An Interpretive Analysis of the Effectiveness of Non-traditional or ‘Structured Discovery’ Blindness Rehabilitation in Canada from the Perspective of Blind Service Recipients and Teachers

By

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Blindness rehabilitation in Canada has traditionally emphasized maximizing residual vision and functional skills through prescriptive, vision-centered methods. While these approaches provide supports, they often reinforce dependency and limit adaptability for people facing progressive vision loss. Structured Discovery, an alternative model that originated in the United States, reframes blindness as a characteristic rather than a deficit and emphasizes non-visual skill development, problem-solving, and empowerment through the mentorship of blind instructors and peers. Despite its influence in the United States, Structured Discovery is largely absent from both practice and scholarship in the Canadian context.

This thesis explores how blind Canadians experience Structured Discovery training as participants and teachers. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and grounded in Critical Disability Theory, the study examines how individuals make sense of their training experiences, the skills and perspectives they gained, and how they compare Structured Discovery to more traditional rehabilitation services. The researcher conducted ten qualitative interviews with Canadians directly engaged in Structured Discovery programs, including those delivered through the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB), one of the few Canadian organizations applying this model.

This study makes several contributions. It represents the first academic examination of Structured Discovery in Canada and addresses a gap in both disability studies and rehabilitation research. It provides practical insights for rehabilitation practitioners by showing how empowerment-based, non-visual training can better prepare blind people for independence and social participation.

Dedication

To my mom—thank you for your unwavering support and for always encouraging me to follow my dreams.

To my sons, Rhys and Ronyn—you inspire me every single day with your strength and love.

And to the blind community, of which I am honoured to be a part—your resilience, strength, wisdom, and belief in what is possible have deeply guided and inspired this work.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee ii
Abstract iii
Dedication iv
Table of Contents v
Chapter 1: Introduction 1
1.1 Research Problem and Gap 2
1.2 Purpose of the Study 3
1.3 Research Questions 4
1.4 Significance of the Study 5
1.5 Structure of the Thesis 5
Chapter 2: Literature Review 6
2.1 Model One: Vision Rehabilitation 8
2.2 Model Two: Functional Skills or Guided Learning 12
2.3 Model Three: Structured Discovery Rehabilitation 14
2.4 Critical Disability Theory and Blindness and Disability Studies 18
2.5 Research Gap 20
2.6 Chapter Conclusion 20
Chapter 3: Methodology 22
3.1 Research Approach 22
3.2 Positionality Statement 23
3.3 Participant Selection 23
3.4 Data Collection 24
3.5 Analytical Framework 24
3.6 Ethical Considerations 25
3.7 Conclusion 26
Chapter 4: Findings 27
4.1 Theme 1: Empowerment, Confidence, and Accomplishments 28
4.2 Theme 2: Problem Solving and Hands-On Learning 36
4.3 Theme Three: Role Models, Peer Mentoring, and Lived Experience 43
4.4 Theme Four: Self-Advocacy and Agency 48
4.5 Theme 5: Non-Visual Techniques 53

4.6 Theme Six: Limitations of Traditional Rehabilitation 57
4.7 Theme Seven: Challenges with Structured Discovery 62
4.8 Theme Eight: The Canadian Context 67
4.9 Chapter Conclusion 72
Chapter 5: Discussion 74
5.1 Research Question 1 74
5.2 Research Question 2 77
5.3 Research Question 3 81
5.4 Research Question 4 86
Chapter 6 Conclusion 92
6.1 Restating the Purpose of the Study 92
6.2 Summary of Key Findings 92
6.3 Recommendations 93
6.4 Limitations of the Study 96
6.5 Directions for Future Research 96
6.6 Final Reflections 97
References 98

Chapter 1: Introduction

Blindness rehabilitation is shaped by contrasting philosophies and models of practice. Mainstream or traditional approaches in Canada, particularly those led by CNIB Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada, primarily emphasize maximizing residual vision through medical and technological interventions and strategies that promote memorization of steps for learning a task, such as remembering a cane travel root or learning steps for using a screen reader with a computer; this rote, or prescriptive method is also known as a guided learning approach. CNIB, which was formerly known as Canadian National Institute for the Blind, is the primary rehabilitation provider in Canada for all blind and low vision Canadians and has been for over 100 years. This charity organization? is funded largely through government grants and donations from private individuals and organizations. CNIB provides services throughout the country; however, service can vary depending on population density, urban or rural and other factors. Quebec has a more diverse variety of blindness rehabilitation providers. CNIB clients receive rehabilitation mostly on an individual basis. For example, a CNIB cane travel instructor will visit one blind or low vision individual in their home or community and provide assistance on an as-needed-basis. Visits to clients can be spaced far apart depending on waitlists and availability of CNIB staff. The visual or medical-intervention approach and the guided learning model provided by CNIB both provide important supports, but they risk reinforcing dependency, limiting adaptability, and often leaving blind people underprepared for progressive vision loss.

In contrast, Structured Discovery represents a transformative model that reframes blindness as a characteristic rather than a deficit. Structured Discovery is rooted in non-visual skill development, experiential learning, and empowerment; it emerged in the United States as a

response to the limitations of traditional, custodial rehabilitation methods. Its core philosophy emphasizes problem-solving, self-confidence, and the lived expertise of blind instructors. Programs such as the Louisiana Center for the Blind and the Colorado Center for the Blind demonstrate how immersive training and mentorship can enable blind people to lead independent, self-determined lives. For instance, a national study found that adults who used Braille at least weekly were significantly more likely to be employed than those who did not; this demonstrates the value of comprehensive skills training that emphasizes literacy, confidence, and problem-solving (Bell & Silverman, 2018). Similarly, a pre- and post-training study of comprehensive adjustment-to-blindness programs found significant improvements in independent living skills, self-esteem, and overall adjustment among graduates (Singletary, 2012). The Colorado Center for the Blind reported that 96 percent of adults completing its Independence Training Program in 2023 were living independently after graduation, which demonstrated the real-world impact of intensive, residential training (Colorado Center for the Blind, 2023).

In Canada, however, due to the overarching influence of CNIB and because of Structured Discovery's American origins, Structured Discovery remains largely unexplored in both practice and scholarship. The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) in Victoria, British Columbia, is one of the only organizations explicitly adapting and delivering this model, which makes it an important site for inquiry and analysis.

1.1 Research Problem and Gap

To date, no academic studies have examined the effectiveness of Structured Discovery within the Canadian context. This absence of research reflects and contributes to a broader applied problem in blindness rehabilitation in Canada. Despite decades of international practice,

Structured Discovery remains largely absent from mainstream rehabilitation policy, funding frameworks, and professional training in Canada. As a result, blindness rehabilitation continues to be dominated by custodial and medicalized service models that emphasize adjustment to vision loss and reliance on professional support rather than the development of independent problem-solving skills and blind-led instruction.

This lack of institutional recognition and empirical evidence has practical consequences. Limited awareness and understanding of Structured Discovery among policymakers, funders, and rehabilitation systems restricts opportunities for program development, sustainable funding, and instructor training. Consequently, many blind Canadians have little or no access to empowerment-based, skills-focused rehabilitation, contributing to ongoing barriers in employment, education, and full community participation.

The research gap surrounding Structured Discovery in Canada therefore represents both a scholarly and applied problem. Policymakers and service providers lack Canadian-based evidence to assess the relevance, effectiveness, and potential policy implications of this alternative model. Understanding how blind Canadians and instructors experience Structured Discovery training, and how it differs from traditional rehabilitation approaches, is essential to informing more responsive, autonomy-focused rehabilitation policy and practice. This study addresses that gap by generating qualitative evidence grounded in lived experience, with the aim of contributing to improved awareness, decision-making, and service provision in the Canadian blindness rehabilitation landscape.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of blind Canadians who have participated in Structured Discovery training, either as students or as teachers. The applied

research problem this study addresses is the limited institutional recognition, policy integration, and availability of Structured Discovery–based rehabilitation in Canada. Despite evidence of its use in other jurisdictions, Structured Discovery remains largely outside mainstream Canadian rehabilitation systems, affecting funding decisions, professional training pathways, and access to empowerment-based services for blind people.

Understanding lived experience is essential to addressing this applied problem because decisions about blindness rehabilitation policy and service delivery are often made without meaningful attention to how blind people themselves experience different rehabilitation models. Structured Discovery is an experiential, problem-solving–based approach that emphasizes confidence, independence, and non-visual skill development through active learning rather than prescriptive instruction. Examining how blind Canadians experience this model in practice provides insight into its potential to address long-standing limitations of custodial and medicalized rehabilitation approaches.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study examines how participants make sense of their Structured Discovery training, the skills and perspectives they developed, and how they compare these experiences with more traditional rehabilitation services. IPA is particularly well suited to this inquiry because it foregrounds meaning-making, which is central to understanding empowerment, confidence, and independence as lived phenomena rather than abstract outcomes. By centering participant narratives, this study contributes qualitative evidence that can inform policy discussions, professional practice, and future program development related to blindness rehabilitation in Canada.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do blind people in Canada describe their experiences with Structured Discovery training, whether as service recipients or as teachers?

2. In what ways do participants compare Structured Discovery with previous or more traditional rehabilitation services they may have received or observed?

3. What specific skills or perspectives do participants feel they gained or helped to develop through the training?

4. What challenges or limitations do they identify in Structured Discovery training, and how might these be addressed?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to multiple fields. For blindness rehabilitation practice, it provides the first qualitative evidence of how Structured Discovery is experienced in the Canadian context. For disability studies, it illustrates how critical theory can be applied to evaluate rehabilitation models. For policymakers and service providers, it demonstrates the importance of alternative approaches that move beyond custodial care to emphasize empowerment, adaptability, and blind leadership.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the thesis. Chapter 2 presents a conceptual literature review of three rehabilitation models—Vision Rehabilitation, Functional Skills/Guided Learning, and Structured Discovery—situating them within broader debates in disability studies. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and describes the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), participant selection, data collection, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the findings, organized into eight themes that capture participants' experiences with Structured Discovery. Chapter 5 discusses these findings

in relation to the literature and theoretical framework. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a conclusion and offers recommendations for rehabilitation practice, policy, and future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This paper presents a conceptual literature review (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009); it compares three models of blindness rehabilitation and develops a point of view (McGregor, 2018) about why the third model is the most empowering and effective for blind people. The

World Health Organization (2023) defines rehabilitation as an intervention or adaptation that "helps a person to be as independent as possible in everyday activities and enables participation in education, work, recreation, and meaningful life roles" (para. 1). This definition demonstrates the importance of independence and societal participation, which is central to evaluating rehabilitation models.

By situating these models within a continuum of approaches, we can better understand their evolution—from medical-centric perspectives to more empowering, person-centered practices. While Vision Rehabilitation and Functional Skills models offer useful strategies, this review argues that the Structured Discovery model best aligns with critical disability theory and provides the most effective framework for promoting independence, adaptability, and long-term empowerment.

For this thesis, I assessed peer-reviewed articles on the three models of blindness rehabilitation using the University of Victoria online library database. To broaden the scope, I incorporated recent research and initiatives, including those from grassroots organizations and critical disability perspectives, to strengthen the argument for the third model, Structured Discovery.

Across the literature, three broad models of blindness rehabilitation are evident, each reflecting different assumptions about blindness, independence, and skill development. Medical and adjustment-oriented approaches tend to emphasize coping with vision loss and professional support, while functional skills–based models place greater focus on practical training but often remain instructor-directed. The Structured Discovery model, by contrast, is consistently described as emphasizing non-visual skill development, problem-solving, experiential learning, and blind-led instruction. Together, these findings provide a framework for understanding how

different rehabilitation models conceptualize independence and participation, and they inform the comparative analysis that follows in this chapter.

2.1 Model One: Vision Rehabilitation

2.1.1 Definition and Approach

Vision rehabilitation in Canada primarily focuses on maximizing residual vision through the use of optical aids, low vision adaptive devices, and infrequent training sessions. This approach, helpful for some, is rooted in the biomedical model, which frames blindness as a condition to be managed or mitigated through medical and technological interventions (Markowitz, 2006). Vision rehabilitation typically involves clinical assessments of visual function, including visual acuity, contrast sensitivity, and field of vision tests, with the goal of prescribing aids such as magnifiers, monoculars, closed-circuit television systems, and specialized lenses (Markowitz, 2006; Lam et al., 2015).

2.1.2 Philosophy and Underlying Assumptions

Vision rehabilitation aligns closely with the biomedical model of disability; it emphasizes the use of residual sight to restore functional ability. The primary goal is to enhance remaining vision rather than teaching adaptive, nonvisual strategies (Markowitz, 2006). This model may be useful for some, particularly those who are not yet legally blind or those who still have enough remaining vision to make such vision-focused strategies viable. The approach, however, reinforces the societal narrative that blindness is inherently limiting unless mitigated through sight-enhancing interventions (Gold, Zuvela, & Hodge, 2006).

2.1.3 Examples and Implementation

Vision rehabilitation in Canada is dominated by key providers such as Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada (VLRC), a CNIB-affiliate, and other low-vision clinics. Quebec operates

government-funded multidisciplinary rehabilitation centers, which provide comprehensive services, including assistive technology training and home adaptation support (Robillard & Overbury, 2006). However, most provinces rely on CNIB-funded models like VLRC, which results in geographic and financial disparities in service availability (Jaiswal et al., 2021).

2.1.4 Barriers and Limitations

Access to vision rehabilitation services in Canada remains inconsistent, largely due to provincial variations in funding and program delivery. As Jaiswal et al. (2021) observe, these discrepancies create inequities that affect where and how blind or partially sighted individuals can receive support. Some provinces offer a more comprehensive network of services, while others provide only minimal or fragmented programs. This uneven landscape means that a person's access to essential rehabilitation often depends more on geography than on need, leaving many Canadians without consistent or timely support.

Another significant limitation involves delayed referrals and a general lack of awareness about available rehabilitation services. Overbury and Wittich (2011) and Fraser et al. (2014) highlight that many individuals who could benefit from vision rehabilitation are simply unaware that such services exist or that they can be accessed through community programs rather than only through medical channels. This lack of awareness contributes to underutilization, with many people not seeking help until long after their vision loss has affected their daily functioning, social participation, or emotional well-being.

A further barrier arises from the over-reliance on residual vision in traditional rehabilitation approaches. Markowitz (2006) notes that many programs prioritize the use of remaining sight, training individuals to maximize their limited vision rather than developing effective non-visual strategies. While this can be useful for some, it leaves individuals

unprepared if their vision continues to deteriorate. The emphasis on visual aids and partial sight can inadvertently discourage the adoption of alternative techniques, such as tactile or auditory methods, that support long-term independence.

Cost is another factor that restricts equitable access. Many low-vision aids and assistive devices—such as magnifiers, screen readers, or specialized technology—are not publicly funded, placing them beyond the financial reach of many Canadians with vision loss (Cruess et al., 2011). The high expense of these tools creates an economic barrier that exacerbates social inequalities, as individuals with lower incomes are less able to afford essential equipment that could improve their quality of life and participation in work or education.

Finally, a lack of multidisciplinary collaboration further limits the effectiveness of rehabilitation services. Gold, Zuvela, and Hodge (2006) and Jaiswal et al. (2021) point out that eye care professionals, rehabilitation specialists, and social service providers often work in silos, with little coordination between medical and functional support systems. This fragmented approach prevents the development of holistic rehabilitation plans that address both the practical and psychosocial dimensions of blindness. Greater collaboration across disciplines could enhance outcomes by ensuring that medical, psychological, and adaptive needs are met in a unified and person-centered manner.

2.1.5 Relevance and Role in the Continuum of Rehabilitation Models

While vision rehabilitation plays an important role in supporting some people with partial sight, its effectiveness as a standalone model is limited. The model does not adequately address the needs of those who are blind or experiencing progressive vision loss (Fontenot et al., 2018). However, despite its limitations, it remains the most dominant rehabilitation model in Canada, with extensive research published in medical and optometric journals such as the Canadian

Journal of Ophthalmology, Investigative Ophthalmology & Visual Science, and Optometry and Vision Science (Jaiswal et al., 2021).

The dominance of the vision rehabilitation model in Canada can be traced to its strong roots in the medical and optometric fields, where vision loss has historically been understood as a medical problem to be managed rather than a social or experiential condition to be lived with. Rehabilitation services have therefore evolved around restoring or maximizing residual vision, often emphasizing the use of optical aids or visual efficiency training (Leat, 2016). Because optometrists and ophthalmologists are usually the first point of contact for people experiencing vision loss, their clinical perspectives have shaped the structure, funding, and delivery of most rehabilitation programs.

Institutionally, vision rehabilitation in Canada has been centralized under a single major national charity, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), and its service arm, Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada (VLRC). This organization receives provincial and federal funding and is deeply embedded within existing healthcare and charitable frameworks, which reinforces the continued dominance of the medical model. Smaller hospital-based or optometric low-vision clinics also contribute to this landscape but follow similar principles, focusing primarily on maximizing remaining sight rather than promoting non-visual skills or independence. The result is a national system where rehabilitation is largely defined and delivered through medicalized channels, leaving little space for alternative approaches such as Structured Discovery.

Culturally, the ongoing dominance of the vision rehabilitation model reflects broader societal attitudes that frame disability in medical rather than social terms. This view positions blindness as a deficit to be corrected or compensated for, rather than as a valid way of

functioning that can be supported through confidence, problem-solving, and non-visual techniques (Markowitz, 2016). Such assumptions make it easier for governments and funders to continue supporting vision-based programs, as they align with traditional healthcare structures and familiar charitable models.

Finally, the concentration of research and professional training within optometry and ophthalmology further sustains this dominance. Most Canadian research on vision loss originates in medical faculties, where the focus remains on the biological aspects of sight rather than the lived experience of blindness. Consequently, empowerment-based models such as Structured Discovery receive limited attention, funding, or legitimacy within the academic and policy landscape (Southal & Wittich, 2012)

In this context, Structured Discovery represents a departure from the prevailing paradigm. By emphasizing experiential learning, non-visual skills, and mentorship from blind instructors, it challenges entrenched medical assumptions and introduces a model of rehabilitation grounded in empowerment, agency, and equality.

2.2 Model Two: Functional Skills or Guided Learning

2.2.1 Definition and Approach

Functional Skills or Guided Learning blends elements of traditional rehabilitation approaches with blindness skills training. This model typically includes some vision rehabilitation strategies such as low-vision aids, magnifiers, and visual scanning techniques (Markowitz, 2006), but it also emphasizes critical non-visual skills such as Braille literacy, orientation and mobility (O&M), cooking, adaptive technology, and daily living skills (Ponchillia & Ponchillia, 1996; Kaiser et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Philosophy and Underlying Assumptions

A defining characteristic of the Functional Skills or Guided Learning model is its prescriptive and route-based approach. Training is often structured around memorizing specific steps to perform tasks, whether for cooking, household chores, travel, or other activities of daily living (Ponchillia & Ponchillia, 1996; Kaiser et al., 2018). In Orientation and Mobility (O&M) training, for example, participants are taught specific sequences of steps — such as turning left at a particular landmark, crossing a set number of streets, and counting steps — to reach their destination (Hersh, 2020). Similarly, cooking lessons may require participants to memorize detailed sequences for measuring, preparing, and serving meals.

This rote learning method provides structure and clear instructions, which is useful in some situations and can be beneficial for people who are newly blind or adjusting to vision loss. However, because participants are often required to memorize steps rather than develop problem-solving strategies, they may struggle when faced with unexpected obstacles or changes in their environment (Penrod et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Examples and Implementation

The Functional Skills or Guided Learning model introduces essential non-visual skills as core aspects of rehabilitation. This includes Braille literacy as a foundational tool for communication (Penrod et al., 2020). Orientation and mobility (O&M) training is also emphasized, combining visual and non-visual navigation techniques (Hersh, 2020; Chamberlain, 2019).

In Quebec, an adapted employment-integration program combined vision rehabilitation and skills training, with participants showing improved employment outcomes following this blended approach (Wittich et al., 2019).

2.2.4 Barriers and Limitations

Though the model is beneficial in many instances, the approach relies too heavily on Prescriptive Methods: Emphasis on memorization rather than problem-solving limits adaptability (Hersh, 2020; Penrod et al., 2020).

As well, critics argue that traditional models reinforce dependency and limit the development of alternative skills that support long-term independence (Parsard & Kavanagh, 2005; Bhagotra et al., 2008).

2.2.5 Relevance and Role in the Continuum of Rehabilitation Models

The Functional Skills or Guided Learning model represents a hybrid approach that combines aspects of vision rehabilitation with essential blindness skills training. While it offers structure and step-by-step guidance that can help some people gain independence, its reliance on rote learning and memorization may limit adaptability and long-term empowerment.

2.3 Model Three: Structured Discovery Rehabilitation

2.3.1 Definition and Approach

Structured Discovery Rehabilitation represents a transformative approach to blindness rehabilitation, emphasizing nonvisual skills, problem-solving, and self-confidence. Rather than focusing on residual vision, this model teaches people to rely on other senses and to develop strategies that work regardless of their visual abilities. Key components include long white cane travel, adaptive technology, Braille literacy, and intensive training in daily living skills, all taught using nonvisual methods (Maurer et al., 2006; Mino, 2011).

Structured Discovery encourages exploration and dynamic problem-solving rather than rigid routines, which makes it effective for people with progressive vision loss (Nyman, 2011).

2.3.2 Philosophy and Underlying Assumptions

Structured Discovery is rooted in the principles of empowerment and independence; it aligns closely with the foundations of Critical Disability Theory (CDT). Both emphasize agency, capability, and the right of disabled people to define their own experiences rather than being viewed through a medicalized lens. From a CDT perspective, disability is not a personal tragedy or medical deficit but a social and structural condition shaped by environmental barriers and societal attitudes. Structured Discovery applies this understanding directly to blindness rehabilitation by positioning blind individuals as competent problem-solvers rather than as patients in need of correction or care.

This approach stands in contrast to the biomedical framework, which locates disability within the individual and focuses on restoring or compensating for lost vision. Structured Discovery rejects this deficit-based model and instead views blindness as a characteristic that can be navigated successfully with the right skills, training, and confidence (Salisbury, 2024). It challenges ableist assumptions by asserting that blindness is not the absence of ability but a different way of interacting with the world. Following this perspective, rehabilitation becomes a process of self-discovery, mastery, and empowerment rather than medical adjustment.

Structured Discovery also aligns with constructivist learning theories, which emphasize that knowledge and skills are built through active exploration and experiential learning (Maurer et al., 2006; Mino, 2011). In this model, students learn by doing—through real-world travel, cooking, Braille reading, and problem-solving experiences—rather than through passive instruction. The role of the instructor is to facilitate discovery rather than to prescribe solutions, encouraging learners to develop confidence through success and error alike. This process

nurtures intrinsic motivation, resilience, and adaptability, which embodies the core assumptions of both constructivist education and critical disability theory.

In essence, Structured Discovery integrates the philosophical foundations of empowerment and experiential learning with a critical understanding of disability. It reframes blindness from a condition to be managed into a lived experience that can be understood, mastered, and valued, reflecting a transformative shift in both pedagogy and rehabilitation philosophy.

2.3.3 Origins and Development

Structured Discovery originated in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century as a response to the limitations of traditional, custodial approaches to blindness rehabilitation. Programs like the Louisiana Center for the Blind and the Colorado Center for the Blind became foundational to Structured Discovery training (Maurer et al., 2006).

2.3.4 Examples and Implementation

Structured Discovery has been successfully implemented in specialized centers such as the Louisiana Center for the Blind, the Colorado Center for the Blind, and the Iowa Department for the Blind (Salisbury, 2018).

In Canada, the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) incorporates Structured Discovery principles in its 'Blind People in Charge' program, providing training in nonvisual skills and emphasizing problem-solving and mentorship from blind instructors. While no formal academic research has been conducted on PTCB, its approach aligns closely with Structured Discovery philosophy.

2.3.5 Academic Literature and Research

All academic research on Structured Discovery comes from the United States (Mino, 2011; Bell & Mino, 2011). In Canada, related academic studies on Braille literacy (Martiniello, Haririsanati, & Wittich, 2022) and employment barriers (Jansenberger, 2014) show the need for more empowering rehabilitation approaches.

Grassroots community organizations like the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) and its publication The Blind Canadian document grassroots advocacy for Structured Discovery training.

As well, Graeme McCreath (2012) in his book, "The Politics of Blindness: From Charity to Parity," critiques traditional rehabilitation in Canada; he argues for alternative models like Structured Discovery that emphasize skill-based, nonvisual training for employment and independence.

2.3.6 Barriers and Limitations

The model's immersive nature requires a significant time commitment, which can be a barrier for some people (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2023). Participation often involves several months of intensive, full-time training, making it difficult for individuals who have employment, family responsibilities, or financial constraints to attend. Additionally, Structured Discovery requires a high level of personal motivation and readiness to engage in challenging, confidence-building experiences that may initially feel uncomfortable. Some centers also struggle to maintain the balance between emotional growth and practical skill development, as both elements are essential for success (Salisbury, 2024). Furthermore, the availability of trained instructors and funding to support such comprehensive programs can be limited, especially in regions where the

model is not yet well established. These factors together create practical and systemic barriers to broader implementation despite the model's demonstrated effectiveness.

2.3.7 Relevance and Role in the Continuum of Rehabilitation Models

Structured Discovery represents the most comprehensive and empowering approach to blindness rehabilitation. It centers nonvisual skills, problem-solving, and mentorship and equips people for independence and self-determination (Mino, 2011; Nyman, 2011). However, further research is needed to examine its effectiveness outside the United States, particularly in the Canadian context (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2021).

2.4 Critical Disability Theory and Blindness and Disability Studies

Critical disability theory (CDT) offers a valuable conceptual framework for analyzing blindness rehabilitation and broader discourses surrounding blindness and disability. As an interdisciplinary field, CDT examines disability as a cultural, historical, and political construct rather than a purely medical condition. This perspective is crucial in understanding the social dynamics that shape how blindness is perceived and experienced.

2.4.1 Core Principles of Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theory challenges traditional medical models of disability, which frame blindness as a personal tragedy requiring cure or correction. Instead, CDT critiques the societal norms that define blindness as an impairment and explores the power structures that marginalize blind people. As Pothier and Devlin (2006) argue, disability is less about medical concerns and more about politics and power, with social barriers and ableist ideologies shaping the experiences of disabled people.

CDT emphasizes the importance of recognizing social injustices and working toward social change. Minich (2017) advocates for CDT to produce knowledge that actively supports

justice for people with marginalized identities. Consequently, CDT explores the lived experiences of disabled people but also tries to dismantle oppressive ideologies.

2.4.2 Blindness Through the Lens of Critical Disability Theory

Blindness holds a unique position within disability discourse. Traditional rehabilitation models often focus on physical adjustment and restoration of function, which inadvertently reinforces ableist assumptions about what it means to be independent and productive. For example, research exploring rehabilitation services in South Africa reveals that these services tend to reproduce dominant social expectations, encouraging blind people to adopt normative performances that align with sighted ideals (Watermeyer & Botha, 2023). This focus on performativity can pressure blind people to conceal their blindness or downplay its significance and limit their ability to form authentic disability identities.

2.4.3 Challenging Rehabilitation Models Through Critical Disability Theory

CDT critiques traditional rehabilitation approaches that prioritize physical restoration and neglect emotional and social dimensions. As Watermeyer and Botha (2023) note, rehabilitation services often perpetuate neoliberal ideals of autonomy and productivity and fail to account for the trauma and identity flux experienced by newly blind people. Rehabilitation models that focus solely on functionality may inadvertently produce "docile" disabled subjects, reinforcing social inequalities rather than empowering people.

2.4.4 Intersectionality and Blindness in Disability Studies

CDT's intersectional approach reveals how blindness is influenced by race, gender, and class. Scholars such as Erevelles and Kafer (2010) argue that disability must be analyzed alongside other social categories to understand how power relations shape experiences of impairment. This intersectional perspective is particularly important in analyzing blindness

rehabilitation in diverse contexts, such as South Africa, where social inequalities are deeply embedded in healthcare and educational systems (Ned et al., 2024).

Critical disability theory provides an essential framework for understanding blindness and disability studies. By challenging ableist norms, highlighting social injustices, and promoting inclusive rehabilitation practices, CDT empowers blind people to challenge marginalization and assert their identities.

Within the context of blindness rehabilitation, CDT provides a way to examine how different models—such as traditional custodial approaches versus the Structured Discovery model—can either reinforce dependency or promote empowerment and independence.

2.5 Research Gap

While extensive research exists on Vision Rehabilitation and Functional Skills or Guided Learning models, no academic studies have examined the Structured Discovery approach within the Canadian context. This lack of scholarship denotes the need to investigate alternative methods of rehabilitation that emphasize problem-solving, adaptability, and confidence rather than dependency and adjustment to vision loss. The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) in Victoria, BC, provides a rare example of Structured Discovery principles being applied in Canada, yet its impact has not been formally studied. Further research is needed to understand how this model influences empowerment, skill development, and social participation among blind Canadians.

2.6 Chapter Conclusion

Structured Discovery offers a distinct and empowering philosophy of blindness rehabilitation—one that prioritizes experiential learning, non-visual skills, and mentorship from blind instructors. By promoting confidence and problem-solving, it contrasts sharply with

traditional custodial or functional skills models. However, the absence of Canadian research on Structured Discovery leaves a critical gap in understanding its outcomes and implications for policy and practice. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of Canadians who have participated in Structured Discovery training, contributing new insights to support the broader development and recognition of this model across Canada.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology I use to explore the impact of structured discovery training in blindness rehabilitation. I employed a qualitative approach, with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the guiding framework. IPA focuses on understanding how individuals experience and make sense of significant life events, which makes it well-suited for investigating structured discovery's role in promoting independence and self-efficacy among blind Canadians. This chapter outlines the research design, participant selection criteria, data collection methods, and analytical approach. The chapter also addresses ethical considerations, including strategies to support participants during potentially emotional discussions.

3.1 Research Approach

I used a qualitative research design to examine how blind people in Canada experience structured discovery training. Because this approach focuses on subjective experiences and meaning-making, it allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives on blindness rehabilitation. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) served as the primary methodological framework, emphasizing detailed, first-person accounts and the ways individuals interpret their own experiences.

IPA is grounded in three key principles:

1. Phenomenology: The study seeks to capture participants' lived experiences with structured discovery training (Moustakas, 1994).

2. Hermeneutics: The researcher engages in a process of interpretation and recognizes that meaning is co-constructed through analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

3. Ideography: The researcher conducts a detailed, case-by-case analysis before identifying broader themes across participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Researchers commonly use IPA in disability research and rehabilitation studies, as this methodology proves effective in exploring personal experiences of empowerment, adaptation, and skill development (Zegeye, 2022; Sim, 2020).

3.2 Positionality Statement

I am a blind researcher who completed Structured Discovery training at the Louisiana Center for the Blind (LCB), and I brought both personal experience and academic insight to this study. As the founder of the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind in Canada, I have worked to adapt and deliver this model in the Canadian context. My own training gives me a deep understanding of the model's impact, which shaped how I approached and interpreted participants' narratives. I engaged with each interview openly and reflexively, while working to center the voices and perspectives of others. My goal throughout was to understand and represent their experiences—not to impose my own.

3.3 Participant Selection

In this study I selected participants using purposive sampling and ensured that all interviewees have direct experience with structured discovery training. The study focuses exclusively on Canadians who meet one or more of the following criteria:

People who completed structured discovery training at the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) in Canada. Canadians who attended structured discovery programs in the United States. Canadians who taught structured discovery at PTCB or who are teaching at a U.S.-based structured discovery center.

3.4 Data Collection

I used semi-structured interviews to collect data; this allowed for flexibility in responses while ensuring core themes are addressed (Barriball & While, 1994). The interviews aimed to capture participants' reflections on their training, its impact on their independence, and how it compares to other models of rehabilitation.

I did 10 interviews in total each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Conducted via Zoom. Recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Interviewing continued until a point of thematic saturation was reached, that is, no new significant themes were emerging from the data.

3.5 Analytical Framework

My data analysis followed IPA's systematic six-step process to ensure that participants' perspectives were interpreted rigorously and meaningfully (Smith et al., 2009):

1. Reading and re-reading: I reviewed each transcript multiple times to familiarize myself with participants' accounts.

2. Initial noting: I documented observations, key phrases, and emerging patterns.

3. Developing emergent themes: I identified recurring ideas within each individual case.

4. Clustering themes: I grouped themes into broader conceptual categories.

5. Cross-Case analysis: I compared themes across participants to identify shared experiences and variations.

6. Writing up findings: I supported interpretations with direct participant quotes and connected these to existing relevant literature (Cassidy et al., 2011; Bakker, Steultjens, & Price, 2019).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines set by the University of Victoria's Research Ethics Board (REB), which ensures that participants' rights, privacy, and well-being are protected. Given that the researcher is the Executive Director of the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB), particular attention was paid to identifying and mitigating any potential conflicts of interest. To prevent undue influence or perceived coercion, no current students, staff members, or board members of the PTCB were invited to participate in this research. Only individuals who had previously completed their involvement with the organization or who were affiliated with other Structured Discovery programs were included. This approach ensured that participation was entirely voluntary and free from any power imbalance or institutional pressure.

Additionally, recruitment was conducted through open calls and personal networks outside of the researcher's supervisory or administrative role, with clear communication that participation—or refusal to participate—would have no impact on any current or future relationship with the PTCB. The consent process further emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Key ethical safeguards included:

Informed consent: Participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, interview process, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Confidentiality: Pseudonyms replace real names in transcripts and final reports, and identifying details were removed to protect anonymity.

Data security: Audio recordings and transcripts are stored on a password-protected device, accessible only to the researcher and thesis advisor.

Through these measures, potential conflicts of interest were acknowledged, addressed, and carefully managed to maintain the ethical integrity of the research and ensure that participants' voices were represented authentically and without bias.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to examine structured discovery training in blindness rehabilitation. I chose a qualitative approach, guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore participants' lived experiences. I selected Canadian participants with direct experience in structured discovery training to ensure relevance to the study's focus. I collected data using semi-structured interviews, and analyzed this data using IPA's step-by-step framework. I prioritized ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participant well-being, throughout the research process.

The next chapter presents the findings from participant interviews and identifies key themes that emerge from their experiences with structured discovery training.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from 10 qualitative interviews conducted for this study. The participants include seven people who received Structured Discovery blindness rehabilitation training and three instructors who have taught using this model. All participants are Canadian. Some completed their training at the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) in Canada, while others attended Structured Discovery training centres in the United States. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to guide the analysis and focused on how participants make sense of their lived experiences. After transcribing and reviewing each interview, I coded the data manually by identifying significant statements and recurring ideas. I organized the material into eight Word documents, one for each emerging theme, and placed relevant quotes and reflections from each interview into the appropriate document. This process helped me identify patterns and increase my understanding of the similarities and differences between participant experiences.

Eight overarching themes emerged from the data. These themes reflect main aspects of the Structured Discovery experience; they highlight the empowering nature of structured discovery and its challenges —particularly in the Canadian context.

The eight themes include: empowerment and accomplishments; problem-solving and exploration; role modelling, mentoring, and lived experience; self-advocacy and agency; importance of learning non-visual skills; issues regarding traditional forms of rehabilitation; challenges with the structured discovery model; providing a Canadian context. The following sections include direct quotes and examples from participants' interviews and explore each theme in detail.

4.1 Theme 1: Empowerment, Confidence, and Accomplishments

4.1.1 Theme Introduction

The first major theme to emerge from the interviews involves the profound sense of empowerment, confidence, and personal accomplishment participants attributed to their Structured Discovery training. Students and teachers described the process of mastering blindness skills as educational and rehabilitative and as life-altering. Participants consistently reported that their time in structured discovery programs, whether in Canada or the United States, equipped them with skills that enhanced their confidence, helped them reclaim autonomy, and reshaped their identities as capable, independent people. This theme demonstrates the interwoven nature of skill development and psychological transformation, a hallmark of the interpretative phenomenological approach (Tuffour, 2017), which focuses on how people make sense of their lived experiences.

4.1.2 Chris's Story: Reimagining Possibility Through Structured Discovery

Chris's reflections consist of layered themes of humility, challenge, and awakening. Before he entered the Louisiana Center for the Blind (LCB), he believed he was enrolling in the program simply to become a better teacher. But his experience was much more personal and profound. He explains: "I became a more confident and competent blind person. I didn't realize how much I would learn—it was truly life-changing." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025)

Chris further contrasted his experience at LCB with prior training he received at CNIB: "At CNIB, they would teach you how to get from point A to point B, but heaven forbid you ever deviated from that" (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). Structured Discovery, he explained, is built on the idea that blind people must be able to explore, problem-solve, and take

ownership of their learning. He continued: “It made it helpful and empowering to strike out on your own.”

Before training, Chris relied heavily on sighted assistance. In his words: “Before, I had to save up tasks to ask a sighted friend for help. Now, I could do those things myself and spend time with my friends doing other things” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). His relationship to others shifted—he no longer depended on them, he could simply enjoy their company.

Chris described LCB’s immersive approach as “night-and-day” compared to anything else he had experienced. He noted how: “Structured Discovery was much more intense and far more empowering. I could build on what I learned day after day” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025) This culminated in tangible growth: “I accomplished so much, and I felt prepared for whatever life threw at me” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

He recalled a defining moment when he was asked to cross Interstate 80 alone: “I walked all the way to Chick-fil-A, got my food, and came back. That was the moment I realized this training actually works.” The act of completing this independently gave him a jolt of realization and pride: “It hit me like a light bulb.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

After graduating, Chris moved back to Canada and became the technology lead for Western Canada at CNIB. “Because of the training—especially in tech and travel—I was flying all over British Columbia teaching.” He advanced quickly and confidently. “Promotions and opportunities kept coming. I was really able to make a difference.” He concluded, “The sacrifice of training was absolutely worth it.”

4.1.3 Julie's Story: Building the Person She Wanted to Be

Julie described the tremendous impact of her master's program through LCB. Her training included immersion, observation, and internship phases. "Just from ten weeks, the amount of progress I was able to make was incredible—especially in one specific area: cane travel." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). Already strong in Braille and tech, travel was her main focus.

She recalled a defining moment: "I had gone to coffee shops before, but I had never done it by myself. A few weeks into my training, I finally decided I was going to do it. I really wanted a coffee." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). She described walking to the shop, ordering, and sitting outside in the sun. "The feeling was so empowering… I thought, 'This is exactly the person I want to be.'" (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Another standout moment was her struggle and eventual triumph navigating a confusing T-intersection. "I had to repeat the route three times. I dead-ended every time. I'll never forget the feeling of Vincey when I figured it out." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

She also described building confidence for worst-case scenarios. "Now I can help people find a seat or do things. I still get anxiety, but it's so much less now when I go places." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). Julie's story showed how deeply psychological and personal travel independence can be.

4.1.4 Holly's Story: From Hesitation to Growth

Holly participated in training at the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) in Victoria, BC, Canada. "The program focused on putting more control in the participant's hands," Holly said. "It placed us at the forefront of determining routes, figuring out our environment, and gave us more room to make mistakes." (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). That

shift—allowing mistakes—was key. “It helped me realize that it’s okay to fumble.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

Holly shared that mental mapping was both the hardest and most rewarding part. “It’s not a muscle I’ve exercised before… Now I can retrace a picture in my head.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). They described learning how streets are organized, how to listen for sound cues, and how to use cardinal directions in Victoria.

One of Holly’s proudest moments was taking the bus to and from the program alone and then applying what they learned in their own small town. “I cooked chili for the first time… I volunteered at a music therapy group and got there by myself.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

Holly also wanted to get a guide dog and move out. “I wanted agency over my own life.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). They shared that they would soon be volunteering at a gallery and had arranged to meet at the Scott train station on their own. “I don’t need five lessons—I can figure it out.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

4.1.5 Hanna’s Story: Reclaiming a Future Through Independence

Hanna’s experience at PTCB was deeply transformative. “I gained the skills and confidence to leave my parents’ home.” (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025). Before training, Hanna lived with family who cared for her but didn’t believe in her potential. “Being able to live independently and have the possibility of working one day was incredibly important to me.” (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

She recalled preparing a dinner for eight people as a breakthrough moment. “It was a positive and life-changing experience.” (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025). She described growing faster and more confident with each new skill.

Hanna also developed advocacy skills. “The advocacy skills I gained were the most empowering because they gave me the courage to change my living situation.” (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025). She emphasized how training helped her move from surviving to thriving. “I wanted to be independent, to work, and to develop the skills needed to survive and take care of myself.” (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

After graduating from PTCB, she became a mentor. “This has been a dream come true for me because I don’t want others to be trapped in what could have been my life.” (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

4.1.6 Scott’s Story: Building a Life of Self-Reliance and Leadership

Scott’s journey at PTCB brought him from student to teacher. “My parents are getting older… That is what motivated me to take the training because I wanted to be independent, be able to live on my own, and take care of myself.” (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025).

Scott, who is DeafBlind, described everyday independence with pride. “I do my own shopping… I go out for coffee; I even get my hair cut on my own.” (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025). These actions symbolized control over his own life.

Training built his confidence “twentyfold.” He added, “It allowed me to advocate for myself.” (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025). He eventually began teaching tech to blind students. “I’ve been able to share my knowledge—technology is a strong point—with others.” (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025).

One day, he cooked a meal for nine people. “The program allows you to learn independent living skills and allows you to gain confidence and take charge of your life.” (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025).

4.1.7 Wanda's Story: Unlearning, Relearning, and Becoming

Wanda, who lost her sight in adulthood, described the training at PTCB as life-changing. "I had to unlearn the way I was used to doing things… That was really difficult at first." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

Her biggest breakthrough was travel. "I didn't just want to go from my house to the store—I wanted to be able to travel anywhere in the world." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). With her trainers' help, she learned to navigate independently. "Before, I would have panicked. Now I feel confident figuring it out." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

She later moved cities and began exploring on her own. "Now, I do things like walk 30 minutes to the nail salon independently." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

One moment stood out: "I was terrified to cross a five-lane street. By the end of the program, I was crossing a six-lane street in downtown Victoria." She also took a solo holiday, stayed in a hotel, and went shopping. "I couldn't believe I had become that person." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

4.1.8 Silvia's Story: A Quiet but Steady Shift Toward Assurance

Silbia said she had always been independent, but that PTCB gave her a more solid foundation. "I have these extra skills incorporated into my unconscious that I use to manage my daily life." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

She described subtle but meaningful changes, like using a lighter, more effective cane and changing her technique on stairs. "These refinements might seem small, but they increased my comfort and control." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

“It was a culmination of little things—building or changing the skills I already had. This sort of learning helps you learn about yourself as a human; it’s not just about skills.” (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

Most of all, she left with a new sense of security. “If I lose more vision, it’s not going to be the end of the world. Now I have skills to prove that.” (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

4.1.9 Lucy’s Perspective: Recognizing Every Step as Success

Lucy, a former teacher at PTCB, emphasized that every student showed growth. “They became independent adults… Not looking for others to solve problems for them.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025). She described how students progressed from living at home to traveling alone, cooking, or staying in hotels.

She shared a story of one student who got locked out of her hotel room without a cane and still problem-solved her way to the front desk. “She didn’t panic.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

Lucy said, “Every student’s accomplishments were celebrated, regardless of whether they finished the course. No one feels like they failed.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

4.1.10 Vince’s Perspective: Confidence as the Ultimate Outcome

Vince, a Canadian teacher who now works in the US, reflected on how Structured Discovery builds real confidence. “Structured Discovery is person-centered and not prescriptive.” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

He spoke about students growing from no tech skills to creating Excel sheets and giving presentations. “Reading notes on their initial progress versus what they’re doing at the end shows real growth.” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

He added, “It’s critical to have as many blind professionals in the field as possible. This is our experience and our lives—we do this every day. We want our students to see that.” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

4.1.11 Jill’s Perspective: Transformation Through Ownership

Jill, another Canadian teacher working in the US, emphasized the importance of understanding what matters to each student. “It takes time to master skills, and it’s different for every student. In the end, it comes down to ownership.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

She described one student who had relied on his ex-wife. After training, he sold his house and moved to Thailand. “He said, ‘Never in my wildest dreams did I think I could do this.’” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

Another student questioned why he was learning to sew. Later, when his child’s toy ripped, he repaired it. “It was so profound.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

4.1.12 Theme Conclusion

Across all narratives, empowerment emerges as something earned through rigorous, immersive experiences. Whether through conquering a six-lane intersection, cooking for others, mastering technology, or navigating unfamiliar cities, participants gained confidence as a skill developed through structured risk-taking, practice, and support. The resulting accomplishments—big and small—caused ripple effects into their work, personal relationships, and goals for the future. As Chris summarized, “The sacrifice was absolutely worth it.” This

finding echoes the foundational philosophy of Structured Discovery, which emphasizes problem-solving, nonvisual skills, and experiential learning as tools for building self-confidence and independence (Maurer et al., 2006; Mino, 2011). It also aligns with Critical Disability Theory, which frames empowerment as a process of resisting ableist norms and reclaiming agency through practical skills and community-based mentorship (Minich, 2016; Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

4.2 Theme 2: Problem Solving and Hands-On Learning

4.2.1 Theme Introduction

One of the most striking and recurring insights to emerge from participant interviews was the transformative power of problem-solving and hands-on learning. This theme reflects how Structured Discovery promotes critical thinking, adaptive reasoning, and transferable skills through direct experience. Instead of providing blind students with predetermined answers or routes, the Structured Discovery approach emphasizes self-directed exploration, creativity, and learning through trial and error. Participants consistently described this process as a way to build practical skills while also developing lasting confidence and a mindset of self-efficacy that extended well beyond the training environment. This theme represented a shift from dependency to autonomy, and from fear to possibility. Although the journey could be challenging and frustrating at times, the hands-on nature of Structured Discovery empowered students to take control of their learning.

4.2.2 Chris's Perspective: More Than You could imagine

Chris, LCB student, captured the essence of Structured Discovery when he said, "Structured Discovery, in a nutshell, takes longer to get going than a traditional class where someone just gives you all the answers. But if you stick with it, you can achieve far more than

you ever imagined.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). His reflection highlights one of the core principles of the methodology: knowledge built through direct experience is deeply rooted. This approach taught Chris how to “figure out more than just how to get from point A to point B.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). The emphasis on learning from failure and adapting strategies encouraged him to treat mistakes as valuable learning opportunities. “When you figure something out yourself, you remember it—and that builds real confidence. That confidence is what gets you through when things change.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

4.2.3 Julie’s Perspective: Believing You can Figure It Out

Julie, LCB student, shared a story that illustrates how Structured Discovery reshaped her problem-solving mindset. “It helped so much. The master’s degree aside, even in mindset—it’s about believing you can figure something out. You can try all these things to get to the bottom of what’s causing your computer to malfunction or how to do a presentation.” (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). She recalled a moment on a rainy day in Ruston, Louisiana, when she was with another blind friend and both of them needed to go to different appointments. They didn’t have time to go together to both appointments, so she knew she needed to get there on her own. “I said, ‘You can’t come with me to mine,’ so I walked it. It was a confusing trek, but I totally figured it out. That wouldn’t have happened before training.” (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). For Julie, navigating independently was more than a practical achievement—it marked a turning point in her identity. She began to support others and stand up for herself. “If you’re applying for a job and someone says, ‘I don’t know how you’d do this,’ I’d say, ‘I can do this. This is how.’” (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Julie also described an experience at a recreation Camp in Colorado that highlighted how Structured Discovery affected her confidence and ability to teach others. During a buffet meal at the event, she and her husband, who was also blind, decided to use their skills rather than rely on help. “The drinks area was across the room—easy to find. My husband showed me where it was. He found the drink, poured a little bit to test what they all were. He said, ‘Ten feet to your right,’ so I went and got my drink.” (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). When a camper asked how she managed this, she offered to show him, walking him through the process. Eventually, many others followed her lead. “A third of everyone ended up getting drinks for themselves,” she said. “Really cool.” In this moment, her confidence became a source of encouragement for others, and problem-solving became a tool for collective empowerment. (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

This story shows how Structured Discovery promotes a shift in identity. Through the IPA approach, we can understand Julie’s experiences as deeply personal and transformative. She internalized the belief that she could find solutions in unfamiliar situations, and this belief shaped her approach to life.

4.2.4 Holly’s perspective: Skills for Life

Holly, former PTCB student., emphasized the unique qualities of Structured Discovery. “It’s definitely different from traditional Rehab—there’s less rigidity. But it still has structure. It’s just more flexible and adaptable.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). Holly explained how the model helped them develop skills for independent learning. “If there’s something I want to learn—like a route—I can ask someone to show me. But I also have the skills to figure it out myself.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). They described preparing to volunteer at a gallery and learning to navigate the local bus and train systems with

growing confidence. “I don’t need five lessons—I can figure it out.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

Holly also spoke about the challenges of mental mapping and understanding cardinal directions. The differences between their hometown, which used numbered streets, and Victoria, which used named streets, made orientation difficult at first. “We tried many methods, and that flexibility helped.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). Grocery shopping posed another learning curve, but experimentation and patience helped them build strategies that worked. Living in a smaller town now, Holly explained that keeping skills fresh through regular practice has been essential: “I’ve encountered barriers, like adapting techniques to different environments, but I keep applying the tools I learned.” (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

4.2.5 Jill’s Perspective: Taking Ownership

Instructors also emphasized how problem-solving is cultivated through structured experience and student ownership. Jill, one of the Canadians teaching in the US, explained her approach: “A hands-on approach is the most useful. Empowerment starts right away. You teach them a basic skill, then immediately let them practice and take ownership of it.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). She described the importance of stepping back once a student can safely navigate on their own. “If you’re constantly hovering, they don’t take ownership. They’ll revert back when they’re alone.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). Jill’s reflections demonstrate that students need space to apply their learning and build internal trust in their own capabilities.

4.2.6 Vince's Perspective: Finding the Motivation

Vince, one of the Canadians teaching in the US, explained his use of Socratic questioning to encourage active learning: "I ask, 'Given what you've learned, how will you figure this out?'" (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025). He collaborated with students to set monthly goals, review progress, and build plans that aligned with each student's vocational aspirations. His teaching style reflected deep respect for students' autonomy and personal motivations. "I try to find what is motivating to students by getting at their underlying desires—what they want to learn and why." (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

4.2.7 Scott's Perspective: Thinking Outside the Box and Building Skills

Scott, a former PTCB student who is DeafBlind, expressed the value of the problem-solving mindset succinctly: "Problem-solving, learning how to think outside the box is such an important part of the training. It's all an ongoing learning process." (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025). Silvia, PTCB student, described a gradual approach to travel training, where skills were built in stages—starting close to home and expanding outward. This method reflects how Structured Discovery promotes independence by layering skills over time and providing space to apply them meaningfully.

4.2.8 Wanda's Perspective: To Travel the World

Wanda, former PTCB student, reflected on how her travel and technology skills evolved. "I used to have trouble crossing streets straight, but my trainer taught me how to cross safely, even if not perfectly straight." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). She had previously struggled to use her MacBook, but through training, learned to navigate the screen independently. "Both travel and tech continue to help me in my professional life." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). She discussed the importance of adaptable skills and

explained how Structured Discovery gave her confidence. “I didn’t just want to go from my house to the store—I wanted to be able to travel anywhere in the world… I still get lost, but now I know how to get back.” (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

4.2.9 Lucy’s Perspective: Being Aware of Your Senses and Making Mental Maps

Lucy, former PTCB instructor, provided rich detail about her teaching approach. She highlighted the importance of orientation and sensory awareness: “Getting them to walk down the street not worrying about mobility—telling me what they are observing, what they’re smelling, what they’re feeling under their feet.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025). She taught cardinal directions, mental mapping, and how to identify street layouts like T-intersections. Lucy emphasized scaffolding—building skills in sequence before layering complexity. “Repetition of basic skills until they become second nature before moving on to the discovery part.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

Lucy described a student who was initially terrified of using an escalator. Through patient, repeated exposure and step-by-step practice, the student overcame that fear. “By the time she did it on her own, she did it. Then got her to do it again.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025). Lucy’s method of gradually increasing challenge, while ensuring safety and respect for the student’s pace, created a space for growth.

She also discussed the importance of creativity and adaptability in teaching and learning. “If one method of teaching isn’t working, be creative. Figure out—assume the problem is with my teaching, not their learning.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025). She encouraged students to explore and touch things, especially those who had been discouraged from doing so as children. “Some blind people aren’t encouraged to be creative—told to sit there, don’t move, don’t touch.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

4.2.10 Julie: It's Not Always Easy

Julie, LCB student, brings this theme to a close with emotional force: "If anyone can go through this program, they should. It's long-lasting—information, skills, techniques you never forget. I could be in the middle of a building, no one around, and think, 'Okay, let's explore.' So empowering." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). She acknowledged that the process isn't always easy. "Sometimes it's going to be a rough day. You're going to want to throw your cane across the room, but at the end of the day, what you get out of it is way more than the time you put into it." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

4.2.11 Theme Conclusion

The stories in this theme show that Structured Discovery builds more than blindness skills. Through active, hands-on learning and guided problem-solving, students develop resilience, confidence, and a capacity for creative action in the face of unfamiliar situations. These skills extend into every aspect of life. This is similar to Mino's (2011) description of Structured Discovery as a model rooted in problem-solving and experiential learning, which promotes independent thinking and adaptability. Additionally, the emphasis on student ownership and internal motivation reflects constructivist approaches to learning, where knowledge is built through active engagement and personal discovery (Maurer et al., 2006). These findings also resonate with Critical Disability Theory's call to move beyond prescriptive rehabilitation and toward models that respect autonomy and embrace diverse ways of navigating the world (Minich, 2016; Devlin & Pothier, 2006).

4.3 Theme Three: Role Models, Peer Mentoring, and Lived Experience

4.3.1 Theme Introduction

One of the most distinctive features of the structured discovery approach is its focus on learning through lived experience, role modelling, and peer mentorship. This theme arose repeatedly across interviews with both participants and teachers in the structured discovery model. Rather than learning passively from sighted professionals, students described an immersive environment where blind instructors, mentors, and peers modelled independence and problem-solving in action. Participants emphasized that having blind teachers who had "been there" made the training more credible, empowering, and transformative. Peer mentoring was not seen as a formal requirement, but rather a natural outgrowth of community-based learning and mutual encouragement. As one participant put it, "I wasn't a blind person alone—I had role models in my trainers who were doing amazing things." The emphasis on shared experience allowed for more than the transfer of technical skills; it facilitated deep trust, emotional support, and belief in what was possible.

4.3.2 Chris: It's About Leadership

Chris, LCB student, spoke powerfully about the impact of seeing blind people in leadership. He was initially interested in the program because of the opportunity to work in the field of blindness education, but what left a lasting impression was witnessing blind professionals leading with authority and purpose. "What drew me in was seeing blind people in positions of leadership," he said. "At first, I was looking for employment benefits, but I quickly saw the personal benefits too—and the potential to help others." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). Chris's story illustrates the power of visibility and

representation. He received training from blind instructors and internalized their confidence and leadership.

The effect of blind instructors went beyond inspiration; it established a learning environment grounded in trust and belief. “Every teacher either was blind or, if sighted, believed in the skills so much that they wore sleep shades while teaching,” Chris noted. “That said more than a thousand words ever could—they truly believed it could be done.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). These demonstrations of faith in non-visual methods created what Chris described as an “empowering” experience. His tech instructor—a blind professional—guided him through preparing a PowerPoint presentation, something Chris never imagined he could do. “Seeing people living out what they were teaching made me realize how different this training was from anything I had experienced in Canada.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

4.3.3 Julie: Personal Journeys of Growth

Similarly, Julie, who also trained and later taught at LCB, described how sharing her lived experiences enriched the learning environment for others. “If a student got lost, I’d say, ‘That’s great!’ You learn way more when you’re lost.” (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). This perspective reflects a key principle of structured discovery: mistakes and disorientation are not failures but opportunities for growth. Julie’s ability to normalize and encourage those moments shows how lived experience shapes pedagogy within this model. Her approach allowed students to learn from her own vulnerabilities, creating a feedback loop of experiential learning.

Julie’s reflections also highlight how fieldwork and immersion deepened her ability to teach. “Going through immersion added a lot more dimension to being able to teach,” she said.

"I'd say, 'I've been through it,' or 'Keep this in the back of your mind.'" (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025). Through this process, her knowledge became not just technical, but personal. She embodied the model's core belief that personal journeys of growth are essential tools for teaching.

4.3.4 Holly: A Culture of Mutual Aid

Holly, former PTCB student, offered insight into how informal peer mentoring developed organically in the program. "I've shared what I learned informally. When someone's doing something, I might offer tips. We help each other by passing along what we've learned." (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). For Holly, this peer support was not limited to the classroom—it became part of a broader culture of mutual aid. At the same time, their trainers at PTCB intentionally created personalized lesson plans and stepped back to let them take the lead. "Hearing how other blind people do things gave me role models and reduced my internalized ableism." (Holly, personal communication, April 11, 2025). This acknowledgement that structured discovery helps dismantle internalized oppression shows the profound emotional impact of learning alongside peers and mentors who have faced and transcended similar barriers.

4.3.5 Silvia: A Learning Exchange

Silvia, another former PTCB student, articulated the unique value of blind instructors clearly: "Having blind people doing training for other blind people is inextricably baked into the structured discovery model." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025). She emphasized the trust and respect this creates, noting that the trainers cultivated "a peer-to-peer environment. It's a teamwork approach, not just top-down instruction." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025). The collaborative and horizontal structure of learning at PTCB made the experience feel more authentic and supportive.

Silvia described the learning as reciprocal, rooted in real-world experience and mutual problem-solving: "They help you find solutions and work together to find what works for you. It comes down to the quality of instructors—it's an exchange, not just information delivery." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

4.3.6 Scott: The Importance of Blind Mentors

Scott, former PTCB student, also talked about the importance of blind mentors in his learning experience. "Most empowering was being able to help the other students," he shared. "I really like helping others." (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025). For Scott, the ability to mentor peers as he learned became a source of personal pride and growth. He spoke highly of the role his blind instructors played, saying, "The fact that they were blind does help. It's important to be around blind teachers. It's important to have blind mentors." (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025).

4.3.7 Wanda: People Who Truly Understand

Wanda, former PTCB student, described a similar experience: "The most empowering part was that all of my trainers were blind. In other programs, the trainers are usually fully sighted." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). For Wanda, being taught by people who truly understood her experience as a blind person created a sense of validation. "Working with people who were just like me and truly understood what I was going through made a huge difference. I felt heard and understood." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). The trainers modelled skills, but also hope and confidence, which helped Wanda envision herself in future roles she once thought unattainable.

4.3.8 Vince: Lived Experience and Collective Knowledge

Vince, a Canadian teaching in the US, reflected on how the model is inherently shaped by lived experience. “Our lived experience and collective knowledge as blind people make a difference,” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025), he said. His words demonstrate that structured discovery is not a detached pedagogy—it is a community practice grounded in the realities of blindness.

4.3.9 Jill: Vulnerability, Humanity, and Authenticity

Jill, another Canadian teaching in the US, explained that role modelling is “very specific to structured discovery.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). She believes it’s not just about skill transmission—it’s about vulnerability, humanity, and authenticity. “People often think they have to be perfect, but students want to see that you’re human. Sharing your own lived experiences is really important for connecting with your students.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). Jill emphasized that teachers must “be students first”—that is, they must go through their own process of skill-building and growth in order to authentically teach. “Going through the process of overcoming challenges makes you a better teacher,” she said. (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

4.3.10 Lucy: The Power of Proximity

Finally, Lucy, former PTCB teacher, put it simply: “It’s important to learn from peers. The model helps you see it can be done—someone doing it with the same challenges you have.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025). Her statement reflects the power of proximity—when students see themselves in their instructors, they begin to see their own potential more clearly.

4.3.11 Theme Conclusion

The structured discovery model is deeply relational. Participants in this study consistently discussed how the presence of blind instructors and peer mentors transformed their learning experience from transactional to transformational. These role models were walking examples of what was possible. Through modelling, peer exchange, and authentic connection, students learned skills and also developed belief in themselves and a vision for their own futures. As Wanda put it, "I wasn't a blind person alone—I had role models in my trainers who were doing amazing things." The significance of lived experience in structured discovery is the foundation and the fuel of the learning process. This theme reflects the broader emphasis in Structured Discovery literature on mentorship and modelling as essential tools for empowerment and skill-building (Bell, 2011; Salisbury, 2018). It also echoes Critical Disability Theory's prioritization of lived experience, mutual support, and resistance to top-down, deficit-based models of rehabilitation (Minich, 2016; Devlin & Pothier, 2006). By focusing on blind leadership and peer-to-peer learning, Structured Discovery challenges ableist assumptions and promotes a pedagogy grounded in authenticity and possibility.

4.4 Theme Four: Self-Advocacy and Agency

4.4.1 Theme Introduction

A strong theme that emerged across many of the interviews was the role of self-advocacy and the development of personal agency. Participants reflected on how their training helped them shift from internalized doubt and passive acceptance to active, informed, and empowered engagement with the world around them. For many, structured discovery training was the first environment where they felt truly encouraged to speak up for themselves, advocate for their rights, and claim space—physically and socially.

Students learned self-advocacy through formal lessons but also through the lived experience of navigating challenges, being pushed outside one's comfort zone, and engaging in peer discussions and support. The theme is closely tied to empowerment but focuses more specifically on how participants used their voices, made demands, and challenged the low expectations imposed on them by others or society.

4.4.2 Chris: Higher Expectations

Chris, LCB student, shared how structured discovery taught him to hold higher expectations—for himself and also for others. This helped him become a more effective advocate in personal and professional settings:

"Once you know what you're capable of, it becomes easier to go into meetings and advocate. At my CNIB job, I pushed for raised expectations because it felt like participants were being given trophies just for showing up instead of being encouraged to pursue real learning goals. Some of my students didn't like that I pushed them, but the ones who stuck with me accomplished much more. That same approach fed into my own self-advocacy. I learned to be respectful but firm. That's something Canada really needs." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

Chris's statement shows how learning and teaching structured discovery created a feedback loop—his own journey toward advocacy enabled him to support others in finding their voices, and vice versa.

4.4.3 Hanna: Learning to Advocate for oneself

For some participants, like Hanna from PTCB, the process of developing advocacy skills was nurtured in an environment of shared experiences and mutual encouragement:

"The supportive conversations we had, where we talked each other through difficulties and learned self-advocacy skills, were invaluable." (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025).Hanna also spoke candidly about the emotional complexity of advocacy, admitting that while advocating for others came naturally to her, advocating for herself could be more difficult: "I sometimes struggle with self-confidence and feel small. However, if I'm asked to advocate for someone else, I'm more willing to step up." (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

4.4.4 Julie: Learning to be Assertive

Julie, LCB student, described how assertiveness emerged from repeated exposure to real-world situations where she had to take initiative. She recalled an experience with a buffet—a challenge that became a moment of learning and public demonstration of blind competence: "The biggest barrier is other people's lower expectations for blind people. For the most part, going through training, the more you apply the skills and stay calm, the better. There can be apprehension and worry—like with the buffet. But as the week progressed, people got it. They didn't ask us anymore. The sighted people were a good audience for that." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

She noted how learning to be assertive helped her and also impacted bystanders, influencing their expectations and potentially shifting broader societal perceptions: "If you can try to be friendly and assertive—it helps. I learned to be more assertive. Knowing people are watching me and then seeing the expectations of what blind people can do go up—that's very exciting." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Julie's description demonstrates the double role blind people often play—navigating their own growth while also educating the public around them, even unintentionally.

4.4.5 Silvia: Advocacy A Community Responsibility

Silvia, a participant from PTCB, emphasized the importance of sharing what she had learned with others. Her advocacy was rooted in community and a belief in mutual support: "Definitely. I'm the sort of person who supports information sharing, mutual aid, and peer support. The skills I learned from PTCB I've passed along to others. Even when I was working at the Disability Resource Centre, I referred people to PTCB. I would say, 'This is what I learned—you could give it a try.' I also support sighted people who don't understand what it's like to be blind by helping them understand." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

This testimonial demonstrates the ripple effect of empowerment and advocacy training. For Silvia, advocacy was a personal development milestone but also a community responsibility. Her willingness to educate blind and sighted people reflects a broader ethos of empowerment, rooted in the values of the structured discovery model.

4.4.6 Scott: The Internal Shift

Scott, another participant from PTCB, gave a powerful description of how training affected his ability to self-advocate: "My confidence has increased twentyfold. It allowed me to advocate for myself." (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025).

Such a direct statement suggests a profound internal shift, one that might be hard to quantify but is easy to feel in the tone and certainty of his voice. The ability to speak up for oneself was repeatedly identified by participants as a clear outcome of the training process.

4.4.7 Wanda: Real-World Impact

Wanda's story adds a compelling example of direct, tangible results that stem from her self-advocacy. Before training, she had difficulty asserting herself. But after working with a

passionate trainer who modelled advocacy, she successfully campaigned for a significant public infrastructure change in her community:

“Before the program, if someone told me no, I’d just go quiet. But I learned why self-advocacy is important. One of my trainers was very passionate about advocacy, and she taught me how to stand up for myself. For example, I got the city of Toronto to make all the crossings near me audible. It took persistence, but I learned not to give up.” (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

4.4.8 Lucy: Cultivating Agency

Lucy, former PTCB teacher, emphasized how advocacy is inherently linked to agency. She distinguished between surface-level visibility and deep empowerment: “Give students agency—for blind people to have agency is critical. With advocacy, often the approach is just to teach sighted people about blind people’s abilities. But we need to have agency—we are in control of our environment, make decisions for ourselves, keep ourselves safe, know what’s happening.” (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

4.4.9 Theme Conclusion

The narratives in this theme illustrate how self-advocacy, when cultivated in environments rooted in empowerment, respect, and real-world experience, can lead to significant personal transformation and broader social impact. The structured discovery model uniquely positions blind people as leaders and agents of change. This training marked a turning point for the participants—from being passive recipients of help to being assertive, strategic, and informed advocates for themselves and others. This reflects the model’s grounding in critical pedagogy and its emphasis on fostering agency through practical skill-building and experiential learning (Maurer et al., 2006; Mino, 2011). It also reinforces the goals of Critical Disability Theory,

which calls for shifting power to disabled individuals and challenging the structural barriers and low expectations that often limit their participation (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Minich, 2016). As participants moved from silence to self-assertion, they exemplified the liberatory potential of rehabilitation models that prioritize voice, leadership, and collective action.

4.5 Theme 5: Non-Visual Techniques

4.5.1 Theme Introduction

Non-visual techniques form the core of the Structured Discovery model; they are foundational, identity-affirming skills that enable blind people to move through the world with confidence and competence. This theme explores how participants and teachers experienced the value of eliminating vision during training and learning to trust their other senses. Through these immersive practices, participants described transformations in their functional abilities but also in their mental frameworks around blindness. Participants described the use of sleep shades, often a contentious point in traditional rehabilitation models, as a crucial element of confidence-building. Participants conveyed a shift in both internal narrative and external practice as they came to see non-visual techniques as sources of liberation rather than limitation.

4.5.2 Silvia: A Shift in Identity

Silvia, former PTCB student, articulated how she now incorporates non-visual skills into everyday life even though she still has some usable vision. “I learned that I can use nonvisual skills if I don’t feel like turning the light on. I don’t always turn the light on—I sometimes keep the light off and use those skills.” (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025). This choice signals a shift in identity. Her words suggest a growing trust in non-visual methods as reliable, empowering tools that she could opt into, even when vision remained available.

This transformation was also intertwined with her evolving relationship to fear and uncertainty about the future. “Because of the nature of my vision, I know I could lose all of it in the future. It’s given me a sense of comfort and reassurance that I’ve learned these things.” (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025). Learning non-visual techniques was an act of agency and pre-emptive resilience: “Even if I don’t need them now, I can expand when I need to. In patches of darkness at night, I use the skills I learned from PTCB.” (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025). Her use of the word “expand” evokes growth, not decline, portraying blindness training as a process of building capacity rather than compensating for loss. The training created psychological safety and a sense of preparedness: “Losing vision is scary, so being more prepared helps.” (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

4.5.3 Jill: Humility and Openness

Jill, a sighted Canadian teacher who got her masters in structured discovery cane travel teaching at the Louisiana Tech University Institute on Blindness and now teaches at a centre in the US, was the only sighted person interviewed for this study. She underwent over 800 hours of immersion under sleep shades and experienced firsthand what it means to navigate daily tasks non-visually: “At the start of the program, I did four months of immersion. Before you learn how to teach, you are a student. I spent four months under sleep shades learning Braille, home management, travel, shopping, and technology.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). Her description shows the humility and openness required of instructors, especially sighted ones, in entering this world.

Jill offered a critical insight into why vision must be deliberately set aside in training. “We use sleep shades for training, and that can cause resistance for some people. But one of the foundations of Structured Discovery is doing everything non-visually.” (Jill, personal

communication, April 4, 2025). Her reflections point to a tension between common assumptions and the Structured Discovery approach. She explained, “Some people think we don’t want them to ever use residual vision. That’s not true—we want them to look at a rainbow, not at the ground to make sure they don’t trip.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). This reframing shifts the focus from denying vision to prioritizing safety, independence, and mastery. Her critique of traditional rehabilitation models was pointed: “In traditional methods, they always try to maximize vision. But people have already maximized vision. It’s not efficient—that’s why they’re here.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). In this analysis, vision is treated like a calculator: useful, but not sufficient for conceptual understanding or real-world adaptability. “You need a foundation of non-visual skills. Then you can double-check with vision… You’re not restricted if the power goes out, or if there’s glare. You can still function.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

4.5.4 Vince: A Lifelong Commitment

Vince, another Canadian teacher who works in the US, expressed this perspective. Although Vince has light perception, he often practices full immersion under blindfold: “Even though I have good structured discovery skills and still have some light perception, it’s amazing how much I use this residual vision.” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025). His awareness of this unconscious reliance prompted a conscious choice to return to non-visual training. “So, I do immersion under blindfold—cooking, braille—and I make time to read Braille every day. Having that focus is critical.” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025). For Vince, immersion was not a temporary exercise but a lifelong commitment to refining and sustaining his skills. This practice integrates professional expertise with personal discipline and a respect for blindness as a way of being, not a condition to be worked around.

He emphasized the psychological benefit of learning through non-visual methods: “Doing things completely non-visually is critical. Knowing you can do something non-visually—even if your vision decreases—gives you confidence.” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025). This confidence, once internalized, became a way to perceive everyday activities: “You learn to rely on your other senses. You ask, ‘What is my cane telling me?’” (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

4.5.5 Theme Conclusion

Participants described more than a set of techniques but a shift in worldview. Sleep shades and non-visual strategies ultimately became the source of confidence and self-reliance. Structured Discovery redefines blindness; it is not a problem to be minimized through residual vision, instead it is a unique sensory modality that, with the right training, can support full and independent participation in the world. For those interviewed, learning to rely on non-visual cues transformed fear into readiness, and reoriented the meaning of independence from “doing it like a sighted person” to “doing it competently as a blind person.” This reflects the Structured Discovery model’s deep alignment with experiential learning theories and its prioritization of skill-building through non-visual methods (Maurer et al., 2006; Mino, 2011). It also challenges traditional vision-centered rehabilitation, which often emphasizes maximizing residual sight rather than cultivating adaptive strategies (Markowitz, 2006; Gold, Zuvela, & Hodge, 2006). By affirming blindness as a valid and capable identity, Structured Discovery echoes Critical Disability Theory’s call to dismantle ableist norms and expand definitions of competence and independence (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Minich, 2016).

4.6 Theme Six: Limitations of Traditional Rehabilitation

4.6.1 Theme Introduction

The shared critique of traditional blindness rehabilitation programs in Canada and the United States emerged as a powerful pattern in participant interviews. Participants described these conventional methods as limited in scope, overly prescriptive, under-resourced, and often reliant on visual techniques. In contrast to the empowering, immersive, and individualized nature of Structured Discovery, many participants described traditional programs as top-down, short-term, and overly focused on prescriptive routes or vision-maximization strategies. Participants often spoke from firsthand experience, having gone through these programs prior to engaging in Structured Discovery, and they emphasized the stark difference between the two approaches.

4.6.2 Chris: Night and Day

Chris, a graduate of the Louisiana Center for the Blind, vividly articulated the transformation he experienced:

"It was a night-and-day difference. LCB was an intensive residential program where I was immersed for at least eight hours a day, five days a week. Before that, I'd only had a couple of hours a week or even a month, and often it was my mom helping me learn skills... at LCB My blindness was not front and center, and I learned that I could really do it." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

Several other participants also mentioned that traditional rehab failed to provide enough consistency, depth, or empowerment, especially those who began with short, scattered, or route-based instruction.

Chris's account also shows a crucial shift in how he understood himself; he wasn't just someone learning skills, he was also someone capable of integrating those skills into his everyday life. This signals a deepened confidence that traditional rehab had not created.

His remarks reflect a wider pattern where rigid rules and limited tools in traditional programs discouraged independence and choice—core outcomes that Structured Discovery intentionally cultivates.

4.6.3 Holly: Systemic Barriers

Holly, a graduate of PTCB, noted the long waitlists common in traditional Canadian programs, which suggested systemic barriers that make it difficult to access meaningful support in a timely way.

4.6.4 Hanna: Power Should Be in the Hands of Learners

Hanna, former PTCB student, elaborated further on the limitations of traditional methods: "The cane travel method they taught in traditional rehab was very route-focused... It required me to return to the instructor to learn a new route whenever I needed to go somewhere new. There was a huge waitlist to see an instructor. They only allowed a certain type of cane, which wasn't the longer-style cane... Structured Discovery puts more power in the hands of blind teachers and learners." (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025). Hanna's words demonstrate the dependency created by prescriptive methods, which contrast sharply with the problem-solving focus of Structured Discovery.

4.6.5 Julie: Transferable Skills Is Important

Julie, LCB student, also stressed the lack of transferability in traditional training; she critiqued her earlier O&M training as overly specific and narrow: "There isn't a lot of skill-building... It's more like, 'This is how you would cross this specific street.' There isn't a lot of

skill-building, which builds a lot of dependence on them and doesn't allow you to branch out on your own." (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

4.6.6 Silvia and Scott: There's More Than One Way

Silvia and Scott, both graduates of the PTCB, brought attention to the rigidity and low expectations of traditional rehabilitation they experienced during their schooling years. Scott commented, "Root training was just A to B. I taught myself technology and Braille... structured discovery really served my needs." (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025).
Silvia mentioned the difference in approach between sighted instructors and blind instructors who shared practical lived knowledge, noting that traditional programs often followed "a standard set of skills" and conveyed an implicit message of compliance: "This is the way; this is how you should do it." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025). In contrast, she appreciated the flexibility and mutual respect offered through Structured Discovery, where multiple approaches were welcomed.

4.6.7 Wanda: The Importance of Immersion and Autonomy

Wanda, former PTCB student, stressed that traditional rehabilitation was too intermittent and insufficient to meet real-life needs: "I didn't want one session and then have to wait three months for the next... Most traditional programs focus on going from point A to point B, but they don't teach problem-solving, using landmarks, or orienting with cardinal directions." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

She added that she really needed immersion—not just mobility from home to store, but the confidence to travel "anywhere in the world." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). Her perspective exemplifies the broader philosophical divide; traditional programs

emphasize basic functioning, but Structured Discovery emphasizes autonomy, lifelong skill-building, and self-determination.

4.6.8 Jill: Importance of Independence and Ownership

Teachers who had experience with both models provided further insight. Jill, a Canadian instructor in the US, spoke about the inadequacies of traditional rehabilitation models. She critiqued their fixation on medical conditions and their lack of immersion: “Many blindness-skills teacher training programs focus on eye diseases, but when you’re working with people, that doesn’t matter... I did a whole research project on the differences between two programs. One gave only 80 hours under shades; I had over 800 hours... That’s a drastic difference.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

Jill said that Structured Discovery's hands-on philosophy promotes independence and ownership. Traditional models, by contrast, often create dependence and limit mastery: “In traditional methods, they always try to maximize vision... Mastery only happens when vision is eliminated from the start.” (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). Her reflections reveal that philosophy and training methodology are deeply intertwined. Structured Discovery requires instructors to fully experience blindness techniques themselves—an immersion approach that informs their teaching. Jill’s dual perspective—as a sighted instructor immersed in the blind community—offers a rare perspective into the impact of hands-on training. Her insight highlights how lived experience and immersive practice can transform teaching philosophies.

4.6.9 Vince: There Must Be a Student-Lead Approach

Vince, one of the Canadian teachers in the US, contrasted his experience with a more custodial and hierarchical approach to what he found in Structured Discovery: “I got into a blindness teacher training program, but it turned out to be very custodial and top-down. It wasn’t

the way I wanted to teach... Even though I came out of the more traditional model, the Structured Discovery centre helped me take my certification and work on building structured discovery skills." (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

Vince highlighted how traditional teacher trainer programs relied on rigid curricula and set benchmarks, with little room for philosophical or student-centered learning. His comments, along with those of Jill and Lucy, show a significant philosophical rift between traditional models and the more empowering, student-led approach of Structured Discovery.

4.6.10 Lucy: Allow for a Diversity of Voices

Lucy, former PTCB teacher, shared her own evolution as a blind instructor. She recalled being taught routes and techniques by sighted instructors, and how this created limitations: "Some students who had mobility training knew how to get from A to B one way. The problem with routes—no choices... To be good at these things with no sight, under sleep shades, you need practice. Regular training." (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025). She emphasized that peer training and multiple perspectives are crucial: "There's not only one way to do something. Recognize lots of ways... It may not be your chosen way, but it works for them." (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

This diversity of voices demonstrates a shared critique: traditional rehabilitation often limits the potential of blind people by prioritizing narrow goals, visual methods, and minimal training. Structured Discovery is characterized by immersive practice, problem-solving, respect for individual learning styles, and the centreing of blind people's knowledge and experience. The structured discovery approach does meet practical needs, but it also promotes a confident mindset and the ability to learn independently, long after training ends.

4.6.11 Theme Conclusion

The narratives shared by participants illustrate a widespread dissatisfaction with traditional blindness rehabilitation programs, which participants often described as fragmented, inflexible, and disempowering. In contrast, participants described Structured Discovery as a model that promotes autonomy, confidence, and the ability to navigate the world through problem-solving and hands-on learning. This theme demonstrates a collective call for a shift in philosophy and practice toward approaches that trust in the capacity of blind people, value immersive training, and recognize multiple ways of learning. Participants' reflections suggest that meaningful rehabilitation must go beyond vision-centered instruction and route memorization to support lifelong independence and self-direction. These critiques align with scholarly analyses that highlight how traditional models often reinforce dependence and marginalization by overemphasizing residual vision and prescriptive instruction (Markowitz, 2006; Hersh, 2020; Penrod et al., 2020). Conversely, Structured Discovery embodies a more empowering approach consistent with Critical Disability Theory, which challenges deficit-based assumptions and instead promotes experiential learning, autonomy, and respect for lived experience (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Minich, 2016; Mino, 2011).

4.7 Theme Seven: Challenges with Structured Discovery

4.7.1 Theme Introduction

Participants overwhelmingly praised the Structured Discovery model for its empowering and transformative impact; however, several important challenges emerged in the interviews. These challenges ranged from structural barriers, such as a shortage of qualified instructors and funding issues, to more personal obstacles related to learning style, mental health, and societal pressures. This theme illustrates the complexities that can arise even within a successful model

of rehabilitation. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the data demonstrates how students and teachers of Structured Discovery experienced, interpreted, and navigated these challenges.

4.7.2 Chris: More Availability and Quality of Teachers

One of the most frequently cited challenges concerned the availability and quality of teachers. Chris, LCB student, described the difficulties of staff shortages and underfunding: “The only thing I would say—and this is a chronic issue across the field—is the shortage of qualified teachers. The pay is often very poor, especially in places like Louisiana… and Sometimes roles can’t be filled quickly.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). He said if there is a shortage of staff, this affects the student-to-teacher ratio and overall experience. He emphasized the broader systemic issue: better compensation and support are needed to attract and retain talented teachers.

4.7.3 Jill: Need for more Teacher Training

Chris’s observation was echoed by Jill, a Canadian teacher in the US, who stressed the importance of “train the trainer” initiatives: “There’s not enough out there about how to train future teachers. If I can teach others who will go on to teach even more people, I can have a much greater impact.” (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

Jill discussed the ripple effect of not having enough qualified instructors; she pointed to the need for a more robust teacher training infrastructure to sustain and expand Structured Discovery programs.

4.7.4 Chris: Time and Intensity

Several students, including Chris, described the physical and emotional intensity of the training itself: "The training was incredibly tiring—mentally and physically draining." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

"It can be hard to press pause on your life for a year. If you have people depending on you, it might feel selfish… But if I could go back and tell myself—and others—anything, it would be that this training is worth it." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). These quotes reflect a tension between personal responsibilities and the demands of immersive, full-time training. Chris's experience reveals an internal conflict that many adult learners may face—balancing self-development with familial or societal expectations.

4.7.5 Hanna: Acceptance Different Learning Styles

Other students encountered barriers due to differences in learning style. Hanna, former PTCB student, explained that although the nonvisual travel techniques were taught effectively, they did not align with her spatial processing needs: "There was nothing wrong with the way we were taught… However, my memory doesn't build mental maps well. Instead, the streets turned into a nightmare maze of twists and intersections." (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Hanna expressed a strong desire to use GPS technology to support her learning, which was not available at the time due to the Structured Discovery principle of first developing nonvisual orientation skills without reliance on tech. Hanna's reflections suggest a need to acknowledge diversity in cognitive processing and learning preferences: "It's important to recognize different learning styles and to remain open to different perspectives." (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

This insight points to an evolving dialogue within Structured Discovery programs about how to maintain rigorous standards while respecting different paths to independence.

4.7.6 Julie: More individualization

Similarly, Julie, LCB student, described emotional and mental health barriers that were sometimes overlooked in training: “Some instructors really want you to succeed and push you so hard to do everything you can. But sometimes… mental health issues, other disabilities… weren’t always acknowledged. There could be more work in individualizing.” (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Julie appreciated the instructors’ dedication but emphasized that a one-size-fits-all approach could fail to accommodate complex needs. She also noted anxiety related to travel training: “It was more about the anxiety part of travel—terrifying… Sometimes they come at you so strong. You have to go into it with the best attitude possible—be positive.” (Julie, personal communication, April 7, 2025).

Her perspective reveals a nuanced understanding of the training—while it was beneficial, the psychological toll was significant.

4.7.7 Silvia and Wanda: Teacher and Student dynamic

Silvia, a student at PTCB, pointed to the relational nature of instruction: “It comes down to the quality of instructors—it’s an exchange, not just information delivery.” (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025).

Wanda, another former PTCB student, also expressed this view, clarifying that any concerns she had were about individual trainers, not the overall program. These reflections demonstrate the importance of the teacher-student dynamic and reinforce that effective Structured Discovery training depends not just on the model itself but on how it is delivered.

4.7.8 Vince: Need for Adaptability and Flexibility

Instructors like Vince and Jill expressed similar concerns from their perspective. Vince described working with a student who resisted sleep shades and training methods. He explained the importance of adapting goals to the student's readiness: "We didn't have outcomes. We asked: 'What are we going to do?' We modified the goals to make them relevant, so the person was happy, and the goals were realistic." (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

Vince's comments reflect a balance between high expectations and flexible teaching, where methods must meet the student where they are.

4.7.9 Jill: Importance of Being Person-Centred

Similarly, Jill discussed how Structured Discovery needs to be understood as adaptable, not rigid: "People sometimes think it's only for the elite blind. That's not true. Many people with different disabilities can do it—it's about having the right training to support them." (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). She provided vivid examples of students with multiple disabilities, trauma histories, or mobility challenges and emphasized how she tailored outcomes without lowering standards.

4.7.10 Theme Conclusion

These testimonies show that the Structured Discovery model is powerful but not immune to difficulty. The challenges—whether due to a lack of teachers, the intensity of the training, differing cognitive styles, or unaddressed mental health concerns—show the need for flexibility, personalization, and structural investment. Participants and teachers emphasized that the model must remain open, inclusive, and responsive to individual needs. These voices call for continued evolution of the Structured Discovery approach to ensure that its empowering potential is accessible to all blind people, regardless of background or circumstance. These findings are

consistent with critiques in the literature that call for stronger instructor training pipelines and sustainable funding structures to support high-quality blindness rehabilitation (Griffin-Shirley et al., 2021; Bell & Mino, 2011). They also align with Critical Disability Theory's emphasis on the importance of honoring diverse lived experiences and challenging rigid systems that fail to accommodate intersecting needs (Minich, 2016; Ned et al., 2022). For Structured Discovery to maintain its empowering foundation, it must continue to embrace adaptability and person-centered practice while upholding its core values.

4.8 Theme Eight: The Canadian Context

4.8.1 Theme Introduction

This final theme focuses on the experiences of Canadian participants navigating structural and systemic barriers to accessing structured discovery training. While interviewees praised the model itself, they discussed how its implementation within Canada revealed critical limitations, including lack of funding, infrastructure, and government support. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, several patterns emerged that illustrate the deeply personal toll of inadequate rehabilitation opportunities, as well as the resourcefulness and persistence of those who sought training regardless of the hurdles. A strong contrast was drawn between the opportunities available to blind people in the United States and the much more limited pathways in Canada.

4.8.2 Chris: The Burdon of Being Canadian

For Chris, who travelled to the Louisiana Center for the Blind (LCB) for training, the journey was marked by resilience and creativity. He described the financial strain of self-funding his participation, relying on credit cards and personal savings. "As a Canadian, I had to really do my own thing," he said. (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). Despite facing

challenges near the end of his training, he found ways to persist, supported in part by LCB's willingness to help him navigate student visa requirements and explore creative funding options. "They really took on the burden of me being Canadian," he reflected. (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). In his view, blind Americans benefit from a system of support and opportunity that is not readily available to their Canadian counterparts.

Several participants described returning to Canada after experiencing structured discovery training in the US with a sense of both inspiration and disillusionment. "When I came back to Canada, I was on fire," Chris recalled. (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). But over time, he found himself discouraged by the low expectations and patronizing attitudes that were more pervasive in his home country. In his words, "Here, [my blindness] was the focus of every interaction. Social interactions, church, even employment—everything felt different." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). These observations speak to the deeper cultural differences that structured discovery training had helped him recognize and resist.

This contrast extended into advocacy efforts. Chris noted that, "At my CNIB job, I pushed for raised expectations because it felt like participants were being given trophies just for showing up." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025). His experience in the US had created a new level of assertiveness and belief in meaningful skill-building. "That same approach fed into my own self-advocacy. I learned to be respectful but firm. That's something Canada really needs." (Chris, personal communication, March 30, 2025).

4.8.3 Hanna: Financial Barriers

Other Canadian participants shared similar sentiments, especially regarding the cost and inaccessibility of US-based training. Hanna, who trained at PTCB in Canada, noted that "PTCB

was the only program of its kind available in Canada." (Hanna, personal communication, April 7, 2025). While she had explored the possibility of training in the US, the approximate $45,000 Canadian cost made it unfeasible. She tried to advocate with both the federal and provincial governments for support, but her efforts were unsuccessful. As a result, her only option was to attend PTCB—a program she found transformative, though significantly underfunded and unable to offer the same level of immersion as US centres.

4.8.4 Silvia: Facilities and Funding

Participants acknowledged that while PTCB provided strong training in many areas, the centre dealt with significant resource constraints. Silvia, former PTCB student, commented on the need for broader experiences and additional instructors: "We need more variety of experiences to create a well-rounded, holistic approach. That takes funding." (Silvia, personal communication, April 5, 2025). She noted, for example, that PTCB once used a community kitchen but lacked a permanent facility for teaching cooking, a key component of blindness skills training. Her comments showed the importance of physical space and equipment in providing comprehensive instruction.

4.8.5 Holly: More Time

Holly, a former PTCB student, suggested areas for improvement specific to the Canadian model, including more time devoted to learning the skills. She explained that while the training was highly effective, the condensed schedule sometimes limited opportunities for deeper practice and reflection. In her view, a longer or more intensive program would allow students to build stronger confidence and reinforce complex skills such as cane travel and problem-solving. Holly also noted that the shorter duration of Canadian programs, compared to those offered in the United States, may reflect differences in funding and resources rather than student ability or

interest. Expanding the time commitment, she suggested, could bring the Canadian model more in line with the immersive nature of Structured Discovery training as it was originally developed.

4.8.6 Wanda: Provincial Restrictions

Wanda, former PTCB student, described the difficulties of accessing PTCB from Ontario. "The biggest challenges weren't from the program itself but from dealing with the Ontario government," she shared. (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). "They didn't understand why I had to go all the way to BC for training." (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025). Despite these barriers, Wanda, like others, said the training "changed [her] life for the better," and she now advocates for more such centres across the country. (Wanda, personal communication, April 18, 2025).

4.8.7 Scott: Local Options

Scott, former PTCB student, mentioned this call for expansion, noting, "It would be nice if blind people had a choice. For example, if someone lived in New Brunswick, they wouldn't have to travel—they could take training there." (Scott, personal communication, March 31, 2025). The lack of local options was a recurring source of frustration for participants, as was the inadequacy of piecemeal services offered by traditional providers.

4.8.8 Jill: A Terrible Compromise

Teachers interviewed for this study also described the systemic inequities faced by Canadians. Jill, a Canadian who earned her master's degree in structured discovery in the US and now teaches at a US structured discovery centre, stated plainly: "In the US, blind people are very lucky. They get all the equipment and training they need. That's not likely in Canada. There's no vocational rehab. If people want to go to the States for training, where it is mostly available, they

have to pay for services themselves." (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025). The compromises, she said, are "horrific." (Jill, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

4.8.9 Vince: The Need for More Structured Discovery in Canada

Vince, another Canadian teacher now working in the US, also emphasized the need for structured discovery in Canada: "We are helping blind people to be successful, not just giving them a checklist." (Vince, personal communication, April 2, 2025).

4.8.10 Lucy: The Need for Support

Lucy, a former teacher at PTCB, described the lack of access to certification in Canada, resulting in a "learn-as-you-go" teaching style. "Sometimes I was only one step ahead of the student," she admitted. (Lucy, personal communication, April 5, 2025). Her comments highlight the remarkable dedication of instructors working within a system that has yet to provide the training, recognition, or funding necessary to build a sustainable model.

4.8.11 Theme Conclusion

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently emphasized the need for policy change and increased investment. They described a Canadian landscape where opportunities were few and far between, and where blind people had to advocate fiercely to access even the most basic services. Yet despite these challenges, their passion for the Structured Discovery model and belief in its potential to transform lives remained strong. As Chris summarized, "Blind Americans have more advantages than blind Canadians ever do, simply because the training exists there."

The Canadian context, thus, emerged as a story of limitations and longing—but also of agency, innovation, and hope. Participants were not passive recipients of services but active challengers of the status quo, demanding more for themselves and others. This theme, perhaps

more than any other, reflects the intersection between individual experience and broader systems, and the urgent need for a Canadian approach that meets the needs and rights of blind people across the country. These findings reinforce literature documenting systemic inequities in Canadian blindness rehabilitation, including long wait times, inconsistent service delivery, and a lack of comprehensive, empowering training options (Jaiswal et al., 2021; Overbury & Wittich, 2011). The call for a Canadian version of Structured Discovery aligns with McCreath's (2012) critique of traditional custodial models and his advocacy for a skills-based, person-centered approach. In this way, the Canadian experience underscores Critical Disability Theory's focus on structural exclusion and the need for policy justice (Devlin & Pothier, 2006; Ned et al., 2022).

4.9 Chapter Conclusion

The eight themes that emerged from this study form an interconnected picture of how Structured Discovery transforms both skill and identity through experience, community, and challenge. Rather than existing as separate findings, these themes overlap and reinforce one another and reveal empowerment as a cumulative process. Participants' stories show that practical skill-building, self-advocacy, and social belonging are interdependent dimensions of a single journey toward independence and agency. These findings show the relationship between learning and becoming. Participants described how problem-solving, hands-on learning, and non-visual techniques promoted competence and also a redefinition of self. Participants consistently linked mastering skills such as cane travel or cooking to emotional growth, confidence, and the realization that blindness does not equate to limitation. This pattern shows a reciprocal dynamic—skill development builds confidence, and confidence motivates deeper learning.

Transformation is also important. Role modelling, peer mentorship, and community relationships demonstrate that empowerment is rarely achieved in isolation. The presence of blind instructors and peers created a shared culture of trust and mutual expectation, where success was normalized and internalized. Through these relationships, participants learned to see blindness as a collective identity rather than an individual deficit, which is similar to Critical Disability Theory's emphasis on empowerment through community and solidarity.

Themes of self-advocacy, challenges within the model, and the Canadian context show how empowerment operates within real structural constraints. Participants used their training to challenge societal assumptions, educate others, and influence change, even as they navigated barriers such as limited funding, teacher shortages, and uneven access across Canada. Their persistence reflected the same problem-solving ethos at the heart of Structured Discovery itself.

Together, these interconnected themes suggest that Structured Discovery functions not merely as a training model but as a philosophy of social change. It unites practical mastery with critical awareness, individual growth with collective empowerment, and personal agency with systemic critique. Viewed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the findings demonstrate how participants made meaning of blindness as a personal identity and a shared political experience. As the next chapter explores, these insights call for a reimagining of blindness rehabilitation in Canada—one that values lived experience, supports blind leadership, and builds policy frameworks that allow empowerment to flourish.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 and connects them to broader literature on blindness rehabilitation, experiential learning, and critical disability theory. It answers each of the four research questions by analyzing how participants make sense of their Structured Discovery training experiences and how these experiences align with, challenge, or extend existing approaches to blindness rehabilitation. The discussion highlights both the transformative potential of Structured Discovery and the complexities that accompany its practice within the Canadian context.

5.1 Research Question 1

How do blind individuals in Canada describe their experiences with Structured Discovery training, whether as service recipients or as teachers?

Participants in this study described their Structured Discovery training as a transformative experience that reshaped how they understood blindness, learning, and independence. Whether they attended programs in the United States or Canada, all participants articulated that Structured Discovery offered something they had not encountered elsewhere: a belief in their capability, paired with practical, non-visual skill mastery. This section analyzes their experiences through three interrelated dimensions— empowerment, identity transformation, and the meaning of independence —and situates these within relevant literature on blindness rehabilitation and critical disability theory.

5.1.1 Empowerment Through Experiential Learning

Across the interviews, empowerment emerged as a process and an outcome. Participants like Chris and Hanna described the training as “life-changing,” emphasizing that confidence developed not just from verbal encouragement but also from real, repeated experiences of doing

things independently. These accounts mirror the findings of Maurer et al. (2006) and Mino (2011) who argue that Structured Discovery's experiential approach produces genuine confidence through problem-solving and mastery rather than passive instruction. As Chris reflected in Chapter 4, Structured Discovery differed from his previous rehabilitation experiences because it demanded initiative and ownership: "They would teach you how to get from point A to point B, but heaven forbid you ever deviated from that." His comparison between the Louisiana Center for the Blind and CNIB-based training reveals the philosophical divide between models that seek to minimize risk and those that view challenge as essential to learning.

5.1.2 Identity Transformation and the Reframing of Blindness

Participants' experiences also reflected an internal transformation that went beyond acquiring skills. Julie and Wanda in Chapter 4 both spoke about the emotional and psychological significance of becoming the kind of person who could "just go out and do things." Julie's story of walking alone to a coffee shop encapsulated this shift: independence was not only a functional skill but a declaration of identity. From an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) perspective, this meaning-making process represents a re-authoring of the self, in which blindness becomes an integrated and accepted aspect of identity rather than a limitation to be compensated for.

This reframing aligns closely with Critical Disability Theory (Pothier & Devlin, 2006; Minich, 2017), which argues that empowerment emerges when disabled individuals reject medicalized deficit narratives and instead claim agency and pride in their lived experiences. Participants' stories showed that Structured Discovery supported this reorientation by encouraging exploration, persistence, and mutual trust between students and teachers. As Hanna described in Chapter 4, "I wanted to be independent, to work, and to develop the skills needed to

take care of myself." Her words demonstrate the liberatory dimension of the model: training was not about dependency reduction but about expanding life possibilities.

5.1.3 Learning Through Shared Experience

Teachers and students emphasized that the credibility and authenticity of the program stemmed from its blind-led structure. Instructors such as Vince and Jill from Chapter 4 viewed empowerment as a visible, measurable transformation—students moved from hesitation to initiative, from fear to confidence. Vince's observation that "Structured Discovery is person-centered and not prescriptive" shows how the pedagogy redefines the learning relationship: students are not recipients of care but active participants in discovery. This peer-based dynamic reinforced self-belief, particularly for participants who had previously been taught by sighted instructors under more paternalistic models. Wanda's statement from Chapter 4 — "Working with people who were just like me and truly understood what I was going through made a huge difference"—shows how shared lived experience creates both trust and aspiration.

5.1.4 Independence as a Social and Political Act

The participants' descriptions of independence did not just focus on practical skills; they were political acts of reclaiming autonomy in a system that often positions blind people as dependents. When Scott in Chapter 4 explained that he could now "go out for coffee, shop, and even get [his] hair cut" independently, his statement carried symbolic weight: these everyday acts signified equality and control. Structured Discovery thus functions not only as a rehabilitative model but also as a mechanism of social justice, which is similar to CDT's call for transformation through agency and resistance to ableist norms. Participants' emphasis on doing things "on [their] own terms" demonstrates how Structured Discovery shifts the narrative from accommodation to empowerment.

5.1.5 Synthesis

Overall, participants described Structured Discovery as an experience of personal and social liberation. The training's combination of non-visual techniques, problem-solving, and blind mentorship allowed them to reframe blindness from a source of limitation to one of strength. Their testimonies affirm that Structured Discovery is not merely a method for teaching skills, it is a philosophy of empowerment grounded in self-trust, resilience, and community. As Chris concluded, "The sacrifice was absolutely worth it." His sentiment captures the collective message of participants: Structured Discovery enabled them to live fully and independently by restoring confidence.

5.2 Research Question 2

In what ways do participants compare Structured Discovery with previous or more traditional rehabilitation services they may have received or observed?

Participants drew clear and often emotional contrasts between Structured Discovery training and the traditional blindness rehabilitation models they had previously experienced, particularly those provided through large agencies such as CNIB's Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada. While both models aimed to teach practical skills, the participants in this study consistently described traditional programs as prescriptive, risk-averse, and limited in scope, whereas Structured Discovery was viewed as empowering, experiential, and transformative. This contrast reveals a difference in pedagogy but also in ideology, how blindness, independence, and human potential are conceptualized and practiced.

The discussion that follows explores these comparisons across several key dimensions, including approaches to risk and challenge, differences in teaching philosophy, and the role of rehabilitation in shaping confidence and identity. The section also situates participants'

reflections within the Canadian context, highlighting systemic gaps in service provision and implications for reform.

5.2.1 From Risk Avoidance to Growth Through Challenge

Many participants emphasized that traditional training programs prioritized safety over growth. Instruction was often structured around memorizing specific routes or techniques, which left little room for exploration or problem-solving. Hanna in Chapter 4 described this difference vividly, explaining that her earlier experiences focused on “being told what to do and how to do it,” while Structured Discovery “put the control back into [her] hands.” Similarly, Chris recalled that traditional training discouraged deviation from instructor-defined paths: “They would teach you how to get from point A to point B, but heaven forbid you ever deviated from that.”

These reflections match with critiques in the literature that suggest that traditional Canadian rehabilitation services often reinforce dependency and limit transferable learning (Gold, Zuvela, & Hodge, 2006; Lapointe, 2006). Structured Discovery’s philosophy, by contrast, treats challenge and uncertainty as integral to the learning process. As Maurer et al. (2006) argue, confidence is built not through protection from failure but through the experience of solving problems under realistic conditions. Participants’ stories demonstrated that the ability to make mistakes safely and learn from them was central to developing resilience and long-term independence.

5.2.2 A Shift in Teaching Philosophy: From Prescriptive to Collaborative

In traditional rehabilitation settings, participants described instruction as hierarchical and instructor-driven, often conducted by sighted professionals who viewed blindness as a deficit to be managed. Structured Discovery inverted this relationship. Teaching was collaborative, student-centered, and often led by blind instructors who modelled independence.

Julie’s comparison in Chapter 4 of her experiences in both systems highlights this pedagogical shift. She observed that in Structured Discovery, instructors “believed you could figure it out,” promoting a sense of ownership and problem-solving that she had not experienced before. This shift reflects what Mino (2011) and Bell (2010) describe as a constructivist learning environment, where students build understanding through doing, rather than receiving predetermined solutions.

Instructors in this study, such as Vince and Jill from Chapter 4, reinforced this collaborative approach. Vince emphasized the importance of using Socratic questioning—asking students, “Given what you’ve learned, how will you figure this out?”—as a way to promote independent thinking. Jill echoed this, explaining that empowerment begins when teachers “step back and let students take ownership.” Such methods stand in contrast to the traditional model’s reliance on compliance and replication.

5.2.3 Beyond Functional Skills: Building Identity and Confidence

Participants contrasted the functional orientation of traditional rehabilitation with the identity-building orientation of Structured Discovery. While older models often focused narrowly on daily living skills, Structured Discovery viewed those same skills as vehicles for empowerment and self-definition. For example, In Chapter 4, Wanda’s training under the traditional model consisted of limited mobility instruction and assistive device use. Under Structured Discovery, she learned to cross complex intersections and travel independently—skills that transformed not just her mobility but her sense of self. “Before, I would have panicked,” she said. “Now I feel confident figuring it out.”

This reflects the interpretative phenomenological insight that meaning-making—how individuals interpret their own growth—is as important as skill acquisition itself (Smith et al.,

2009). Participants were not merely learning techniques; they were reconstructing their understanding of blindness, capability, and autonomy. This process reflects the social model of disability and critical disability theory (Pothier & Devlin, 2006; Minich, 2017), which argue that empowerment arises when disabled people reframe their experiences outside of deficit-based structures.

5.2.4 Philosophical Foundations: Deficit vs. Discovery

Underlying the contrast between models is a philosophical divide. Traditional rehabilitation services are rooted in medical and functional paradigms that position blindness as a problem to be compensated for (Overbury & Wittich, 2011). Structured Discovery, in contrast, operates within an empowerment framework that assumes competence and builds from the reality of blindness rather than resistance to it.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that Structured Discovery redefined blindness as a normal, navigable state of being. Lucy from Chapter 4, a former instructor at PTCB, explained that this model encourages agency rather than accommodation: "Give students agency—for blind people to have agency is critical." This distinction matters because it situates Structured Discovery as not merely a different technique but as a different worldview—one that validates blind experience and demands equality rather than sympathy.

5.2.5 A Canadian Context: Systemic Gaps and the Need for Reform

Several participants also expressed frustration that Structured Discovery programs are still rare in Canada, noting the systemic dominance of traditional models. Chris from Chapter 4, who trained in the U.S. before returning to Canada, reflected on how much more comprehensive and empowering his U.S. training was. He argued that Canadian services remain limited by "lower expectations" and a lack of blind leadership. His observation echoes findings from

Jaiswal et al. (2021), who identified paternalism and insufficient representation of blind professionals within the Canadian rehabilitation system.

Participants' calls for more experiential, blind-led approaches suggest that Structured Discovery could serve as a model for reforming blindness services in Canada. The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB) represents one of the few examples of such innovation, and participants like Hanna and Scott described it as a place where they finally "felt in charge of [their] own learning." The consistency of this feedback across participants demonstrates the importance of broadening access to this kind of training nationally.

5.2.6 Synthesis

When viewed collectively, participants compared Structured Discovery and traditional rehabilitation across several consistent dimensions. Traditional services were described as prescriptive, risk-averse, and professionally controlled, with an emphasis on safety, compliance, and limited skill transfer. In contrast, Structured Discovery was experienced as experiential, problem-solving–oriented, and collaborative, emphasizing challenge, autonomy, and blind-led instruction. Participants also contrasted the narrow functional focus of traditional programs with Structured Discovery's broader impact on confidence, identity, and self-understanding. For participants in this study, these differences shaped how skills were learned, but also how blindness itself was understood, with Structured Discovery aligning more closely with their lived realities, capabilities, and aspirations.

5.3 Research Question 3

What specific skills or perspectives do participants feel they gained or helped to develop through the training?

Participants in this study described Structured Discovery as more than a set of blindness skills—it was an immersive framework for developing practical competence, problem-solving ability, and a renewed sense of identity and possibility. The training cultivated technical proficiency in non-visual skills but also confidence, creativity, and self-trust. Through this combination of experiential learning and philosophical grounding, participants gained a toolkit for navigating both their environments and their lives with greater autonomy.

Their responses reveal three main domains of growth: (1) mastery of transferable non-visual techniques, (2) development of adaptive and critical thinking skills, and (3) acquisition of new perspectives on blindness, self-efficacy, and leadership.

5.3.1 Mastery of Non-Visual Techniques

Participants repeatedly identified non-visual training as a cornerstone of Structured Discovery's effectiveness. Skills in cane travel, Braille literacy, adaptive technology, and cooking under sleep shades were more than practical; they were transformative acts that built trust in one's own senses and judgment. As Vince in Chapter 4 noted, "You learn to rely on your other senses. You ask, 'What is my cane telling me?'" His phrasing captures how non-visual tools became extensions of perception rather than substitutes for lost vision.

For many, this shift represented the first time they were encouraged to use blindness itself as a foundation for learning. Wandas reflections in Chapter 4 illustrate this clearly—before training, she was anxious about crossing streets or traveling independently. By the end, she could navigate six-lane intersections and take trips alone. She explained, "Before, I would have panicked. Now I feel confident figuring it out."

This confidence was grounded in repetition and immersion. Silvia described practicing travel techniques until they became "incorporated into [her] unconscious." Her phrasing shows

how Structured Discovery reframes blindness as a mode of interacting with the world. These findings are similar to Maurer (2006) and Mino (2011), who emphasize that mastery through non-visual practice produces enduring self-assurance that vision-centered training cannot replicate.

From an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) perspective, these accounts demonstrate meaning-making through embodiment: as participants mastered physical techniques, they internalized psychological transformation. Mastery of non-visual skills became synonymous with self-belief.

5.3.2 Development of Adaptive and Critical Thinking Skills

Beyond technical competence, participants emphasized that Structured Discovery strengthened their problem-solving and reasoning abilities. Rather than being taught fixed methods, they were encouraged to experiment, analyze, and persist through uncertainty. As Chris in Chapter 4 explained, “When you figure something out yourself, you remember it—and that builds real confidence.” His experience reflects the constructivist foundation of the model, where knowledge is built through active discovery (Mino, 2011; Salisbury, 2018).

Participants like Julie and Holly in Chapter 4 described this as “learning how to learn.” Julie recounted how she approached unfamiliar routes or computer challenges with curiosity rather than fear, stating, “It’s about believing you can figure it out.” Holly echoed this mindset: “I don’t need five lessons—I can figure it out.” Their words capture the essence of Structured Discovery’s pedagogical goal—creating independent problem-solving that transfers beyond the classroom.

Instructors reinforced this process through intentional methods. Jill from Chapter 4 described using a hands-on, Socratic approach to guide students toward self-reliance:

"Empowerment starts right away. You teach them a basic skill, then immediately let them practice and take ownership." This method built skills but also cultivated agency and intrinsic motivation.

These findings correspond with literature emphasizing that experiential learning supports cognitive flexibility and resilience (Bell, 2010). Structured Discovery's iterative, challenge-based design trains students to adapt strategies to diverse environments—a crucial distinction from the rote, prescriptive methods of traditional rehabilitation. Through this, participants developed an internalized belief that they could face new problems and find solutions independently.

5.3.3 Acquiring New Perspectives on Blindness, Self-Efficacy, and Leadership

Perhaps the most profound outcomes participants described were changes in perspective—on blindness, capability, and their own leadership potential. Participants spoke of redefining what it meant to be blind, moving from internalized deficit narratives to a sense of empowerment grounded in community and pride.

Several participants said this shift was created by learning from blind instructors and peers. The model's insistence on blind role models gave students a tangible vision of success. As Wanda in Chapter 4 explained, "Working with people who were just like me and truly understood what I was going through made a huge difference." The impact was not limited to emotional validation, it reframed blindness as a normal and shared human experience.

Scott's experience from Chapter 4 illustrates how this new perspective extended into leadership. He described transitioning from student to instructor, teaching technology to other blind learners: "The program allows you to gain confidence and take charge of your life." His progression exemplifies the model's broader social goal—to develop blind leaders who pass empowerment forward.

These outcomes are similar to Critical Disability Theory, which emphasizes that liberation is achieved when disabled people claim authority over their narratives and practices (Pothier & Devlin, 2006; Minich, 2017). Structured Discovery embodies this by treating blind experience as expertise. As Vince observed, “It’s critical to have as many blind professionals in the field as possible. This is our experience and our lives—we do this every day.” His comment captures how learning and leadership are intertwined within the model’s philosophy.

5.3.4 Integration of Skill and Mindset

Participants’ narratives suggest that Structured Discovery’s success lies in its ability to integrate skill development with psychological transformation. Technical mastery (cane travel, Braille, cooking, technology) is inseparable from mindset shifts (confidence, problem-solving, self-advocacy). As Julie noted in Chapter 4, “If you’re applying for a job and someone says, ‘I don’t know how you’d do this,’ I’d say, ‘I can do this. This is how.’” Her statement demonstrates the internalization of both competence and self-assertion.

This synthesis mirrors findings in empowerment-oriented rehabilitation research, which stress that independence cannot be separated from identity formation (Bell & Mino, 2011). Structured Discovery accomplishes this by combining physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of learning. Each new skill reinforces a broader belief: blindness does not limit one’s ability to learn, adapt, or lead.

5.3.5 Synthesis

The skills and perspectives gained through Structured Discovery extend beyond practical independence. Participants emerged from training as competent travellers, cooks, and technology users and also as confident thinkers, advocates, and mentors. They described learning how to

trust themselves, how to adapt when circumstances change, and how to interpret blindness as a neutral, navigable state rather than a deficit.

In essence, Structured Discovery equips blind people with the tools—and the philosophy—to thrive. It teaches that independence is not a static achievement but an evolving mindset built through practice, reflection, and community. The participants' experiences affirm what the literature shows: when blind people are taught through discovery rather than prescription, they do not simply gain skills—they reclaim agency and redefine what it means to live fully and freely.

5.4 Research Question 4

What challenges or limitations do participants identify in Structured Discovery training, and how might these be addressed?

While participants overwhelmingly described Structured Discovery training as empowering, they also acknowledged several challenges that affect both individual learners and the broader implementation of this model in Canada. These challenges fall into four interconnected categories: personal and emotional barriers during training, systemic and structural limitations, The accessibility of the model, and the need for greater public and institutional recognition of Structured Discovery. Examining these tensions offers a more nuanced understanding of how Structured Discovery can continue to evolve as both a pedagogical method and a social movement toward equality and inclusion.

5.4.1 Personal and Emotional Barriers During Training

Structured Discovery's immersive nature demands persistence, resilience, and openness to discomfort. Participants recognized that while this intensity leads to long-term confidence, it can also be emotionally taxing. In Chapter 4, Julie described moments of frustration, admitting

that “some days you just want to throw your cane across the room,” yet she viewed this frustration as an essential part of growth. Her reflection captures the dual nature of Structured Discovery: it empowers through challenge, but that challenge can at times feel overwhelming.

For some, early stages of training triggered anxiety or self-doubt, especially for those new to using sleep shades or navigating busy streets. Wanda, who lost her vision later in life, described the initial fear of crossing multi-lane intersections alone, but also emphasized that working through those fears became the foundation of her empowerment. From an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) perspective, these experiences reveal that empowerment is a process of transformation, not comfort—it requires confronting fear and reframing it as learning.

Instructors acknowledged these emotional barriers as well Jill in Chapter 4 emphasized the importance of empathy and patience, explaining that transformation “takes time and ownership” and that progress must be measured individually. Vince in Chapter 4 noted that students’ motivation fluctuates, particularly when they encounter setbacks, and that instructors must “find what is motivating to students by getting at their underlying desires.” These comments are similar to the literature on experiential learning, which recognizes that discomfort is not failure but a catalyst for growth (Bell & Mino, 2011).

5.4.2 Structural and Systemic Limitations

A second category of challenge concerns the limited availability and institutional recognition of Structured Discovery training in Canada. Participants frequently noted that while the model has proven transformative, its reach remains small compared to traditional rehabilitation systems. Chris from Chapter 4, who trained in the United States before returning to Canada, expressed frustration that “nothing like this exists widely here,” pointing to the dominance of CNIB-affiliated programs that still rely on functional or vision-centered methods.

This scarcity limits access for blind Canadians who could benefit from more intensive, empowerment-based training. As Jaiswal et al. (2021) and Martiniello et al. (2023) observe, Canada's rehabilitation infrastructure remains deeply influenced by medical and custodial paradigms. These frameworks often prioritize safety, liability, and measurable outputs over independence and community-led innovation. Participants' narratives reveal that Structured Discovery's success depends on philosophical alignment, not just curriculum; implementing the model requires a cultural shift toward expecting capability rather than managing limitation.

Funding structures also pose barriers. Because Structured Discovery programs are longer and more immersive than conventional training, they are often more expensive to deliver. The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind (PTCB), for example, relies on grants and donations rather than consistent government support. As Lucy in Chapter 4 observed, "To really sustain this model, you need ongoing belief and investment, not just one-time funding." This highlights a larger policy challenge: if empowerment-based rehabilitation is to expand, it must be recognized as a legitimate, evidence-supported public service rather than an optional alternative.

5.4.3 The Need for Broader Awareness and Recognition

Participants also pointed to public misperceptions of blindness and low societal expectations as ongoing challenges that extend beyond the training environment. Julie in Chapter 4 described encountering well-meaning but intrusive offers of help in public spaces, noting that "sighted people's low expectations" can undermine the confidence Structured Discovery seeks to build. Silvia in Chapter 4 emphasized the importance of advocacy and public education as part of empowerment: "I support sighted people who don't understand what it's like to be blind by helping them understand." Her comment suggests that the effectiveness of Structured Discovery

extends into the social realm—it equips participants to live independently but also to reshape public attitudes through example and education.

From a Critical Disability Theory perspective, these experiences highlight the systemic nature of the barriers blind people face. As Minich (2017) argues, empowerment requires both individual and collective transformation: personal growth must be accompanied by structural change. Participants' reflections show that Structured Discovery succeeds at the personal level but struggles against societal systems still rooted in ableist assumptions.

5.4.4 Balancing Intensity and Accessibility

Another tension identified by participants concerns balancing the model's rigor with accessibility for diverse learners. Structured Discovery's emphasis on immersion and challenge is central to its success, but not all participants can commit to long, intensive training periods. Holly observed that "it takes dedication—it's not something you can do halfway." While this dedication promotes transformation, it also means that some people, particularly seniors or those balancing work and family, may find the model difficult to access.

Instructors recognized this and suggested that adaptation, rather than dilution, is key. Lucy advocated for offering flexible modules that maintain the program's core philosophy but accommodate different paces and schedules. This aligns with Mino's (2011) argument that Structured Discovery should be understood as a continuum rather than a fixed format: what matters most is preserving the model's underlying principles of exploration, self-direction, and belief in capacity.

5.4.5 Synthesis

The challenges identified by participants do not undermine the value of Structured Discovery—they highlight its depth, rigor, and transformative potential. The model's emotional

demands reflect its power to change lives; its systemic barriers demonstrate the need for cultural and institutional reform. Ultimately, these challenges affirm that Structured Discovery is a training method but also a social movement grounded in the conviction that blind people can and should be fully in charge of their own lives.

5.4.6 Chapter Conclusion

This discussion has examined the lived experiences of blind Canadians who participated in Structured Discovery training, revealing how the model reshapes both skill development and self-perception. Across all four research questions, participants' accounts demonstrated that Structured Discovery is an alternative approach to blindness rehabilitation but also a transformative reimagining of what it means to learn, to live, and to belong as a blind person.

Participants described their training as a process of empowerment that merged practical mastery with psychological transformation. Through experiential, non-visual learning, they developed confidence, self-trust, and the ability to problem-solve independently. Their stories showed that empowerment is cultivated through challenge, not avoidance of difficulty, and that confidence emerges through authentic experience rather than prescriptive instruction.

In contrasting Structured Discovery with traditional rehabilitation models, participants exposed a philosophical divide between dependency and agency. The findings demonstrated that traditional models often reinforce limitation, while Structured Discovery promotes autonomy and belief in capacity. This shift aligns closely with Critical Disability Theory, which frames empowerment as resistance to ableist structures and the reclamation of voice and agency.

Participants also gained profound new perspectives—seeing blindness as a neutral and navigable way of being rather than as loss. Through mentorship from blind instructors and peers, they learned not just technical skills but a philosophy of equality and capability. The presence of

blind leadership was central to this transformation, demonstrating how representation itself becomes a pedagogical force.

Although challenges exist—emotional intensity, limited access, and structural barriers, the consistency of participants' reflections confirms that Structured Discovery's impact extends beyond skill acquisition. It equips blind people with the tools, confidence, and community to live self-directed lives and to challenge societal misconceptions about blindness.

Overall, the findings presented in this chapter reveal Structured Discovery as both a pedagogy and a movement—an approach that transforms how blind people learn and also how they view themselves and how society might learn to view them. These insights set the stage for the final chapter, which will draw together the study's conclusions and consider their implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.1 Restating the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how blind Canadians experience Structured Discovery rehabilitation training, both as participants and as teachers. This research sought to understand how individuals make sense of this training in their daily lives and how it compares to more traditional models of blindness rehabilitation commonly provided in Canada. By focusing on personal experience and meaning-making, the study demonstrated how Structured Discovery supports independence, confidence, and a stronger sense of self.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

Through ten qualitative interviews, this research found that Structured Discovery has a powerful and lasting impact on the lives of blind Canadians. Participants described gaining confidence, acquiring practical skills, and developing a renewed understanding of themselves as capable and independent. The training supported problem-solving and adaptability, with learning grounded in real experience rather than memorization or step-by-step instruction. Mentorship from blind instructors and connections with peers played a key role in strengthening identity and belonging.

Participants also contrasted Structured Discovery with traditional rehabilitation models, which often emphasize residual vision, prescriptive techniques, or support delivered in short, infrequent sessions. Many found these approaches limiting or disempowering. Structured Discovery instead encouraged exploration, self-direction, and long-term growth. However, the model requires time, commitment, and access to skilled instructors—factors that are not currently widely available in Canada, which limits who can benefit from the training.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that meaningful reform in blindness rehabilitation in Canada is most likely to emerge from grassroots, blind-led organizations that centre lived experience, peer leadership, and experiential learning. The following recommendations are directed toward grassroots blindness organizations, policymakers and funders, post-secondary institutions, and mainstream rehabilitation systems. Together, these recommendations emphasize strengthening Structured Discovery as a legitimate, community-rooted model while avoiding the further concentration of authority and resources within large institutional systems.

Recommendations for Grassroots and Blind-Led Organizations

Grassroots, blind-led organizations should be recognized and supported as primary sites of innovation in blindness rehabilitation. These organizations are uniquely positioned to deliver Structured Discovery–based training that emphasizes non-visual skill mastery, problem-solving, and confidence-building through lived experience. Grassroots providers are encouraged to continue developing and refining training practices grounded in experiential learning, blind leadership, and peer mentorship, while remaining responsive to the diverse learning styles, mental health needs, and personal circumstances of participants.

Strengthening pathways for training, mentoring, and supporting blind instructors should remain a central priority. Participants in this study consistently identified blind instructors and role models as essential to their learning, confidence, and identity development. Protecting organizational autonomy and maintaining community accountability are also critical, particularly as Structured Discovery gains greater visibility and legitimacy.

Recommendations for Policy, Funding, and Systems-Level Decision-Makers

Provincial and federal policymakers and funders should move away from one-size-fits-all rehabilitation funding models toward approaches that actively support grassroots, community-based innovation. Funding frameworks should be designed to enable smaller, blind-led organizations to deliver, sustain, and expand Structured Discovery–based programs, rather than privileging large, established institutions by default.

Governments are encouraged to recognize Structured Discovery as a legitimate and essential form of blindness rehabilitation and to develop funding mechanisms that value experiential learning, non-visual skill mastery, problem-solving, and blind leadership. Policy development should include meaningful consultation with blind-led organizations to ensure that lived experience informs rehabilitation standards, service priorities, and accountability measures.

Recommendations for Universities, Colleges, and Professional Training Programs

Post-secondary institutions offering programs in rehabilitation, disability studies, education, and allied fields have a critical role to play in legitimizing Structured Discovery as a recognized pedagogical and rehabilitation approach. Universities and colleges are encouraged to include Structured Discovery and other blind-led, non-visual training models within curricula, research agendas, and professional preparation programs.

Teacher training and rehabilitation education programs should engage with grassroots, blind-led organizations under conditions that preserve blind leadership, curricular control, and community accountability. Such collaborations can ensure that students learn directly from blind instructors and are exposed to experiential, non-visual teaching methods, while preventing the absorption of Structured Discovery into traditional or custodial frameworks. These efforts can

contribute to the development of a future workforce that is better prepared to support empowering, autonomy-focused rehabilitation practices.

Recommendations for Mainstream Rehabilitation Systems

Mainstream rehabilitation organizations, including large national agencies, should not be positioned as the primary drivers of Structured Discovery–based reform. Given the significant power and resource imbalances within the rehabilitation sector, uncritical partnerships risk marginalizing grassroots, blind-led organizations and diluting the core principles of Structured Discovery.

Where engagement occurs, it should be clearly defined, limited in scope, and structured to protect blind leadership, organizational autonomy, and community accountability. Mainstream systems can play a supportive role by acknowledging the legitimacy of Structured Discovery, refraining from appropriating blind-led models, and creating space for independent grassroots programs to operate without pressure to conform to medicalized or custodial service frameworks. Referral pathways or parallel service options—rather than integrated partnerships—may offer a more appropriate means of broadening access while preserving the integrity of blind-led practice.

Recommendations for Public Education and Community Engagement

Blind-led organizations should remain central to public education and awareness-building efforts that challenge deficit-based assumptions about blindness. Workshops, presentations, and community-based engagement initiatives can demonstrate the effectiveness of Structured Discovery in promoting independence, confidence, and full participation in community life.

Supporting ongoing research, evaluation, and knowledge mobilization will help ensure that the lived experiences of blind people continue to inform public understanding, professional

training, and policy development. Centreing grassroots voices in these efforts is essential to sustaining an empowerment-based vision of blindness rehabilitation in Canada.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

This study used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as it's theoretical underpinning; The interpretive nature of IPA requires a small sample size and therefore reflects a depth of insight rather than a wide sample of experiences. The participants already had access to Structured Discovery training, which may not reflect the experiences of blind Canadians without such opportunities. Throughout the document there seems to be a bias toward SD and against traditional approaches. In the lit. review (Ch.2), it would be good to acknowledge some of the documented benefits of traditional approaches (even if your study ultimately critiques them). Are there contexts where the traditional model has been shown to work well? Are there skills, populations, or instructional conditions where it produces positive outcomes? Presenting a more balanced view will increase the credibility of your analysis and help the reader understand whether the traditional approach has strengths worth preserving, or whether the literature portrays it as universally problematic. Additionally, the research relied on personal narratives, which are shaped by memory, context, and individual interpretation. Further research could broaden and deepen these findings by examining experiences over time or comparing outcomes across different rehabilitation models.

6.5 Directions for Future Research

Future research may wish to examine long-term outcomes for Structured Discovery graduates, including employment, community participation, and self-advocacy. Comparative studies between Structured Discovery and traditional rehabilitation models would help inform policy and funding decisions. Additional research could also explore adaptations of Structured

Discovery for seniors, people with multiple disabilities, or those living in rural or remote areas. Finally, research involving policymakers and service providers could help discover barriers to wider implementation.

6.6 Final Reflections

This study shows that Structured Discovery is more than a training method; it is an approach that supports blind people to trust their abilities, build confidence through experience, and claim greater control in their lives. Participants described moments of accomplishment that reshaped what they could do, but also who they believed they could be. Their experiences demonstrate that blindness is not a limitation to be worked around, but a characteristic that can be navigated with skill, creativity, and pride.

Structured Discovery is still emerging in the Canadian landscape, yet it holds clear potential to address longstanding gaps in blindness rehabilitation. By supporting non-visual skill mastery, mentorship from blind instructors, and a belief in possibility rather than limitation, this model promotes empowerment in ways that traditional rehabilitation models often do not.

The challenge moving forward is not whether Structured Discovery is effective—it is ensuring that more blind Canadians have access to it. The voices in this study show what becomes possible when blind people are supported to lead their own lives, shape their own learning, and define their own futures.

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