

**The Unsolvable Jigsaw of Inclusive Practice: How Educators Inadvertently Facilitate  
Learned Helplessness in Students with Disabilities**

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### **Abstract**

The impact of learned helplessness often appears in one of the most vulnerable populations, students with Learning and Developmental Disabilities (LDD) in today's classrooms across North America. The educator's role in supporting students with LDD can hinder independence, resulting in learned helplessness behaviours. This is through teaching strategies that are unsuccessful for students with LDD, the challenges behind adapting new strategies for students, as well as time and resource constraints around tasks. Using these strategies can exacerbate learned helplessness, which is exceptionally difficult to reverse. As an educator with extensive experiences with individuals of diverse needs, I investigated the relationship between educators and learned helplessness in students with LDD to identify the missing pieces of the puzzle. Learned helplessness is a serious hinderance to this population in their development into adulthood. As an elementary teacher and M.Ed. student in Canada, this research does not only support my own application of new LDD strategies but also further informs the education community. This research also reflects the importance of changing the impact of systemic discrimination towards LDD students in the classroom and in the greater context of society. Change is made possible by questioning inclusive policies, recognizing bias in the classroom, and having no tolerance for discrimination. As educators use better-informed strategies, LDD students gain more independence as adults, requiring less support which then eases the strain of health care and government resources. This also promotes the reflection of what it means to uphold a true inclusive environment through universal policy action.

*Keywords:* learned helplessness, students with disabilities, teacher strategy, strategy adaptations; inclusion, inclusive practice

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## Chapter One: Introduction

An educator's role is to facilitate a positive learning environment for all students. In North America, the diversity of the student population continues to grow, increasing the pressure on teachers to provide distinct support for each student. A major group of students who require specific support are those with Learning and Developmental Disabilities (LDD). This group of students varies from merely having difficulty reading at grade level, such as dyslexia, to having difficulty even communicating with others, such as low-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Lyon, et al., 2003; Grzadzinski, et al., 2013). This ever-growing population group requires a substantial amount of proper training and strategies for educators, in order to effectively teach them as they develop into adulthood. Educators need to be appropriately trained in order to support this vulnerable group of students. Unfortunately, educators often are not fully equipped to support students with LDD and can fall down a slippery slope when using broad teaching strategies, which frequently are unsuccessful with this group.

It is critical for population-specific strategies to be used with students with LDD, so that they can become as empowered as their other peers in the classroom. Furthermore, these students need more time and the proper guidance to accomplish everyday tasks, which educators may not always be able to provide. As a result, students may be "pushed through" by virtue of necessity and to "ease" their struggles, which ultimately results in the opposite and only adds to their struggles. Thus, students with LDD frequently are passed along through the education system, creating an increasing population that do not reach their full potential of independence, requiring further support as adults.

There are 6.2 million individuals living with a disability in Canada today, most of which are less likely to be employed (Morris, et al., 2018). Furthermore, one in five adult Canadians

have a disability, and this number continues to grow (Morris et al., 2018). This ultimately strains the health care system and the government as more students reach adulthood who need further resources and care to support them. Supporting students with LDD reach their full potential when they are in school would also increase the mental health and positive well-being for a large population in North America. Through my early life, my teaching career and my time in the M.Ed., I have been developing my interest in learned helplessness in the education system.

### **Personal Context**

Ever since I was young, I have been curious about human interaction. As I grew up, I became more inquisitive about communication and development, which became my jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces I wanted to discover. This puzzle was simple at first, but grew to be increasingly complex, especially once I began to study LDD in University. This created new missing pieces of the puzzle, such as, how our actions impact the learning development of others. My experiences with individuals with LDD in my work and studies made me realize the immense impact of educator's actions on vulnerable students. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with individuals of diverse needs.

Working as a Paediatric Physiotherapist's Assistant I was able to discern the limitations students with LDD experienced and how even simple everyday tasks could be physically and mentally exhausting for them. I also had the experience of working at a Pool Therapy Program, which helped me understand how different environments and strategies impacted the perseverance of students with LDD. As a Behaviour Interventionist, I learned many varied strategies for working with children with LDD, which were usually different for each individual student. As a Residential Care Worker, I grew to understand that some strategies, which were introduced in an effort to help, actually limited the abilities of children with LDD, and

exacerbated deficits in adulthood, leading to adults requiring more physical support. Tutoring designated students in Montreal, Quebec, taught me that countless students believe that the limitations perceived by others are their reality and they will not persevere further. This phenomenon is termed *learned helplessness*.

Working as a Special Education Teacher through a private program for individual students, I found that many students feel as though they are incapable of specific tasks because of what others tell them through their preconceived notions. As an Elementary Teacher, I have learned that educators are strained with trying to provide support for each student in their class. They can be overwhelmed delivering fair opportunity for all and having enough time and resources to support each student to reach their full potential, as well as creating a positive environment that is inclusive for all. However, I have come to understand how important it is to empower students through my work. This has been reinforced through my education in the M.Ed.

Through my experiences in the M.Ed. program, I had the opportunity to explore the field of LDD and the topic of learned helplessness at a deeper level. The M.Ed. program helped me realize connections of my learning journey that relate to my field of interest. For example, I recognized a connection to my early learning and how I struggled as a child in school which led me to teaching, to support other struggling learners. Understanding the use of educational strategies was another area of learning in my M.Ed. journey.

A major impacting factor for student's educational success is the difference of strategies. In my M.Ed. journey, I have been able to explore the meaning of strategy-use through the statement "*equity over equality*" through the research of St. Denis and Schick (2003). Their study reflected the success of an educator's teaching by using *equity strategies*, which considered

treating each student in terms of what they specifically needed. Whereas, *equality strategies* required treating every individual the same. Thus, the concept “fair does not equate to equality”, should be the driving force behind educator practice. A part of this knowledgebase is also furthering one’s own understanding of perceptions in the classroom.

The perception of educator’s ideas about diverse students impacts their learning development. In my coursework, I was able to deepen my perspective on diverse learners through Guo’s (2012) research. They investigated classroom teachers and their perceptions on diverse students. Their research revealed that many teachers hold assumptions against diverse students, seeing their diversity as *deficit* rather than *difference*. The result of this perception decreases diverse student’s ability in the classroom, their persistence at a task, and terminates inclusiveness.

Through researching learned helplessness and the predictive behaviours in my coursework, I realized the power of influence others have on students with LDD. This was reflected through Nolen-Hoeskema et al.’s (1995) research, which revealed that parental roles are extremely influential in the development of learned helplessness. This research created a transformational learning experience for me, as I began to realize that a major impacting factor of learned helplessness in students with LDD are also educator’s actions.

### **Importance of Topic**

Students with LDD are an extremely vulnerable population. Besides being vulnerable to learned helplessness, these individuals already have a multitude of difficulties to persevere through. According to Mullins and Preyde (2011), students with disabilities struggle with physical accessibilities, social and organizational barriers, let alone emotional and psychological difficulties associated with LDD. When these students are faced with such challenges, having

perseverance-like attributes increases the opportunity for successes. Whereas, behaviours that resemble learned helplessness, such as lack of motivation, decreases the chance of independence and detracts from their well-being. As a result, this increases mental health issues in this vulnerable population (Minotti, et al., 2021). Although educators may understand the impact of learned helplessness, understanding their own influence benefits the learning community.

Educators must be knowledgeable about their own preconceived notions of diverse students to prevent bias in the classroom, which holds the risk of exemplifying systemic discrimination (Cook, et al., 2007). As educators, delving into individual preconceived notions supports the elimination of larger negative outcomes. It is also imperative for educators to be wary of time limitations and resources to spark change.

Time and resource limitations for educators ultimately effects vulnerable students. When educators understand the resources they have, they are better able to effectively assess and instruct students with LDD. As students with LDD reflect learned helplessness behaviours, it is clear that time and resource allocations should be reconsidered to better support this population. I want to provide insightful and realistic strategies for educators and provide new perspectives for policy change to further a universal inclusive definition for classrooms.

### **The Argument**

I claim that educators inadvertently facilitate Learned Helplessness in students with Learning and Developmental Disabilities (LDD) because of the failure to adapt strategies, preconceived notions, and the limitations of time, resources and policies. Through educators use of common teaching strategies and the difficulty of adapting new strategies, students with LDD have increased risk of learned helplessness. Brownell et al. (2010) investigated instructional practices when working with students with LDD, revealing the imminent need of further

knowledge for teachers in adapting new strategies, resulting in student's decreased self-advocacy behaviours. Educators also exacerbate student's LDD through preconceived notions, enabling learned helplessness. Woodcock & Vialle's (2011) research on surveying teachers displayed negative perceptions about students with LDD, displaying common misperceptions of an exaggerated lack of ability. Educators are limited by policies, lack of time and resources to support students with LDD, therefore they do not get the support they need, which also promotes helplessness. Gotshall and Stefanou (2011) investigated teacher training and strategies for students with LDD, displaying lack of resources, time and the impact of policies that focus on grade-level expectation rather than individual needs. Consequently, students are not receiving the support they need, resulting in learned helplessness behaviours.

The purpose of this paper is to review the impact that educators have on students with LDD who are susceptible to learned helplessness. In chapter two, learned helplessness will be defined through recent research, followed by a description of the population vulnerable to this phenomenon, students with LDD. Educator's methods are articulated as well as the adaptation and use of strategies. Educator bias, classroom discrimination, and systemic discrimination in education are reviewed and how this affects students with LDD. Subsequently, education policies and constraints of time and resources are investigated as another piece of the jigsaw puzzle. In chapter three, I will describe personal and global implications. Finally, in chapter four, a summary of all the studies that connects to this theory are summarized and areas of further research are contemplated.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The phenomenon of learned helplessness is an area of psychological behaviour that has been researched through a plethora of studies. Earlier research denotes helpless behaviours through animal studies, which offer depth in the understanding behind this phenomenon (Seligman, 1975). Recent research involves human studies that examine the various aspects of decreased self-advocacy behaviours and how it is facilitated by others. In this chapter, relevant research that sheds light onto the complexities of learned helplessness, educator influence, and the vulnerabilities of students with LDD are examined.

### Learned Helplessness

The term learned helplessness is used to describe a series of intense powerless behaviours (Seligman, 1975). This phenomenon can specifically be defined as “a reaction to prolonged aversive stimulation that sensitizes a specific set of neurons” (Seligman, p. 361). This has been studied through animals, which has been characterized by decreased self-advocacy. (Carlson, 2010; Maier & Seligman, 2016). A classic case is the Pavlovian study on conditioning dogs to salivate when presented with a metronome sound (Pavlov, 1927). This study furthered the understanding of conditioning, a term used to describe learned responses. This, then led to research that explored behaviours that define learned helplessness today.

The term learned helplessness is characterized by behaviours such as repeated failure and the absence of independence. Maier and Seligman (2016) review studies that involved animals in determining the components of learned helplessness. They concluded that passivity in animals, involving learned helplessness, was the default behaviour to the exposure of repeated failure. Learned helplessness in humans is similar in that it is connected to independence and self-advocacy (Seligman, 1975). Behaviours that can occur prior to learned helplessness include

escape or avoidance behaviours (Sutherland & Singh, 2004). However, when these behaviours no longer successfully prevent the aversive stimuli, learned helplessness becomes the outcome. Seligman's (1975) study showed me that the absence of control in learned helplessness relates to many characteristics of mental illness. This contribution led to other studies connecting learned helplessness and mental health.

Learned helplessness is connected to mental illnesses due to the absence of control, which can also limit daily functioning. Jenkinson (1999) completed a study examining the effects of learned helplessness on decision-making skills, which limited daily functioning. Furthermore, according to a recent study, learned helplessness has been linked to major depressive disorder through the gene expression of a neurotrophic factor seen in mental illness (Storace, et al., 2019). This puts further pressure on educators to have the capacity to offer increasing support for the specific population that is the focus of this study. Jenkinson (1999) describes the situation students with LDD can be placed in, involving repeated failure situations. It is for this reason that LDD students are specifically prone to developing learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness impacts student's future academia through the experience of repeated failure, which is highly influenced by educators. Sutherland and Singh (2004), as well as Kavale and Mostert (2004), speak of the detrimental cycle of learned helplessness for students with LDD. They reported on patterns of inappropriate behaviours and academic failure, which led to the negative cycle of learned helplessness. Kavale and Mostert defined the *failure cycle* as a behaviour pattern resulting from negative reinforcement and frustration from difficult tasks. When students become entrapped in the *failure cycle*, they are at risk for learned helplessness behaviours. Helplessness surfaces when students have repeated experiences of setbacks as well (Licht & Kistner, 1986). Licht and Kistner (1986) state that, children with LDD are prone to give

up easily following a difficult task due to the repetition of failure experiences. These consequences hinder the development of social-emotional learning.

Learned helplessness can be a by-product of antisocial behaviour, particularly for students with LDD. Settle and Milich's (1999) research presented situations in which students with learning disabilities displayed a learned helplessness response style towards social interactions. Their results revealed the participants with disabilities had pronounced reactions to both friendly and unfriendly interactions, resulting in hypersensitivity. This outcome influenced the idea that LDD children display helplessness when faced with social failure experiences. Social and academic aspects of a student's life are critical when preparing for independency in adulthood. Motivation is key in this scenario, yet learned helplessness can be major a piece of that puzzle.

Learned helplessness impacts achievement and motivation in both easy and difficult tasks. DaPaepe et al. (1996) studied the impact of learned helplessness and the level of difficulty in task completion. Their study revealed that even when students were first presented with an easy task that they could complete with 90% accuracy, when offered the same task after a more challenging and risk-averse task with 75% accuracy, they would produce the same decreased motivation behaviours to the easy task prior to the difficult one. Thus, once learned helplessness behaviours are present, they affect all prior tasks no matter the difficulty level.

Learned helplessness has been an important part of research in the education field, shedding light onto the intricacies of a phenomenon that is still present in the classroom to this day. Furthering our understanding of this concept increases the chance of educators feeling equipped to support students with LDD, so that learned helplessness becomes a concept of the past.

## Students At-Risk

It is clear from previous research that people are critically impacted by learned helplessness. Children are especially susceptible to the cognitive restraints of learned helplessness. When a specific environment is presented, such as task failure expectancy, learned helplessness is inevitable. Helpless behaviours typically appear when vulnerability, repeated failure, and codependency are present. These characteristics can apply to an array of individuals but can impact children with LDD in particular. Thus, in this section students with LDD are examined as an at-risk population for helpless behaviours, which can be inadvertently facilitated by educators in particular.

Students with LDD display difficulty with daily function within the classroom, which make them vulnerable to educator influence. These students have immense difficulties with educational goals because of the challenges they struggle with, including the neuropsychological and neurophysiological disparities, as well as the difference between the effort they expend on tasks compared to the successful outcomes that occur (Cerne & Jurisevic, 2018, p.9). In Cerne and Jurisevic's multiple comparative case study, self-regulated learning in students with LDD, reflected the use of insufficient rote strategies.

Students with LDD tend to use rote strategies that are not always sufficient or practical, leaving them vulnerable to frustration in tasks provided by educators. Cerne and Jurisevic's study displayed that participants with LDD used cognitive rehearsal strategies, whereas the participants without disabilities used metacognitive strategies to problem solve. Results also indicated all students with LDD portrayed "defensive pessimism" and learned helplessness when problem-solving. The students with LDD used strategies that associated repetition of the problem and could not apply more elaborate cognitive strategies without aid. This research revealed the

susceptibility of these students to learned helplessness and the impression educators may have about the LDD students' capabilities. As problem-solving is an area of cognitive reasoning that is impacted, it is clear that academics is a major area where educators may be inadvertently promoting learned helplessness as well.

Students with LDD not only face difficulties with daily function skills but also have significant educational difficulties involving learned helplessness. One study examined students with LDD and identified various academic difficulties that appear alongside learned helplessness (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Hen and Goroshit state that "students with learning disabilities are well acquainted with academic difficulty and maladaptive academic behavior." (2014, p. 116). This study analyzed the relationship between academic procrastination, performance and emotional intelligence, which revealed a strong correlation of these concepts for students with LDD. They stated that for students with LDD, they display decreased persistence, academic expectations, and negative affect. This displayed LDD students' susceptibility to educator's expectations in regard to perseverance and expectations in educational settings.

Students with LDD are at-risk of learned helplessness through their difficulties in daily function, task-strategies, and academia. As students with LDD require extensive supports, educators and parents hold a critical role in facilitating positive strategies towards independence.

### **Parental and Educator Influence**

Students with LDD are extremely susceptible to others as they need an abundance of assistance. The influence of parental and educator roles can facilitate and exacerbate learned helplessness behaviours in students with LDD. There are multiple studies that reveal the specific impact these individuals can make on this population. In this section, specific actions that invoke learned helplessness from parents and educators, as well as preventative measures are explored.

**Parental influence.**

Students are influenced by the nurturing styles of their parents, which reveals the potential negative, or positive, impacts on children with LDD. Nolen-Hoeksema et al. (1995) reported helplessness in children of parents who were diagnosed with depression. In this study, children with mothers who were depressed were observed completing a puzzle-task together, which focused on tendencies to encourage their child to complete the puzzle or providing assistance. Nolen-Hoeskema et al. (1995), revealed that the parents who were more pessimistic, hostile and did not encourage mastery showed more behaviours resembling learned helplessness compared to those who supported more problem-solving approaches to the task. This indicates that helplessness behaviours can be impacted from the home environment; however, these behaviours can also be accelerated even more so within the classroom.

Parental influence on student academics contributes to the risk of learned helplessness. Results from Cerne and Jurisevic's (2018) study, identified the parental involvement on student's academic self-esteem and motivation, which only furthered the impact of the educator's role in helpless behaviours for students with LDD. Another study involving learned helplessness and parental influence connected controlling behaviours from parents with frustration and learned helplessness at school (Filippello, et al., 2018).

Understanding the impressions parents have on students through their nurturing style, modelling, and academic involvement reveals the impact they have on the development of learned helplessness. Although it is important to create a positive learning environment at home, it is even more important to create this at school where a large majority of LDD students' learning takes place. I argue that educators have more of an impact on the development of learned helpless behaviours for students with LDD because of their immense impact on their

learning development. Educators continue to have one of the most impacting relationships with children, therefore, exploring educational practice and how this influences learned helplessness behaviours is critical when putting the jigsaw puzzle pieces together.

### **Educator influence.**

Teachers have an important role in children's lives. They have the role of being the source of new information that will support children in their development into adulthood. Although parental influence can have a lasting impact, I argue that it is educator's role, which is the main source of cognitive development, and that has a much larger impact on students with LDD. Not only do educators impact students' academia, they can also influence their self-concepts.

Burhans and Dweck (1995) explored students' self-worth, which is majorly impacted by educator influence. Their research reflected how children who are vulnerable to learned helplessness would typically base their self-concept on the feedback from their teachers. Students susceptible to helplessness contributed their task completion to the approval of others. These students had lower confidence levels and were also more likely to use avoidance strategies to prevent failing tasks. Therefore, educator's use of feedback for students can ultimately have a lasting effect on students' self-concept and helpless acts. Teachers' methods in the classroom, such as feedback strategies, are also influenced by the underpinnings of educational beliefs.

Educator's epistemological beliefs shape the view of knowledge acquisition, which impacts student's success. According to Jordan and Stanovich (2004), educators' difference in instructional practices effects their instructional interactions with their students. Through surveys, teachers described their personal ideologies on the acquisition of knowledge. Their findings included student's learning development was directly linked to educator's belief system

on educational practice. Thus, if educators' perception of knowledge acquisition is thought to be limited for students with LDD, then educators will not be supporting these students to reach their full potential. Educators' self-efficacy is also rooted in their facilitation of helpless behaviours.

An educator's self-efficacy beliefs can have major and lasting impacts on student's behaviour and development in the classroom. Self-efficacy can be a powerful tool for teachers and students alike. The term self-efficacy refers to the belief that an educator's teaching strategies impact how well students learn. Sharma et al. (2011) studied perceived teacher efficacy, which showed that teachers' efficacy was connected to their inclusion strategies. The more educators' teaching reflected positive self-efficacy, the more inclusive their classroom was. Whereas, the teachers who had low self-efficacy beliefs, limited student's educational development. This promotes *failure expectancy traits*, which leads to learned helplessness that limits independence. Therefore, teacher's beliefs and ability in the classroom is a major influence on student's behaviour and development. Although self-efficacy is a major aspect of preventing learned helplessness, specific attitudes toward students with LDD and experience with them is also a critical aspect of positive classroom culture.

An educator's general attitudes towards students with LDD and amount of experience with them is important when preventing learned helpless occurrences. Brady and Woolfson (2010) researched teachers' various external factors that could have the most lasting impact on students, particularly with LDD. Their findings included that teacher efficacy, amount of experience with LDD students, and general attitude towards these students impacted the influence educators had on students with LDD. These results revealed that educator influence was closely tied to locus of control and stability for students with learning difficulties.

The impressions left with students from educators are clearly lasting, especially with LDD students. When educators perceive students as ability-limited, they will ergo teach them to this set level. As this vulnerable population is passed on from teacher to teacher, their abilities are increasingly perceived as limited and helplessness developing into adulthood is therefore inevitable. When educators have a limited perception, they are inadvertently facilitating learned helplessness in students with LDD.

### **Environmental Influence**

An immense contributing factor to learned helplessness is the environment of the child. A child's main two environments typically include home and school. The home environment is usually created by family culture and parents, whereas school environment is created mostly through administration and educators. As stated above, educator and parental actions greatly influence the risk for students with LDD to experience learned helplessness. This section explains the environment caretakers create for students with LDD, which can either hinder or encourage positive development.

Situations within an environment, such as problem-solving situations, can influence behaviours that lead to learned helplessness. Gacek, et al. (2017), examined students with LDD exposed to induced cognitive exhaustion and an unsolvable task. Their study identified participants that experienced behaviours resembling learned helplessness after being mentally exhausted. These participants also had difficulty in recognizing their mental exhaustion (Gacek, et al., 2017). Other environments that were created and manipulated by the researcher includes Kavale & Mostert's (2004) research in which complicated academic tasks were presented to students with LDD, which revealed their learned helpless behaviours.

Learned helplessness is impacted by class culture, which can cause a negative reinforcement cycle. Sutherland and Singh (2004) looked at the impact classroom culture can have on students with LDD. Their results revealed how the rate of academic responses and educators' control of actions impacted student's emotional and behavioural wellbeing. Sutherland and Singh discuss the compounding effect this has on students when these experiences are continuous. This leads to a negative reinforcement cycle, in which educators focus on negative consequences. Thus, the classroom culture becomes increasingly challenging for vulnerable students, leaving them to feel helpless and unable to complete tasks without being disciplined.

Together these studies show how learned helplessness behaviours are inadvertently facilitated, particularly in students with LDD, by creating an environment that was mentally exhausting or contained unsolvable tasks. This caused mental frustration, the feeling of the absence of control, and decreased self-advocacy. Through these studies, it can be seen that environments, which increase learned helplessness behaviours, all appear in classroom environment, that can be hindered or facilitated by educators.

### **Strategies in the Classroom**

The use of strategies in the classroom are imperative to instill inclusive classroom-culture and positive educator influence. As students with LDD require more attention and resources, using *equity strategies* versus *equality strategies* can be extremely beneficial to this group and prevent learned helplessness behaviours. Some strategies for students with LDD take time and resources that may not be accessible to all schools, therefore, practical strategies are explored to better support educator's time management balance. Adapting strategies that are already used in the classroom can also be a successful method to balance the needs of the students and the

educator's teaching practices. In this section, strategies that have been successful for preventing learned helplessness in students with LDD are examined and the benefit of adapting existing strategies to better suit class needs.

### **LDD strategies.**

The use of specific strategies in the classroom can make all the difference for a student becoming a successful independent adult compared to a dependent one. Research shows the significant influence that educators can have on any one student and how their positive or negative influence can shape their student into adulthood (Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Jordan & Stanovich, 2004; Sharma, et al., 2011). Educators must have a strong grasp of the range of strategies for LDD students if they are to increase the odds of impacting them in a positive way. Thus, perceiving the reasons behind teachers' implementation of strategies is helpful and important when considering teacher training.

One of the impending factors to inclusiveness in the classroom is teacher training in LDD strategies. Bender et al. (1995), studied the types of instructional strategies teachers used in their classrooms. By questionnaires, teachers evaluated themselves on strategy-use and preparedness. Their results showed that teachers with less positive attitudes were also less likely to use effective strategies more frequently. Furthermore, their results reflected teachers' understanding of inclusion in the classroom were more likely to be based off of practical classroom issues rather than any specific ideology. This reflects educators' disposition towards new strategy-use and how inclusion is seen through a narrow lens of in-class issues, rather than through furthering a positive school community.

Dispositional attributions of students with LDD can impact motivational skills, which can further knowledge for LDD strategies. Self-reinforcement is an important skill for children to

develop so they can cultivate resiliency. Valås (2010) researched LDD students and the impact labelling of a diagnosis compared to other students who were not labelled. Their multi-variance study revealed that students who were diagnosed showed increased helpless behaviours and had more psychological maladjustment. Thus, placing less emphasis on labels or diagnoses for students with LDD in the classroom as a positive strategy could prevent helpless behaviours facilitated by educators.

The use of consistent reward-systems for task attempts for students with LDD is a strategy that decreases the risk of learned helplessness. Kleinhammer-Tramill et al. (1983) explored the influence of educators on students with LDD through consistent and non-consistent reward systems. Their results revealed that students with LDD were more likely to reflect learned helpless behaviours when random rewards were given that were not associated with completing or attempting a task. Therefore, educators influence students with LDD in helpless behaviours when maladaptive strategies of rewards are used.

Encouraging student attempts for a difficult task can instill confidence and help to prevent learned helplessness. Students with LDD can become overwhelmed and unmotivated when they continuously attempt difficult tasks in the classroom. Harter (1978) found that with positive reinforcement for attempts to complete tasks, students were more encouraged to keep trying. Whereas, when they only received praise for successfully completing a task, they give up earlier and were susceptible to helplessness. If rewards that were non-specific to student's actions were used, expectancy of failure was high (Kleinhammer-Tramill, 1983). Zeleke (2004) outlined how students with LDD need an increased amount of time for attempting a task compared to their peers, which impacts their self-concept. When students with LDD were encouraged throughout the process of attempts, there was higher likelihood of task completion.

Harter referred to this term as *effectance motivation*, which is considered the impact of positive reinforcement for the motivation of others.

Extrinsic motivation decreases resiliency attributes when faced with failure, whereas, intrinsic motivations strengthen determination. Boggiano and Barret (1985) completed a study which examined the effects of learned helplessness in regard to the different types of motivations in the classroom. Their research concluded that students who relied on extrinsic motivations, such as stickers offered by educators, were more likely to give up on tasks after being faced with failure. Contrarily, students who were instilled with intrinsic motivation were more determined to complete a task after they tried and failed. This depicts the importance of strategies for students, especially those with LDD.

### **Strategy adaptation.**

The use of strategy adaptation can be a powerful resource for educators. Educators can fall into the trap of repeatedly using the same strategies for every student in their classroom, which can be unsuccessful for LDD learners. This can be the case when educators feel they do not have the time, energy, or resources to continuously learn new strategies (Bender, et al., 1995). Therefore, strategy adaptation can be a solution for educators to create a more inclusive classroom, which can prevent behaviours such as learned helplessness for students with LDD.

Teachers with more positive self-efficacy and openness to try new strategies were more likely to implement successful methods that support students with LDD. Chester and Beaudin (1996) studied the relationship between self-efficacy and teacher's strategy adaptation. Included in their findings was the fact that strategy adaptation was more likely to be successful when the teachers had more experience and training with students with LDD, and more positive school practices in inclusiveness. Inclusive school practices included more opportunity for

collaboration, encouragement and positive support from administrators, and increased availability for the level of resources (Jordan et al., 1997). Adaptation of educator strategies can be as simple as altering praise comments.

Specific adaptation to praise strategies significantly decreases the risk of helplessness. Kamins and Dweck (1999) explored the difference between criticisms and praise. Students vulnerable to helplessness were significantly less likely to identify their attempts as failure when they received *process criticism*, such as encouraging the child to find another way to solve the problem, compared to *person criticism*, expressing disappointment, were significantly less likely to identify their attempts as failure. Moreover, students who received *person praise*, such as telling the child how proud they are, were more likely to view later errors as failure than when they were offered *process* or *outcome praise*, which focuses on encouragement related to effort or completion of a task. Thus, adapting reinforcement strategies to provide specific praise could be the difference of students developing helpless behaviours or independence.

### **Educator bias.**

Preconceived notions of educators are the backbone of facilitating helplessness in students with LDD. The preconceived notions of educators resonate through teaching strategies, education pedagogies, as well as their efficacy beliefs. This shapes their classroom culture and can be a driving factor of the development of learned helplessness. Educator's attitude about inclusivity can negatively impact the amount of accommodation they are willing to make in their classroom as well. Ellins and Porter (2005) studied teacher's attitudes toward accommodating students with disabilities. Their study showed that teachers who had to make the most accommodations in their classroom had the least positive attitude, impacting educator bias and

student's development. This issue, however, can ultimately increase over time, as the more teachers perceive their classrooms as problematic, the more biases there are (Costello, 2013).

Educator bias can also influence students' self-perception based on the perceived support from teachers (Raufelder, et al., 2017). Raufelder et al.'s study identified the relationship between emotionality and learned helplessness using the *buffering hypothesis* as a theoretical basis. The buffering hypothesis considers a unit of support for an individual as a safeguard to stressors. Thus, if there are no buffers for motivation, then the result is increased bias and susceptibility to helplessness. Consequently, educators are an active agent in the prevention or development of learned helplessness in students with LDD. This reflected the greater need for mental health support related to learned helplessness in schools and how systemic discrimination can be a result if this is not addressed.

Cook et al.'s (2007) research uncovered teacher's unequal perception of students with disabilities. The results for children with LDD included feelings of rejection and minimal attachment, which ultimately affected their behaviours in the classroom. When biased attitudes are reflected from the classroom, systemic discrimination goes unnoticed and is considered acceptable by the larger learning community (Payne et al., 2017). This facilitates a non-inclusive environment and limits the outcomes for diverse students, including LDD students, which ultimately amplifies the need for more resources as adults, a supply already stretched thin.

### **Systemic discrimination.**

The influence of educator's preconceived notions about students with LDD does not only impact the student's ability in the classroom, but also facilitates systemic discrimination. Systemic discrimination is referred to as the widespread prejudice and biased acts within a larger working system (Yang & Ham, 2017). Implicit biases are widespread and fluctuate over time

(Payne, et al., 2017). Biases that originate with adults can also be mirrored seamlessly to children (Payne, et al., 2017). These discriminatory attitudes continue to disadvantage students with LDD (Sood, et al., 2020).

When systemic discrimination is evidently present, disadvantaged students have decreased opportunity for success in the classroom. Yang and Ham (2017) conducted a study that analyzed anti-discrimination policies in the education system on diverse student absenteeism. The diverse student population included minority groups as well as LDD students. Their results revealed the connection of absenteeism and systemic discrimination. They found that the bias acts in the classroom were mirrored concepts of society's overall discriminative views of diverse students. Their study showed that the greater the volume of discrimination from educators, the greater absenteeism and giving up behaviours were present.

Systemic discrimination is exhibited through the K-12 education system, limiting outcomes for students with LDD. Reid and Knight (2006) discuss the exclusion of minority students and the impact of discrimination in education. They argued that the ideology of normalcy for students is ingrained in the K-12 education system, which deems LDD students as different and difficult. This issue does not stop at the elementary schools, but also branches into their success in college. Although students with LDD increasingly receive more support during the transition to higher education, the authors argue changes need to happen to modify the continuation of issues for students with LDD.

Systemic change can occur through positive perceptions of students with LDD. Edmonds (2012) studied the challenges individuals with LDD face through the impact of the education system and discriminatory acts. Their study used qualitative interviews of adults with LDD about their childhood experiences in education. The results asserted the impact of singular teaching

strategies that favour only one group of students, reflecting discrimination towards diverse students and their learning. Edmonds research suggested the consideration of viewing these individuals as having a “*diff*”-ability rather than “dis”-ability. This theory works from the ground up, starting with educator’s beliefs about LDD, and stems to the greater school community to bring more inclusive policy changes to alter these rigid perceptions of LDD students.

### **Education Policies and Resources**

A major factor of the strain placed on teachers is the access and allocation of resources in regard to students with LDD. Educators require a certain amount of support in terms of time, resources, and teacher collaboration. Although it is a common perception of many educators that they do not have enough time or resources, a larger issue according to recent research, is how they use what time and resources they have effectively and the amount of training and experiences educators have in LDD instruction. Policy constraints, such as the amount of resources set aside for teacher training or limited inclusive community policies, further the acceptance of systemic discrimination. This section provides further information on policy, time, and resource constraints that facilitate educator’s influence on LDD student’s helpless behaviours.

#### **Resource and time limitations.**

Teachers most often relate ideas of inclusiveness to practical issues in the classroom rather than to a specific ideology. This can be problematic as educators focus on the time and resource constraints they have when they need to accommodate for a student. This negative attribute is then transferred to the student and effective strategies are not implemented. Practical issues that educators attend to include time restrictions around realistic accommodations, the mistake of creating equal opportunities for students rather than using *equity strategies*,

apprehension of the output from students with LDD, the lack of support they received compared to what they required, and the limitations of training in teaching students with LDD alongside creating an inclusive environment (Bender et al., 1995).

### **Policy constraints.**

Generally speaking, the majority of teachers want to improve inclusivity, but the method of implementation is not always straightforward or universal (Hill, 2009). In Hill's research, teacher attitudes were examined through the Scale of Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusive Classrooms (STATIC). The results displayed that most of the teachers are supportive of inclusive policies, however, there is still no consensus on what this means or how to implement this practically. Deploying a government grounded definition of inclusion in the classroom with a simple implementation process could benefit classrooms across North America. Wright (2015) argues that although there are policies in place to encourage inclusiveness in the classroom, they are not specific enough to direct educators to accomplish this successfully everywhere.

Educators perceived stress about working with students with LDD is impacted by policy constraints. Forlin and Chambers (2009) researched teacher preparedness in working with students with LDD. Through the use of teachers' self-evaluations, this study explored the impact of preparedness and understanding policies for inclusiveness. Their results disclosed that teacher's stress-perception from the classroom continued to impact them even when policy improvements were made. Similar findings were discovered in Vaz et al.'s (2015) research, in which teacher's attitude toward teaching students with LDD greatly influenced their ability compared to the policies. This reflects how teachers view policies as seemingly 'nonchalant' or indifferent to them, when in reality, policies could ultimately shape inclusiveness in the classroom and better define inclusion so that vulnerable students are not facing major

hinderances such as helpless behaviours. These studies also shed light on the immense stress and anxiety teachers feel when faced with challenges with students with LDD in their classroom, and how they can be unprepared to face these challenges.

### **Summary**

The importance of knowing the origin of the term *learned helplessness* further supports the understanding of the needs for students with LDD. Animal studies helped find the puzzle pieces of helpless behaviours, including sensitization of a specific set of neurons after adverse stimuli is present (Seligman, 1975; Pavlov, 1997; Carlson, 2010; Maier & Seligman, 2016). Repeated failure and the absence of independence frames the reasons underpinning learned helplessness (Maier & Seligman, 2016; Sutherland & Singh, 2004). Other mental illnesses, such as major depressive disorder link to helplessness, which further decreases daily functioning, repeated failure experiences, and lower persistency skills (Licht & Kistner, 1986; Jenkinson, 1999; Storace et al., 2019).

Student's future academia is at risk when learned helplessness is present as the failure cycle in behaviour patterns is difficult to reverse (Kavale & Mostert, 2004). It is evident that students with LDD are one of the major groups at-risk of learned helplessness, due to their mental and emotional vulnerability and need for other's support (Cerne & Jurisevic, 2018). It should be noted, however, that not all studies reach the same conclusions. Zeleke (2004) reviewed multiple research studies that focused on student's self-perception and academia. Their research concluded that although the research is valuable, not all students with LDD will experience lack of motivation or decreased self-advocacy behaviours.

Students with LDD also tend to use rote strategies that are only effective in a small number of experiences. Thus, parental and educator influence is a major factor in developing

learned helpless behaviours. Specifically, parents can impact children through their nurturing styles, motivation, and control (Nolen-Hoeksema, et al., 1995). However, educators have an even greater impact and influence in cognitive development, as they are the child's main source of new information. Educators affect children with LDD by their epistemological beliefs, praise and criticism strategies, as well as their self-efficacy (Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Jordan & Stanovich, 2004; Sharma, et al., 2011). Therefore, effective and consistent strategies established in the classroom, such as strategies of *effectance motivation*, which can include *process criticism*, *process praise*, or *outcome praise* are effective strategies to lower the risk of facilitating learned helplessness (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Zeleke, 2004). These strategies are even more effective when the environment is controlled, avoiding settings such as mental exhaustion and the absence of control (Pavlov, 1997; Kavale & Mostert, 2004; Gacek et al, 2017).

The environment of the classroom can be a reflection of educator bias, which can stem from systemic discrimination (Payne, et al., 2017). Discriminatory attitudes disadvantage students with LDD, creating an environment where students are vulnerable to learned helplessness. This can easily be a real outcome for classrooms when resources and time are stretched thin. Campbell et al. (2003) outline the strength positive pedagogies and experience towards inclusive education have on classroom culture. Formal training and field experiences were characteristics of educators who effectively used strategy adaptations around resource limitations, time restrictions, and policy constraints (Campbell, et al., 2003). Creating concrete meaning of a universal inclusive classroom would further support the LDD community, relieve resource constraints, and educate teachers to develop inclusive practice (Hill, 2009). Viewing students with LDD as having difference rather than deficit also furthers the inclusiveness of the

school community (Edmonds, 2012). In the next chapter, the connection of my personal experiences and the research is explored, as well as the significance of the application process.

### **Chapter Three: Application**

In this paper I argue that educators can inadvertently facilitate Learned Helplessness in students with Learning and Developmental Disabilities (LDD) because of the failure to adapt strategies, preconceived notions, and the limitations of time, resources and policies. The purpose of this paper is to review the impact that educators have on students with LDD who are susceptible to learned helplessness. In this chapter I focus on my own personal attitudes and intentions and the ways I have adapted strategies for my students. The implications of altering educators' teaching strategies, negative perceptions of students with LDD, and attitude toward accommodation are much greater than within the walls of the classroom. These jigsaw puzzle pieces fit into a much larger puzzle of human morality. The significance of this is how the research can be applicable to practical settings and how this impacts the larger society. In this section, personal applications of strategy-use, attitudes, and intentions are evaluated. The examination of building school community, within the larger picture of the education system, is undertaken. Lastly, evidence is provided to show how this research can be applicable on a grander scale, demonstrating the connections between systemic discrimination, population growth, and learned helplessness in LDD students are all connected.

#### **Personal Application**

During my time as a teacher, I have been faced with a variety of classrooms, schools, colleagues, and students. All of these experiences have had an impact on the ways I see learned helplessness develop in LDD children. These experiences have helped me develop the perspectives and skills I now have and help prevent the development of learned helplessness in LDD children. All of these represent major aspects in the development of learned helplessness. An understanding of the root connections and differences between these aspects of the puzzle

help to decipher which pieces fit where within the practical settings. In this section, my personal connection to this research is reviewed, as well as the continuity of strategy implementation among educators, and the relevant connections to the classroom setting are presented.

### **The relevant context.**

Through my experience in the classroom, I have found that the environment typically tends to include a plethora of learners. Within this setting, there has characteristically been at least one designated LDD student, two students with learning difficulties, and at least one other student with behaviour difficulties. Balancing a classroom built on trust, safety, and acceptance is difficult to accomplish when the teacher is juggling so many factors. The elementary classroom is, generally speaking, a busy place. There are children flying in and out, toys spread across the floor, paper being tossed, and a teacher somewhere dealing with who-stole-whose pencil.

In many ways, the school and the classroom represent a train and the station. Students come and go through the system, much like passengers stepping onto a train for their journey and getting off for their stop. The teacher, is much like a train conductor in that they lead the way for the students, create an atmosphere of safety and trust for the riders, and control who will continue on to the next train ride. The station itself represents the many aspects of a school, such as the business of people coming and going, and the overall atmosphere of the environment.

As a teacher, there have been many times in which I have felt as though the train was difficult to control. Using strategies as the train conductor, such as slowing the train down before switching tracks, results in effective support for the passengers on board. Similarly, techniques such as *effectance motivation*, *process criticism* or *process praise* can be simple preventative

strategies in avoiding the facilitation of learned helplessness in the most vulnerable passengers, students with LDD (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Zeleke, 2004).

Students with LDD in the classroom can and always will have unique abilities, differing from one child to the next. Therefore, as a teacher, it can be difficult to apply personal classroom strategies that work effectively for every student who needs further support. However, just as through training and experience, a train conductor becomes better at implementing approaches which make the passengers' ride as smooth as possible, teachers also require experience and appropriate training to generate and apply suitable strategies which will make their learners' journey as effective and effortless as possible (Bender et al., 1995). Helplessness prevention strategies must also be flexible, adaptable, and easily molded to fit each student's needs within a diverse classroom.

An example from my personal context includes working with a student who was diagnosed as low-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who was legally blind, and who had limited mobility. She was motivated by very few things, which included her food and high-interest toys (such as her iPad). Since she did not develop along a "neurotypical" path, she also required unique support, and the curriculum we prepared for her differed greatly from the standard curriculum. Many of her educational experiences, unfortunately, reflected an education system that was ill-prepared to support her unique needs adequately, which clearly accentuated the systemic discrimination against atypical students (Reid & Knight, 2006).

I began working with this student when she was very young. As she grew older, her development displayed slow progression and occurred in random spurts. For example, initially, this student's language skills were minimal and she could only use basic sign to communicate. However, her progression of language changed drastically once I began using *effectance*

*motivation* strategies. The use of *effectance motivation* built her confidence as well as her ability. The first step in initiating this progress, was breaking the tasks down into discrete skills. For example, during a linguistic task, I would break a word down to one syllable, one sound, one tone, and one mouth movement to increase the opportunity for success. Simplifying the task in small but attainable achievements increased my student's motivation and because of this, success rates increased. This, in turn, elevated her confidence and lowered her helpless behaviours. Once she began to learn more basic syllables, I helped her string them together using encouragement to keep trying. Through *process praise*, offering support during her attempts at various sounds, this student became more confident in her work and showed less self-defeating behaviours.

### **The significance.**

The importance of *effectance motivation* and other useful strategies in the classroom are reflected in the positive impact left on students by a teacher, which can extend to the wider community (Harter, 1978). The use of *effectance motivation* facilitates teacher-to-student success, as well as student-to-student success. Using this kind of strategy for particular students in my class has not only been an important part of their development, but has also unmistakably impacted their peers in the classroom as well. One example of this occurred when I was able to encourage one LDD student through LDD strategies, who then encouraged other students in return.

Through the use of *process criticism*, I found that sharing strategies for success became contagious (Kamins & Dweck). An example was facilitating LDD students to use different ways to solve problems. While I have worked with many high-functioning ASD students as a teacher, one in particular really demonstrated to me the positive side of effective strategy use. By showing this high-functioning ASD student how to tackle a certain area of learning, this learner

then went on to help others struggling with the same issues. Therefore, the successful use of strategies with one student can spread to helping other students as well. Through the use of *process criticism*, alongside the use of a consistent reward system, this student's success rates increased substantially. When I observed these aforementioned students in classroom activities, I began to notice that they were using similar encouragement-based strategies with their peers. Subsequently, this affirming approach then spread like wild-fire to the other students in the school.

Many of my LDD students that are high functioning become intrinsically motivated through the use of LDD strategies. Consistent reward systems, such as *process praise*, *process criticism*, or timed-breaks, help the child to understand that, when they attempt a task, correct or not, they will be rewarded for their efforts (Kleinhammer-Tramill, et al., 1983). Intrapersonal reinforcement, which refers to the individual encouragement that arises from within, can be an outcome when the use of LDD strategies or adaptations are used effectively. As already shown, the student in my illustration began to be more intrinsically motivated and even used these strategies with other students themselves (Valås, 2001). Although this was an ideal situation, I have also had experiences of failed attempts with students, in which I had to adapt my strategies and think on my feet; however, this ultimately led to a new learning opportunity for me. Of course, this type of experience exemplifies the disparities between each student and their learning needs.

Educators' strategy use may differ in style but should remain consistent at the core. Just as learning needs differ from one student to another, educator strategy differs from one teacher to the next. Nevertheless, finding the perfect 'fit' of strategy adaptation in the classroom for each student can be accomplished through trial and error, the use of previous student records, as well as the use of prior experience with LDD students. This is another reason why adaptation is

critically important for an educator. Through teacher autonomy, educator integrity and collaboration opportunities, educators will be able to apply their own characteristics to LDD strategy, while maintaining the core principles of these methods. Keeping the strategies consistent from educator to educator provides consistency for students throughout their education experience, and also assures each student has been given the proper tools to be successful.

### **The goal.**

Students should never feel as though they are powerless and have no control. In reality, a great many students walk into my classroom at the beginning of each year carrying with them this negative attribute. Preventing these types of feelings and behaviours in these students would open the door for them to get on the next train with confidence and know exactly where they want to go. As an educator, I can do my part by learning how to ease these student's struggles through the use of effective strategies as well as strategy adaptation, keeping the core of these methods consistent. I can also stay continuously up to date with inclusive practice and policy, as well as learn through new fieldwork experiences in regard to successfully managing resources and time to best support students with LDD.

### **School Implications**

Speaking as a teacher who has worked in multiple schools, the overall education environment is a critical piece of the puzzle for student success. This environment includes school culture, staff rapport, student relationships, and school community connections. These aspects are also important influences on the web of learned helplessness and failure expectancy traits in students with LDD. In this section, the implications of helplessness prevention at the school and community level are analyzed.

**The relevant context.**

If classrooms represent a train, the school is the train station. Schools, like classrooms, can be a hectic environment, one that is ever-moving and ever-changing. Similar to the station, schools have people in and out of trains, who typically only use the station to get to the next destination or classroom. The school building itself can go unnoticed by many students, and seem unimportant for creating a positive atmosphere, since students spend most their time in classrooms. However, I would challenge that statement by arguing that classroom culture stems from school community. That is, if the station's environment is dirty and unkempt, likely the train will be also.

In my own experiences, school and classroom are partners in developing community and inclusion for students. Strategies for LDD students that are effective in the classroom, typically are effective throughout the school as well. For instance, the use of *equity strategies* is an effective strategy in the classroom, but also around the school. *Equity strategies*, which focus on what each student specifically needs rather than providing equal amount of support to each student, can offer solutions for situations where helplessness has previously been the driving force (St. Denis & Schick, 2003). Examples of situations in the school where this strategy could be applicable would include student mobility support, group conflict, and student relationships, as well as playground or recess activities. If a student was having difficulty playing with peers from other classes at the playground, a simple *equity strategy* solution would consist of prompting conversation starters with that student, so they could be more prepared and have more frequent positive dialogue with other students in the school, thereby building interpersonal relationships. Although some of these strategies may already be used in these cases, applying

them consistently across all schools would effectively strengthen these critical skills for LDD students.

**The significance.**

*Equity strategies* can effectively create an inclusive environment for schools (St. Denis & Schick, 2003). Successful implementation of this plan requires all teachers and administration to be on board in the use of this strategy as well as in the adoption of the mindset that a little bit of extra motivation will tip the balance for LDD students' success. The outcome can go a long way towards shaping the school culture as a whole. At my home school, my administrator, Alan Millar, believes strongly in this philosophy and uses it to motivate struggling students as well as the teachers. Once this philosophy was sparked in the school, it was like a flame that could not be put out. Educators and students alike would stop to help students who were having difficulties and raise them up to feel proud of their accomplishments. When the station is working fluidly, the passengers can reach their desired destination easily and pleasantly. School-wide *equity strategies* also act as a barrier toward negative biases and, ultimately toward systemic discrimination.

**The goal.**

The school, similar to the train station metaphor, represents a working system. This working system is important to keep running for the people in the system to be successful, especially once they leave. Both classroom and school impact each other's environment. Just as if a train broke down, the station would be closed, if the station was inoperative, the trains would be halted as well. Thus, the school's inclusion abilities are just as important as the classroom's inclusive environment. As an educator, I can support this movement by increasing other

colleagues' knowledge about policies surrounding inclusive practice as well as collaborating with other teachers to create fewer inconsistencies in how LDD strategies are implemented.

If schools across North America began to adopt inclusive strategies at the micro level, such as in classrooms, all the way to a macro level, such as across schools, then just as the positive fire of inclusiveness is contagious in the education community, it can become contagious outside of this community as well. This would mean that the education system would hold a true consistent inclusion practice that is clearly defined consistently for all, that LDD strategies and adaptations are used on both micro and macro scales, and systemic discrimination would not be tolerated ever.

### **Universal Applications**

The implications that occur when inclusive policies are in place seem endless. From altering the classroom culture to changing how society depicts minority groups, inclusivity is the key to preventing helplessness in anyone. When children with LDD are viewed as fellow beneficial members of society, they are not only provided with more opportunities, but they are also enabled to give back to their own communities by supporting others like themselves, who are vulnerable to helplessness. This could also ease the strain on health and social resources, such as the amount of physical support these individuals would require as adults. In this section, the larger impact of learned helplessness prevention is identified, and how this is connected to implementation at an individual level.

#### **The relevant context.**

One of the best parts of my job as a teacher, is empowering students. When I see one of my struggling learners accomplish a task, which they thought they would never be able to do, I cannot help but love my career. As a teacher, believing that a particular student can accomplish a

challenging task further instills independence and empowerment in students with LDD, who are then able to support other students, creating a ripple effect of positivity and success. As the extra time and effort given by educators to LDD students is increasingly valued, the ripples widen and become even greater in their effect. As a result, these students become more independent and are able to give back to the greater community. An example of this, includes a Physiotherapist clinic that employs their previous LDD patients to work for them in adulthood, which can be just the beginning of successful inclusive practice in the larger context (Feltham, 2021). With more research into effective LDD strategy with consistent implementation, these types of programs can be further established. Conversely, the belief that, using extra effort to support LDD students is a waste of time, promotes the negative view that these students are not as important or as valuable as other students. This destroys the beneficial ripple effect and creates stagnation, providing minimal opportunities of independence for LDD children into adulthood (Cook, et al., 2007). Thus, the school context is extremely important for the wider context in the successful implementation of inclusion in the attempt to prevent learned helplessness.

Stagnation of LDD strategy implementation effects the greater community's inclusive perceptions. For my experience as an Education Assistant (EA) in schools, I have had the opportunity to watch how schools and educators manage students, which in turn, is reflected in the education community. Unfortunately, there have been multiple times in which students with LDD have been excluded from class activities (especially extracurricular activities), treated differently due to their LDD, and even forgotten about in the school. This, unfortunately, is not an uncommon event that is also emulated in the community. One student with whom I worked with had such an experience at a school field trip to the bowling alley, this student was made to sit out from the activity in a separate room alone. The reasoning behind this action was because

the class wanted to turn on the strobe lights, and this student had a seizure disorder, making it impossible for them to participate. Thus, this student was completely excluded from the rest of the class, revealing the reality and commonality of exclusion in the North American education systems.

Another experience one of my LDD students had was that, whenever they attempted to notify the teacher that they hadn't understood the instructions, they were perceived as having disruptive behaviours, reprimanded, and immediately expelled from the classroom so the other students could continue to work. They were sent to the hallway to eat lunch alone in the dark, questions still unanswered. This was not only cruel, but it was also an extremely ineffective teaching strategy that did not support the student. Furthermore, it was dangerous because this student had a choking hazard as well as a seizure disorder. The student involved in this situation developed high anxiety and fear of failing in the classroom, which became learned helplessness over time and impacted their ability in the greater community as an adult. This example strongly demonstrates the seriousness of treating people with LDD without consideration for their differences.

When learned helplessness is unintentionally exacerbated in LDD students, the greater community ultimately suffers. Another of the students with whom I worked with was wheelchair-bound, and had to take the elevator to get between the floors of the school. On one occasion, the assistant teacher directed the student to do this alone during lunch hour, when supervision was low because the school was stretched thin of resources. The student was found an hour later, trapped in the elevator and paralyzed with fear, because they had been unable to reach the keyhole in the elevator which would open its doors. As a result of this student feeling unimportant and insignificant, they began showing signs of helplessness. Thus, the student's

gifts of supporting other struggling learners in the community did not commence until they faced their anxiety and helplessness.

These are only some of the relevant experiences I have heard or seen in which a school's inclusiveness was minimal to none, leaving LDD students there almost invisible. The school context, and the effort that is put into inclusivity and accepting diversity, are both extremely important as they ultimately translate into safety for this minority group and their impact within the community.

**The significance.**

Viewing students with LDD or other diverse students as possessing deficit rather than difference is a form of discrimination that limits the outcome for these minority groups in the education system (Guo, 2012). Altering this perception for students and teachers alike creates a safe and accountable community built on trust. Schools that put the effort into positive support, that set aside specific time to creatively assist these students, and that create clear, realistic, inclusive policies, successfully develops an accepting environment that nurtures the growth of all.

Inclusive education practice within the school context is critical to preventing learned helplessness in students with LDD. Experiences which exclude, demean, or negatively differentiate LDD students leave a lasting impact on this vulnerable group. When students are placed in environments that make them feel helpless, these types of behaviours become the default, which ultimately strains the limited resources communities in North America currently have. As LDD students who experience learned helplessness at a young age develop into adulthood, helpless behaviours carry forward as well, which further excludes them from activities and makes them feel even more different. Many of my grown LDD students who

experienced classroom or school-wide exclusion are still impacted by the effects of this treatment. They have expressed to me that there is always an underlying feeling that others are judging them for being different, and believe they are not 'capable individuals'.

**The goal.**

If policies within the schools focus less on the legalities of school and more on the treatment of others through equity strategy and mental well-being of others, positive self-worth will foster the LDD students becoming independent upstanding members of society. This can be accomplished through clear and consistent steps that initiate the project, specific training for educators and administration, as well as maintenance procedures to uphold these policies in action. According to Kilgore (2019), it is critical for educators and administration to consciously put effort into creating a procedural inclusion practice with intent. The first step to moving forward lies in reviewing current practices to move forward, such as, understanding what is already being implemented and how successful it actually is within the community. This is beneficial for concrete inclusion practice to be implemented.

To keep everyone accountable, it is helpful to have a team of individuals who can lead workshops, guide teachers, and to establish the level of inclusive practice needed at the school and classroom level (Kilgore, 2019). The implementation process can be one of the hardest steps. Putting words into action can be a difficult and, in some cases, frightening step for teachers. Having to actively change teaching strategies can seem daunting, however, with enough practice, these LDD strategies should become second nature to teachers all over North America. Although this may seem like an immense job, it should be at the top of the priority list for schools to become proactive agents of every students' unique needs, which further prevents learned helplessness.

Putting theory to practice is the first step in creating an inclusive environment that comes naturally to teachers and students alike. The goal for universal implication of this research would be to have this consistent and concrete inclusive practice be the ripple that grows into a wave, thereby producing the most powerful impact on the greater society. Rather than searching out each piece of the puzzle and trying to force them together, it is time to allow each unique piece to find its own place in society. Inclusion is not about making the pieces fit the way we want them to, but rather about letting each piece to find its own way to connect to the greater picture.

### **Summary**

The difference that educators can make when adapting strategies for students is striking. Similar to a train, the classroom is a place where students are taken along a path or trajectory, with a goal or destination in mind. In my own experiences as a teacher, classrooms can be hectic and stressful environments. However, the environment can be shaped through educator influence in a positive direction. Through the use of LDD strategies and adaptation, such as *process praise* and *process criticism*, simple methods can make an astonishing difference in the prevention of learned helplessness for students with LDD. The school represents the train station, from which much of the positive or negative environment stems. The use of *equity strategies* school-wide can support the process of implementing further inclusive practice.

There are detrimental impacts on LDD students and the overall community when learned helplessness occurs, much like a ripple effect that spreads to the larger society. Many students with whom I have worked have had school-based traumatic experiences that have also led to preventable helpless behaviours. This not only impacts students at the classroom-level, but also impacts the learning community at the school-level as well. Therefore, implementation of learning strategies can not only be used on a small-scale, such as in classrooms, but can also be

implemented on a larger-scale throughout schools, which can spread from there to the greater society. It is critical for clear expectations and positive implementation strategies to be put into place, that are consistent across North America, to truly achieve inclusive practice. This would provide a large-scale impact for LDD students across North America, while also providing a higher standard of care for all students, easing the strain of resources as the population grows.

## **Chapter Four: Conclusion**

It is clear that educators have a great deal of influence on students with LDD. Through the historical research I have explored, regarding the connections between learned helplessness, educator influence, and the vulnerability of LDD students, it certainly appears that educators can be a major aspect of the development of helplessness. My argument clearly stands that educators also play a major role in the development of minority group academic powerlessness. These findings reinforce my position that educators unintentionally contribute to the development of learned helplessness in LDD students. My argument is bolstered by demonstration of ineffective strategy-use, strategy adaptation, and preconceived notions of educators about LDD students. External factors centering on limitations of time, resources, and inclusive policy action are acknowledged. Each chapter has demonstrated the immense depth to which this topic has been studied and how effective change can be implemented into real practical settings. The sum total of my findings is that these elements facilitate negative attributes being reinforced in LDD students, resulting in dependency into adulthood. Ultimately, If educators alter their strategy-use, strategy adaptation and preconceived notions, change can happen for the better, leading to a reversal of learned helplessness and empowerment of LDD students. In the summary section, previous research and the argument are reiterated, summarizing each chapters' major points and how they are all connected. Finally, I will also reaffirm my personal connection to this research, as well as its broader significance.

### **Summary**

The effective use of strategies and strategy adaptations of educators support the development of empowerment for LDD students. In chapter one, the importance of learned helplessness, educator awareness, and the frequency of helplessness in LDD students is

emphasized. The population of LDD individuals continues to grow rapidly, which requires further resources that are already reaching their limits. Ultimately, the strain on resources can be eased by providing concrete supports for LDD students in turn preventing the development of helplessness behaviours, which will eventually produce more independent adults. Through my own involvement working with LDD students, I have acquired many experiences that have shown me the depth to which their helplessness can go, subsequently impacting them for their lifetime. These situations have also shown me the importance of strategy implementation and adaptation for LDD students, which, once taught, will then continue to support them throughout their lifetime.

My M.Ed. experiences further taught me the importance of viewing LDD as *difference* rather than *deficit* (Guo, 2012). Viewing LDD students in this way also provides opportunity for *equity strategies*, which focus on the needs of each student, rather than simply providing the same support for all (St. Denis & Schick, 2003). While working on my M.Ed. I also began to recognize the influence others have on LDD students' development of helplessness, revealing how parental and educator roles are both critical influencers (Nolen-Hoeskema, et al., 1995). This unmistakably once more reflects the immense vulnerability of this population.

Students with LDD are further susceptible to learned helplessness because of their need for additional support. They struggle with a multitude of difficulties, including physical, social, and psychological issues that create barriers to success. This clearly indicates the importance of investigating the causes of learned helplessness (Mullins & Preyde, 2011; Woodcock & Vialle, 2011). Inclusive practices are in need of re-evaluation, as preconceived notions of educators detract from inclusion practices, furthering the negative spread and acceptance of systemic discrimination (Cook, et al, 2007). Thus, educators must have more opportunities to further their

own knowledge about LDD strategies and adaptations which prevent helplessness (Brownell, et al., 2010). In addition, resources, time, and effort are strained in the educator world, which also impacts the prospects of providing adequate LDD support (Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011).

In chapter two, a review of historical and current research regarding learned helplessness is analyzed. In this research, the term *learned helplessness* is described as the psychological behaviour displaying the absence of independence, advocacy, and determination (Carlson, 2010; Maier & Seligman, 2016). This is commonly paired with mental health, which further limits independence in daily activities, such as decision-making (Jenkinson, 1999). Helplessness greatly effects students' academic success, causing repeated negative feelings of frustration known as the *failure cycle* (Licht & Kistner, 1986). Once students become entrapped in this loop, they will give up easily on even simple tasks and carry a "defensive pessimism" that evolves into helpless behaviours (Cerne & Jurisevic, 2018; DaPaepe, et al., 1996).

Learned helplessness can also exist concurrently with antisocial behaviours, as LDD students typically display an over-developed sensitivity towards positive and negative interactions, leaving them with the expectation of social failure (Settle & Milich, 1999). Students with LDD tend to use rote strategies that are not as versatile as metacognitive strategies, which would enable them to use flexibility to problem solve more efficiently. The use of these strategies could be guided by parent or educator supporters.

While parental influence has some impact on the formation of LDD students' helpless behaviours, educators have an absolutely critical impact through their role in supporting students' learning. Some of the research provides a glimpse into how the nurturing style of parents, their mental health, and their motivational styles can produce learned helplessness in students with LDD (Nolen-Hoeskema, et al., 1995; Cerne & Jurisevic, 2018; Filipello, et al.,

2018). The research also reveals how educators affect student self-worth, knowledge attainment, and learned helplessness behaviours (Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Jordan & Stanovich, 2004). This is particularly impacted by educators' epistemological beliefs about knowledge, preconceived notions, and self-efficacy beliefs (Jordan & Stanovich, 2004; Sharma, et al., 2011). Research indicates that situations in which LDD students are placed can drastically alter their presentation of helplessness behaviours (Gacek, et al., 2017). Such environments include cognitive exhaustion scenarios, negative classroom culture, and negative cyclical situations.

Strategies in the classroom are an educators' most effective tool in the prevention of learned helplessness. Teaching and modelling self-reinforcement, as well as intrinsic motivation skills, are fundamental attributes in the prevention of helplessness acts (Boggiano & Barret, 1985; Valås, 2010). Consistent reward systems for attempts, rather than for completion or correctness, represent one of many simple tools for success (Kleinhammer-Tramill, et al., 1983; Harter, 1978). Allowing LDD students more time to complete a task, alongside the use of *effectance motivation*, which is considered the positive reinforcement instilled by others, produce tremendous positive outcomes for LDD students (Zelege, 2004). Adaptation strategies are another quick and easy method for preventing learned helplessness in LDD students. These can include simple changes in praise comments, such as using *process praise*, which focuses on praising the effort, rather than using *person praise*, which comments directly about the person (Chester & Beaudin, 1996; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Similar to these, are *process criticism*, in which an educator encourages the student to find another solution to a problem, compared to *person criticism*, in which disappointment in the individual is expressed. Using these simple strategy adaptations can make all the difference in developing of positive self-worth in a student, rather than the hindering effects of negative helplessness.

The educator bias involved within preconceived notions further develops helplessness in LDD students. There is much research about teachers' bias towards LDD students, which limits their potential and success in the classroom. Specifically speaking, teachers who must make the most accommodations in their classrooms for LDD students were shown to have the least positive attitude toward LDD students, causing them to have feelings of rejection (Ellins & Porter, 2005; Cook et al., 2007). The fact that adequate support is drastically needed in every classroom is exemplified by the *buffering hypothesis*, which reveals the need for a unit of support for educators and students alike, as a mental well-being safeguard (Raufelder, et al., 2017).

At the deepest level of this issue of biased notions, is the immense and almost seamlessly unnoticed existence of systemic discrimination in schools. This is spread through implicit biases, which not only limit LDD students' opportunity for success in the classroom, but sadly are also mirrored by children from adults (Payne, et al., 2017; Sood, et al., 2020). The reality that LDD students are deemed as different and difficult in the K-12 education system is a dismal situation in our modern society, for which change is critical (Reid & Knight, 2006). Systemic change begins in the classroom through positive perceptions and inclusion practices, such as viewing LDD students as having a "*diff*"-ability rather than a "dis"-ability (Edmonds, 2012).

There are indeed many internal factors of educators that can inadvertently facilitate helplessness in LDD students, but there are also major external factors. Time and resources are continuously stretched thin for teachers, furthering stressful patterns of behaviour in the classroom. Because of this, teachers tend to associate ideas of inclusivity to practical issues in the classroom rather than with specific theory or ideology, which can become problematic when the unwanted accommodations are related to specific students (Bender, et al., 1995). Inclusion is key in this scenario; however, the majority of educators find inclusive policies less than user-

friendly (Hill, 2009; Wright, 2015). Teacher-attitude and stress-perceptions are more impactful on inclusive practices than teachers' understanding of policies (Forlin & Chambers, 2009; Vaz et al., 2015).

In chapter three, my personal connection to the research is explored and the application of strategies of this research has to the bigger picture is explained. I show how teachers can make positive change and empower LDD students by implementing *process strategies* used with LDD students. *Equity strategies* can be implemented school-wide to further execute inclusive practices. The success of this research has unveiled the need for inclusive policies, decreased-stress environments, training in LDD strategy-use, and most importantly the need for teachers to accept unique learners.

### **Further Considerations**

The study of learned helplessness in vulnerable individuals is extremely valuable. Although we do not know all of the answers yet, questioning our current reasoning will further support true inclusiveness, and prevent unwanted behaviours such as helplessness. Looking forward, it is clear that there are areas in need of further research. In addition, the creation of space for inclusive practice to grow within society as a whole, is necessary to move forward at every level. In this section, considerations for future research are considered and implementation within the larger context is explored.

Digging deeper into why LDD students with labels are so vulnerable to helplessness shows that the problem could be due to deficit ideologies. Gorski (2010) delves into this controversial topic, concluding that educators can make the mistake of viewing students first through their deficits. The theory spills over into societal perceptions of disability, which even affects our language. An example of this is the common use of the words “handicap” or

“disability” -spot, when referring to a spot designated for specialized parking, rather than using a more inclusive and positive term such as the “accessible” spot. Thus, helplessness can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if society itself deems the challenged population as “unable”. Further research into the deficit ideological standpoint could be one of the most valuable endeavors in truly understanding how to prevent this from permeating society as it does today.

Examining the effects of resource strain on teachers and how stress-relieving practices might be implemented are critical in producing better support for LDD students. Further related research might be focused on methods of preventing burn-out. The more policy change occurs, the greater the number of students who would be receiving support, thereby further increasing the burden on teachers.

Investigating the well-being of LDD students once they reach adulthood would increase our understanding of the effects of helplessness and its lasting impact. LDD adults face unemployment at a much higher rate than other populations (Statistics Canada, 2021). The connection of unemployment and LDD adults who suffer from learned helplessness would further strengthen the argument that prevention strategies in childhood are necessary. Other associated factors, such as race, sexual orientation, diverse languages, and so on, may be interwoven with the complexities for LDD students who show helplessness, causing their situation to be even worse. Exploring other variables or events within LDD students’ lives, such as being bullied or having parents divorce, would shed more light on how how these factors, acting together, impact their lives.

Putting words into action may very well be the most difficult part of solving the problem of the missing puzzle piece. However, the strategies that are easily adaptable to a variety of teaching styles can be a big step in the right direction. Speaking up when discrimination occurs

opens the door for positive and respectful communication throughout the education system. Questioning why policies or rules are in place that are not furthering inclusivity, will produce a lasting ripple effect that extend to the larger picture. This will then factor into how inclusive practices can create an inclusive society, where fair opportunities for LDD individuals are as routine as they are for everyone else. Being a teacher myself, I know I can create change in own my circle: by altering my strategies, by connecting to LDD students to better meet their unique needs, and by supporting inclusive policy action.

The pieces of the jigsaw have been tried, and then forced together, with unsuccessful results. However, in actuality, they were never supposed to conform or fit together in the first place. Each puzzle piece is a unique and beautiful picture within itself. Fully perceiving and accepting this fact will begin to fully recognize the true value of each child that is differently-abled.

The change starts now with shifting each educators' mindset about LDD students. Our regrettable impact on facilitating learned helplessness can be eliminated as new attitudes take hold. So, take the step. Make the change. Be the difference.

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