too much going on the day camp started. The researcher’s request to send out the consent forms ahead of the start of camp went unanswered. An employee of Eye to Eye explained the study to parents and obtained signatures, which in the researcher’s opinion, was not optimal in that this reduced the number of possible participants recruited because the explanation was not as thorough as it would have been had the researcher explained her own study to participants.

One other limitation of the study lies in the fact that this case study required input from children and adults who possess a language-based learning disability. The nature of the learning disability poses difficulties with expressive and receptive language. Questions needed to be repeated and rephrased multiple times, in some cases, while still maintaining objectivity on the researcher’s part. In some cases, such as in interviewing the counselor/mentors, the researcher felt she was not obtaining full descriptions or answers to her questions, even after several attempts to paraphrase.

Conclusion

This case study looked at how one organization, Eye to Eye, teaches social-emotional skills to youth with learning disabilities during their five-day summer camp. Social-emotional skills are necessary for all youth to navigate their increasingly stressful world but are especially critical skills for youth with learning disabilities, since most skills taught to this population need
to be explicitly and directly taught. The social-emotional skills examined in this study were skills such as self-advocacy, metacognition, and peer relationships, among others. Eye to Eye accomplishes this task by employing 3:1 mentoring in a camp setting, grouping LD college students with LD middle school students. The case study design utilized in this study allowed the researcher to look at the organization as a whole, and to explore how Eye to Eye teaches social-emotional skills to LD youth in a five-day summer camp.

This study is unique in that Eye to Eye is the only organization for and by individuals with learning disabilities, using mentoring as a pathway for instruction of SEL skills. Given this fact, it was the only organization offering an opportunity to examine how SEL skills are taught to LD youth. Three superordinate themes emerged during the analysis of data in this study: Community, Telling your story, and Social-emotional skills. Within these themes, sub-themes were identified.

Overall, this study gives concrete insight into and a roadmap on how to instruct LD youth in the area of SEL. Through an art-based curriculum, Eye to Eye engages students in conversations about their LD, and directly teaches skills such as self-advocacy, metacognition, and grit, among others. Without these skills in their toolbox, LD youth are extremely challenged in navigating their school day and home life, and, in some cases, this leads to negative outcomes, such as teenage pregnancy, school delinquency, and incarceration, in their futures.

**Personal Reflection**

As I sit and reflect on my journey to get to this point, I’m amazed at the transformation in not just my personal life in the past five years, when I started this program, but also in the worldview I now hold, as a result of this study in the area of learning disabilities and social-emotional learning. On a personal level, five years ago, my daughter, whose story opened this
dissertation, was still in the 8th grade. There was so much unknown ahead of her, and so much I needed to learn to help her navigate the inevitable hills and valleys she would encounter on her way to becoming an empowered LD young adult. Now, she is a senior in high school, and off to college in the fall. She is a mentor with Eye to Eye and helps younger LD students at the local elementary school to find their paths and become empowered.

In the past five years, there were struggles in this doctoral journey, and in navigating the balance between home life and graduate school life. I changed my topic three times, and my daughter changed high schools three times. She encountered bullying, and sexual harassment, but swore me to secrecy so the bullies wouldn’t target her further. All of the bullying and harassing happened at a high school for students with learning disabilities, which was eye opening in itself. The cycle of abuse is rampant in these schools, it seems. Indeed, the bullies were being bullied in their public schools, and they got sent to private LD schools, where they found new targets, and the bullying continued. All of this gave me further motivation to complete my study and re-enter the workforce stronger and more knowledgeable about the work that lies ahead to empower LD youth.

My worldview in the area of learning disabilities has changed dramatically, I would say. To be honest, I didn’t really know what SEL was, or how it was implemented through Eye to Eye, even though I had been on the board of directors for 8 ½ years. Now, five years later, I not only know what it is, but I have a deep understanding of how and why it should be implemented in schools to empower LD youth. While I am disheartened at the enormity of work still to be done for LD individuals, the progress in the past five years in this area shows promise.

Armed with the knowledge gleaned from this study, I feel ready to open the very first after-school social-emotional learning center for LD youth, with the goal of empowering these
young people. This has been a long-term goal of mine for many years, and I now feel prepared to
tackle this enormous undertaking. Having a center where LD youth can feel like they are listened
to, respected, and understood will be a dream-come-true for me, and the past five years has led
me to a point where I can realistically envision myself taking on this challenge.
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Appendix A
Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Elizabeth O'Heaney successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 11/07/2013.

Certification Number: 1315630.
January 20, 2017

Dear Elizabeth,

I have reviewed your request to conduct a research case study involving Eye to Eye, and the interview protocol that will be used. I feel that this study will be beneficial to Eye to Eye. You have my permission to interview key stakeholders, observe the Eye to Eye art room at various Eye to Eye sites, and perform document analysis (to include: board meeting agendas and minutes, grant proposals, and newspaper articles).

*The following stipulations should be observed:* findings of this study will be shared with Eye to Eye, and all participants of this study.

If you have any questions or need further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at 212-573-4429.

Sincerely,

Marcus Soutra
President
Eye to Eye
Appendix D

May 1, 2017

Dear Research Study Participants,

My name is Elizabeth O’Heaney. I am a Masters level special education teacher, and a candidate in a Doctoral program earning my EdD from Northeastern University in Boston. I am conducting a study on how Eye to Eye uses social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with dyslexia. Social-emotional traits are things like perseverance, making and keeping friends, stress management, and self-advocacy.

If you volunteer, I would like to interview you to find out your experiences with Eye to Eye. I will be requesting volunteers from the CEO of Eye to Eye, David Flink, one National Program Coordinator, one board member, several mentees and their parents, several mentors, several middle school principals, and several university supervisors of Eye to Eye chapters.

If you choose to volunteer to participate in this study, you will be involved in one-on-one interviews. The interviews will consist of 1 face-to-face interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, and possibly 1 phone interview for follow-up questions. I will come to you, at a location you choose, for the in-person interview, but prior to that I will contact you by phone to go over the scope of the study. The consent form will be e-mailed to you prior to our meeting. If follow up interviews are necessary, a phone interview will take place at your convenience. All interviews will be audio recorded.

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not contact me to volunteer, you will not be contacted again about this study. If you are willing to volunteer for this study, please e-mail me at oheaney.e@husky.neu.edu. Per Northeastern University IRB, any e-mail to other accounts will be deleted with no reply. If you volunteer, I will follow up shortly with a phone call to set up times to meet.

Thank-you for your time,
Elizabeth O’Heaney
Appendix E

May 1, 2017

Dear Research Study Participants,

My name is Elizabeth O’Heaney. I am a Masters level special education teacher, and a candidate in a Doctoral program earning my EdD from Northeastern University in Boston. I am also an Eye to Eye board member. I am conducting a study on how Eye to Eye uses social-emotional learning strategies to empower youth with dyslexia. Social-emotional traits are things like perseverance, making and keeping friends, stress management, and self-advocacy.

If you choose to volunteer to participate, I would like to interview you to find out your experiences with Eye to Eye. I will be asking for volunteers from the CEO of Eye to Eye, David Flink, several National Program Coordinators, a corporate funder, one board member, several mentees and their parents, several mentors, several middle school principals, and several university supervisors of Eye to Eye chapters.

If you choose to volunteer, and you are a mentor, mentee, or parent of a mentee, you will be assigned to a focus group (a group interview), where I will be asking questions that you will have a chance to answer in a group setting. There will be a short introductory meeting lasting 20 minutes or so, when I will explain the study to you and you will sign the consent form, and then one 60-90 minute group interview. All interviews will be audio recorded, held at a mutually agreeable place, and the consent form will be sent to you prior to our meeting for your review.

Please indicate your interest by e-mailing me at oheaney.e@husky.neu.edu. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not contact me to volunteer, you will not be contacted again about this study. Per Northeastern University IRB, any e-mail to other accounts must be deleted with no reply. If you volunteer, I will follow up with a phone call shortly to go over the details of the study.

Thank you for your time,
Elizabeth O’Heaney
Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, Department: CPS School of Education
Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator: Kelly Conn; Student researcher: Elizabeth O’Heaney
Title of Project: Will I be OK? A Case Study of a National Mentoring Organization and its Use of Social-Emotional Learning to Empower Students with Dyslexia

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you (or your child) to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being recruited for this study because of your enrollment in Eye to Eye camp, and your knowledge of the learning disability, dyslexia.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to examine how the organization Eye to Eye empowers students with dyslexia through social-emotional learning strategies (social-emotional traits are things like: peer relationships, controlling emotions, developing empathy, developing self-advocacy skills, and perseverance). How Eye to Eye does this is the purpose of this study.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to be interviewed as part of a focus group, which is a group interview. Each focus group will last 60-90 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked questions that relate to your experiences with Eye to Eye.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
Interviews will take place at Eye to Eye camp in New York. Each focus group will have 6-9 participants, will last 60-90 minutes, and most likely will only require one meeting. Follow up questions will be done through phone calls and e-mails (parents of mentees might also have a follow up interview by phone toward the end of the summer).

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
Discomfort will be minimal, and might include mentors and mentees having feelings of vulnerability, or embarrassment by telling their stories. As well, parents of mentees might exhibit feelings of sadness when telling their stories of their son or daughter being diagnosed with dyslexia. These risks will be minimized by connecting participants to each other and other Eye to Eye personnel, if desired.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help to advance the learning disability movement, and services & programs for students with dyslexia.

Who will see the information about me?
Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Elizabeth O’Heaney, 978-886-3600, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Kelly Conn, 857-205-9585, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact:
Nan C. Regina, Director,
Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
Mentors will be given a $20.00 gift card to their choice of Amazon, iTunes, or Dunkin Donuts.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There are no costs to you for participating in this study. The researcher will take care of all costs pertaining to this study, including participant parking, snacks, and the like.

Is there anything else I need to know?
Parents or guardians of minors must give consent for children under 18 years old. In addition, if your child is a mentee, they will be interviewed in a group of about 6-9 other mentees. They will be in a room with the researcher, and no other adults.

I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.

Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part
Printed name of person above
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent
Printed name of person above
Appendix G

Interview protocol

**Mentor Focus Group:**

1) Tell me about your experience in Eye to Eye’s art room, and here at camp? (Prompt: your relationship with your mentee…how you feel when you’re in the room…)

2) Tell me about what Eye to Eye has meant to you personally? I read that the mentors benefit a lot, and not just the mentees…can you talk about that a little bit?

3) Tell me about the changes you see in your mentee from the beginning of the camp week to now? Are they all positive? Or are there negative things, as well? Can you talk a bit about why you think those changes occurred?

4) Tell me about any changes you have noticed in your mentee’s emotional state? More or less happy? No change? More or less anxious or more or less willing to participate in the art room activities?

5) Has your mentee talked with you about anything outside the art room, good or bad? Can you share anything from those conversations with me?

**Closing script:**

Ok, I think that’s it for today. Thank you so much for your time! If we need to meet again, I will let you know. I will also be e-mailing you a written transcript of this interview, and if there is anything you don’t want included, you can let me know, and I will take it out. The information on how to reach me was sent in an e-mail to you. You can contact me at any time. Any other questions? Ok great…thanks again.

**Mentee Parent Focus Group:**

1) Tell me a little about your experiences before your child was in the Eye to Eye camp (like your child’s attitude before school?)

2) Tell me a little bit about differences you have noticed in your child since doing the camp…good or bad?

3) Tell me about any changes you have noticed in things like: the ability to make friends, attitude toward difficult tasks, or emotional state?

4) Tell me about any differences in the way your child talks about his or her learning difference? For example, are they more or less open about their disability?

5) Tell me about any differences outside of camp in how your child interacts with others?

6) Tell me a little bit about how Eye to Eye fosters strengths in your child?
**Closing script:**
Ok, I think that’s it for today. Thank you so much for your time! If we need to meet again, I will let you know. I will also be e-mailing you a written transcript of this interview, and if there is anything you don’t want included, you can let me know, and I will take it out. The information on how to reach me was sent in an e-mail to you. You can contact me at any time. Any other questions? Ok great…thanks again.

**1:1 Interviews:**

1) **CEO:** Tell me a little about your educational background…where did you go to high school, college, graduate school?
   - **NPC:** Tell a little about where you worked before Eye to Eye? What are your responsibilities for Eye to Eye?

1) **CEO:** What was your greatest struggle growing up with dyslexia? What were the good things about it? (Did you know they were positive things at the time or only later?) Tell me more about that…how did that affect your decision to start Eye to Eye?
   - **NPC:** Tell me a little about your LD? Were there struggles that brought you to the place you are now? Were there positive aspects?

2) **CEO:** Tell me about how you decided to use an art curriculum in Eye to Eye, and not some other approach? Why didn’t you incorporate music, dance, or some other art form?
   - **NPC:** What do you see as the greatest obstacle in training the Eye to Eye mentors? When you visit an art room, what do you see happening between the mentor and mentee? Was this the same or different than your own experience as a mentor in Eye to Eye?

3) **CEO:** What was your main goal when founding Eye to Eye? Was it friendships, advocating, raising academic achievement, or something else?
   - **NPC:** What do you see as the main benefit of Eye to Eye to the mentees? What about to the mentors? What do you learn from this job?

4) **CEO:** Tell me about the changes you wanted to see in mentees when you started the organization? Did you also want to see changes in the mentors? Tell me about any surprises along the way in what you saw?
   - **NPC:** Tell me about your biggest challenge in training the mentors? What surprises have you experienced along the way since your time at Eye to Eye?
   - **Funder:** Tell me a little about what instruments you see Eye to Eye using to measure their success? In your opinion, what do you think “success” looks like in Eye to Eye?

5) **CEO:** Talk to me about whether or not you were looking for changes in emotional states of the participants of Eye to Eye when you began? Emotional regulation, things like
that...did you make a conscious effort to help your mentees work on emotional regulation?

- **NPC**: Tell me about any questions you get from mentor coordinators about mentees’ emotional state? Do they vocalize problems they are having, and in what way do these concerns change over the school year?

6) **CEO**: Tell me about the strengths-based approach Eye to Eye takes?

- **NPC**: This study is about using SEL to empower LD youth...Do you think Eye to Eye could be doing more to instill a strengths-based approach? Tell me about that....

**Closing script**: Ok, I think that’s it for today. Thank you so much for your time! If I have follow up questions for you, I will call or e-mail. Is that ok? I will also be e-mailing you a written transcript of this interview, and if there is anything you don’t want included, you can let me know the next time we meet, and I will take it out. Ok great...thanks again.
Appendix H

Field note/observation log

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<th>S-E trait</th>
<th>Mentor Language</th>
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Name and address of school:

Date:

# of visit: