Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MA (University of Victoria, 2010)
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“An Ecological Mixed Methods Study of Youth with Learning Disabilities: Exploring Personal and Familial Influences on Mental Health”

Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

Wednesday, August 8th, 2018
10:00 a.m.
Clearihue Building
Room B017

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Gina Harrison, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Anne Marshall, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, UVic (Co-Supervisor)
Dr. Marion Ehrenberg, Department of Psychology, UVic (Outside Member)
Dr. Todd Milford, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, UVic (Additional Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Jessica Whitley, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Nigel Livingston, School of Public Health and Social Policy, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

There is a notable overlap and co-occurrence of mental health and learning challenges among school-aged youth. Existing research highlights associations between learning disabilities (LD) and mental health problems; however, there has been little exploration of additional variables, such as familial influences, that represent multiple levels of influence (Cen & Aytac, 2016). From a developmental relational systems framework (Overton, 2015), advancing the understanding of familial influences on youth development is crucial. Using a mixed methods design, the present study examined the influences of parent depression, parenting behaviours, family functioning, and youth social and emotional competencies on symptoms of anxiety and depression among youth with LD. Addressing two hypotheses, the quantitative Study 1 aimed to identify factors associated with mediating effects on internalized distress in 14- and 15-year-old youth with LD using secondary analysis of a cross-sectional national sample of youth and their parents. Youth social and emotional competencies and parental monitoring were found to be the most significant buffering influences in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression. The qualitative Study 2 built on the results from Study 1, to extend the quantitative findings. In Study 2, youth at the end of middle school and their parents were interviewed to gain deeper understanding about the experiences of co-occurring LD and mental health problems from a family perspective. Data analysis identified youth fatigue, youth self-efficacy, and family relationships as central themes related to the challenges youth and their families experienced. Integrating the findings of the two studies illustrated the complex psychological, social, and educational implications for youth with LD in a family context. The interplay of factors embedded in the relation between the LD and mental health problems underscores this complexity, suggesting the relation cannot be completely understood without considering the multiple levels of influences. Implications for theory, research, and practice are described with an emphasis on ecological approaches and building school-family relationships.