



Getting Things to Stick:

Exploring the narratives of young New Zealanders who experience specific learning difficulties

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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry sought to explore the views of eight young New Zealanders, aged nine to 14 years, who had experienced specific difficulties with learning. Narrative research procedures were used to gather and interpret the stories the young participants told about their experiences. Findings revealed that young people become aware of their own learning difficulties and need to understand why they experience problems. The study also found that this understanding is developed in relationship to the information and support offered by knowledgeable adults, who understand that it is possible to be intellectually competent yet have trouble learning numeracy and literacy skills. Furthermore, it was found that by identifying themselves in roles in which they experience competency, young people express a more positive and holistic identity than that of being “learning disabled”. Opportunities to achieve mastery in activities they enjoy doing enables young people to develop innate abilities, which underpin a positive sense of identity and well-being and are likely to provide a link to success in adult life.

Research paper

KEY WORDS

Learning difficulties, self concept, research methodology, student participation.

INTRODUCTION

Specific learning difficulties in children who do not have intellectual impairment can present as a puzzling phenomenon. This study was undertaken to investigate the views of a small group of New Zealand children and adolescents who had experienced specific difficulties in learning literacy and numeracy skills. To understand learning experiences from young people’s perspective, it is useful to gather information directly from students themselves (Gollop, 2000; Nuthall, 2005). While children are often perceived as unreliable informants, studies which have directly sought young people’s views demonstrate that they make dependable participants and have something worthwhile to say (Bird, 2003; Curtin, 2000; Scratchley, 2004; Smith & Taylor, 2000). Similarly, in this study young people’s views were valued for their potential to offer adults fresh insight on issues related to specific learning difficulties.

A primary supposition underpinning the inquiry was that failing to learn in school undermines children’s self-esteem and sense of themselves as capable human beings. Previous

studies carried out with adult participants have reported that the social-emotional consequences of experiencing learning difficulties in childhood persist into adulthood, including low self-esteem, depression and anxiety about using literacy or numeracy skills in everyday life (Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind & Herman, 2003; Fanchiang, 1996; McNulty, 2003). While these studies observed that difficulties with literacy or numeracy skills did not entirely resolve in adulthood, they also found that many adults achieved self-sufficiency by developing strategies to compensate for their difficulties and by capitalising on their particular abilities or talents (Fanchiang, 1996; McNulty, 2003). We were therefore interested in what young participants might have to say about their talents and abilities, as well as their learning problems.

COLLECTING THE NARRATIVES

The study was conducted as a narrative inquiry, an interpretivist methodology founded on the notion that people are innate storytellers who make sense of life events by forming them into personal stories (Atkinson, 2002). Narrative research procedures were used to gather personal narratives as a means of exploring the participants’ perspectives of the research issue. Children develop the art of storytelling early in life (Engel, 1999), and we anticipated that the young people would make able informants, with their narratives about experiencing learning difficulties providing a rich source of data.

In addition to being data, narrative researchers view participants’ stories as phenomena worthy of study in their own right. Narrative analysis examined the form (structure) as well as the content of stories told by participants. Attending to the narrative voice of the participants was a central part of the analytical process.

The broad question that guided the inquiry was, “What could be learned from the narratives of a small group of New Zealand children, in relation to their experiences of specific learning difficulties?” Addressing this question meant being open to hearing about activities participants felt they were good at doing, as well as any issues they might raise in relation to schoolwork. A secondary question asked whether understanding the unique perspectives of young people might generate new insights for adults.

The eight young participants recruited for the study attended either a state or a private school, at primary, intermediate or high school levels, and were all following a regular school curriculum irrespective of their learning difficulties.

Recruitment criteria excluded children and adolescents whose learning delays were associated with intellectual impairment. Also excluded were young people experiencing learning or developmental delays associated with sensory, physical and medical disabilities, or significant conduct disorders.

Young research participants have the same right to privacy and confidentiality as adult participants, but special ethical considerations applied. We were conscious of the power imbalance that inevitably exists between adult inquirers and young participants (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Gollop, 2000). Accordingly, participants were invited to complete a consent form, respecting their right to agree or decline to participate irrespective of the written consent already obtained from their parents. During interviews, which were conducted by the first author, care was taken to enact a friendship rather than an authoritative role.

Narrative interviewing procedures are usually unstructured, allowing participants to talk freely about their experiences using natural conversation and storytelling (Richmond, 2002). This approach proved to be particularly suited to the needs of the young participants, providing a relaxed, informal way to gather their views and opinions. The analytical process began by synthesising each interview transcript into a personal story. Respect for the viewpoint participants offered was shown by crafting stories from the interview transcripts based entirely on their words. Participants were invited to check their own story to ensure that it reflected what they wished to say. The plot of each whole story was further summarised in a core narrative, encapsulating each participant's unique voice and message. The kinds of stories told by participants and the key narrative themes emerging were examined.

INTRODUCING THE STORYTELLERS

The young people participating in the study, aged 9 to 14 years are known by pseudonyms of their choosing. Alex (12), an intellectually gifted boy, initially found schoolwork easy and recalled being shocked at age ten to realise he was struggling to keep up with his peers. He chose to accentuate his love of art and was optimistic about his future, based on his talent as an artist. Amy (13) provided the first surprise in the study, confounding our assumption that children with learning difficulties have low self-esteem. Despite still struggling with reading and spelling at a high school level, Amy presented as an extremely confident, outgoing girl, fond of outdoor adventurous activities. She told an upbeat story of getting on with life, and not letting spelling difficulties get her down. Bob (11) reflected on his early failure in learning to read. By age seven, he experienced the embarrassment of finding he was the only one in the bottom reading group, even surpassed by a new immigrant student just beginning to learn English. Bob emphasised his motivation to succeed and related how, with his parents' constant encouragement and remedial tutoring, reading had become his favourite activity.

Bowin (13) remembered starting school with great confidence and feeling accepted by his classmates, but from age six, his experience was marred by difficulties with spelling and maths, and bullying. He lost confidence and cast himself in the role of "rejected loner". A turning point occurred at intermediate school when he discovered that he was talented in science, English and a wide range of extracurricular pursuits. Ella (14) enjoyed primary school, seeing herself as a capable student despite her spelling difficulties. However, at high school, her learning difficulties affected her achievement in academic subjects. Apart from enjoying PE and sport, Ella declared that she now, "hated school altogether". In contrast Jodie, who had experienced significant learning difficulties ever since beginning school, emphasised that she enjoyed school. Nevertheless, Jodie (14) found studying for and not succeeding in exams disheartening, saying, "I like school, but some days are hard".

Jordan (13) experienced learning difficulties, particularly with maths, but felt her biggest challenges at school were social. Her early school years were marred by social exclusion by other girls and not understanding why. She found, that as she became more confident in herself and her abilities, she was making friends and things were, "changing in [her] social world". Sam (9), an intellectually gifted young boy, felt that without his learning difficulties he would be seen to be smarter. Despite his learning frustrations in the classroom, Sam had a strong personal sense of his many talents and an optimistic view of his own future as an engineer or a doctor.

Narrative analysis revealed that learning difficulties acted as a negative interruption in the progressive course of young participants' life stories, with the potential to compromise their sense of identity and well-being. However, exploring the stories highlighted the individuality of their experiences. Despite their learning difficulties, some were hopeful, optimistic and upbeat, while others were angry, frustrated or disheartened. One example of contrasting views was that, despite facing significant learning challenges, Jodie enjoyed school while Ella, whose difficulties were described as mild, hated school. The insight we took from these contrasting perspectives is that, as adults, we need to be aware that a young person's perception of how things are going for them in an educational setting may not relate to our assumptions about their degree of learning difficulty or learning potential.

NARRATIVE THEMES

While the focus of the study was aimed towards participants' personal perspectives, we were open to the possibility of 'universal themes emerging from individual narratives' (Bruner, 1996, p. 137). During the analytical process, narrative themes were identified and collated into collective categories. Main narrative themes related to understanding self, being understood by others and being seen to be competent. Overall we found that there was an interdependent relationship between the children's awareness of their own learning difficulties, and the awareness of their parents, teachers and remedial tutors.

BECOMING AWARE

All of the young people spoke of developing an inner awareness of their learning struggles, most as young children, independent of their difficulties being identified by adults. They also told of becoming aware of their learning problems while in primary school. Bowin remembered thinking as a six-year-old, something's a bit wrong here – I'm not really doing this well.

Paired with their awareness of having difficulty was their lack of understanding why. Amy reflected that between years 1-3, "I didn't really know myself [why it was hard] but I felt that I couldn't do this, 'it's too hard'. I thought it was just like that ... because I didn't know any different". Not understanding the reason for their learning problems sometimes created stress, not just for the child concerned, but also those around them. Alex remembered being a nuisance in the classroom,

I think once I hit year 6 I sort of stayed with the learning capabilities that I did have ... but I didn't learn any more, which is why I had a sudden shock of having a difficulty learning, as the rest of the class had moved on. I was having tremendous difficulties, which led to behavioural problems ... because I couldn't concentrate I was annoying other children in the class. Because [of] things like ... that I just couldn't work. In some cases I didn't know how to do it ... so I'd sit there doing nothing ... which means I would annoy someone else to try and get their attention.

Most participants indicated that it was their mothers who sought an explanation of their learning problems. This usually involved being evaluated by an educational psychologist, as Alex recalled, "I [went to see] this lady [psychologist] for behavioural problems and that's how they found out I was dyslexic". Once he had been given an explanation, Alex settled down behaviourally in class, even though he continued to find some aspects of learning difficult.

UNDERSTANDING WHY

Information and support offered by educational psychologists and remedial tutors (in one case an occupational therapist) played an important role in helping the children make sense of their learning struggles. For most participants this meant being given the label 'dyslexic'. However, participants used the labels they had been given as a form of explanation for their learning struggles, particularly with their teachers and classmates. Jordan used the term 'dyspraxia' to explain to her teacher why she was struggling to grasp what was being taught: "I had to do it because he was saying 'Oh, why don't you get this?' and things and I said: 'Because I have dyspraxia'". Alex did not mind being given a label.

Rather than just having the name "difficulty" I think it's better to have a name for it [dyslexia] because "difficulty" could mean I actually have a difficulty in any area at all. And so it's a learning difficulty with an actual name which gives people some idea what it actually is.

Likewise, Bob did not mind being labeled 'dyslexic', but made an important point about the difference in tolerability of certain labels saying, "I don't like walking around like with

a giant sign on my head saying 'I have learning disabilities'. I just like to be called normal".

Understanding why they were struggling with their learning made a difference to most of the young participants. It enabled them to reframe their sense of themselves as learners.

SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS

As well as developing an understanding of their own difficulties, a core message in participants' narratives was the importance that their learning difficulties were understood by others. Most of their stories indicated that class teachers who recognised their learning struggles for what they were, something other than exasperating behaviour, established a positive learning relationship with them. The positive support offered by such teachers was highly valued by young participants and they remembered with appreciation those teachers who encouraged their learning efforts. For example, after experiencing a difficult time in primary school, Bowin credited a supportive intermediate teacher with creating a positive turning point in his life.

My first year was really good [at intermediate school] ... it was! I still had problems learning things, like words and spelling and stuff like that and maths, but I had a teacher who was really nice and she got me a long way.

At intermediate school, with the encouragement of an understanding teacher and a supportive reading mentor, Amy developed her literacy skills to become a functional reader. At high school, the English teacher's willingness to make accommodations to class assignments made it possible for her to complete tasks.

We're doing a reading thing at the moment. We have to read books but I've actually got just like a book of short stories that I'm doing because I find it easier to read short stories and write a bit about those short stories.

It was not surprising to find that participants perceived supportive teachers to be helpful. Positive learning relationships enabled them to move forward in their learning. Conversely, when teachers did not understand their learning struggles, young people reflected that this added to their stress and made things more difficult because they were unsure how to meet these teachers' expectations.

Ella's anecdote illustrated why it would have been helpful to have her teacher understand how her mild dyslexia affected her ability to perform certain classroom tasks.

It's hard to write like essays and stuff and write out questions especially like now at high school. Our [social studies] teacher dictates a lot to us and when she dictates I can't spell any of the words 'cos they're like real hard words – then I get left behind ... it does make it harder. I've actually got to think when the teacher's dictating – I've got to actually think about what I'm doing – and then I get tired and then it gets hard – and nobody else can read my work. Like when I try to spell a word I'll spell it wrong, but I'll be able to read it and only I will be able to read it.

Spelling was not an automatic skill for Ella – she needed to think consciously about how to spell the words at the same time as trying to listen to the teacher and write down what was being dictated. What was a standard classroom activity from the teacher's perspective, from Ella's was one that required considerable cognitive focus and effort. She was all too aware she was unable to meet the standard of performance required.

All of the participants offered narratives that clearly described how their learning difficulties played out in the classroom. Understanding students' individual difficulties makes it possible to work out strategies to manage them. For instance, most of the participants said they used the spell check on their home computer for homework assignments, but only Alex used a laptop in class.

TUTORS WHO UNDERSTAND

One of the challenges associated with identifying children's specific learning difficulties is that they are generally more different in their learning characteristics than they are alike (Levine, 2002). Young people in the study described having trouble in different areas of their learning to different degrees. Four of the participants were competent readers, four were not, all but one struggled with spelling, three mentioned issues with handwriting and four had difficulty with mathematics. Most found concentrating in class tricky, particularly when it was noisy. Three spoke about their behavioural issues, such as being a distracting influence in class. One characteristic all eight participants referred to was difficulty with memorisation. Most spoke of their strategies for trying to get information to stick but found that hard work and perseverance did not necessarily make a difference. Bowin explained:

I find the hardest thing is recalling. What I'll do is – I'll get to maths and we'll do the day's work, no problem, remember it – next period 'straight out the door' – it's gone! I can't even remember it. And so what I have to do is - do it and do it – but the thing is, it doesn't matter even if I do it for five minutes or do it for a whole hour – it still goes away as soon as I get home and try and do it the next morning.

The young people suggested that those who have not experienced the frustration of trying to remember previously learned information cannot understand what it is like. They found that one of the most helpful aspects of remedial tutoring was that tutors understood their learning difficulties and were able to offer different learning strategies from those taught at school. In Bob's opinion, it was useful that his remedial tutor had experienced dyslexia herself, because she understood what kind of learning approach was needed.

You have to have a [remedial] teacher that has actually studied spelling problems to be able to learn better spelling. [Teachers at school] give you spelling words and they'll just say, "well repeat these, sound them out and tomorrow you'll know them". Then maybe tomorrow you will know them, and then the next day you'll go, "what

were my spelling words?", and you won't even be able to remember what your spelling words were. So you've got to have something that really sticks.

Nine-year-old Sam felt that remedial tutoring had helped improve his spelling but he also highlighted the importance of tutoring to develop his learning ability in mathematics. While Sam did not feel he performed so well in maths at school where he found it hard to concentrate, he reported having exceptional ability when working one-to-one with an understanding tutor: "I've basically just done year 9, year 10 and year 11 but I've done a tiny bit of year 12". (His work books demonstrated this was so.)

FRIENDS WHO UNDERSTAND

As well as being understood and supported by knowledgeable adults, being understood or accepted by classmates was another prominent theme in most stories. This highlighted the dialectical relationship between the participants' sense of self and peer acceptance. Bowin and Jordan spoke of feeling different from their peers and their sense of difference was reflected back to them in uneasy relationships with their classmates. They perceived that when their peers did not understand their struggles with learning or with social skills, this led to teasing, bullying and even social exclusion. Bowin offered a powerful analogy, which showed the impact that being called dumb "thousands and thousands of times" had on his sense of psychological well-being.

And I see it like fighting in a ring with someone. You start off and they start insulting you and it's like being kicked ... it doesn't hurt that much – the more they do it the more it starts to hurt and hurt and hurt until finally you fall down or collapse – but the thing is if you can pull up. If you can just find that strength ... to just keep going you develop an immunity to it.

Others mentioned that anti-bullying programmes in their schools made a difference but being called "dumb" was a common experience, even by friends. Ella was mainly teased by her friends and therefore chose not take it too seriously.

I get called 'dumb' all the time ... when I do stupid things like fall over and hurt myself [shows bruise on arm] and when I ask someone, "how do you spell" something and they say, "oh, you're so dumb". I don't really mind that much.

Ella wisely reflected that the taunt "you're so dumb" was used because "they don't really know what dyslexia is, and they just think that it means you're dumb".

Amy, on the other hand, enjoyed significant social status among her peer group and was neither teased nor bullied. In fact she commented that people rarely believed she had learning difficulties when she told them. Jordan and Bowin mused that as their own concept of themselves began changing for the better, they experienced increased social acceptance by their peers.

A CULTURE OF UNDERSTANDING

Many of the stories indicated that a school culture of acceptance and understanding made a difference as to whether young people felt it was safe to be seen to have learning difficulties. Alex reported that his previous school “did not believe in dyslexia”, and he felt a student he knew with similar learning difficulties was treated unfairly. In his current school, he found that it was “no big deal” to be known to be dyslexic.

People that I wouldn't suspect to be [are] supportive. There's this girl I know, and we're sort of friends, but I told her I was dyslexic and she goes, "oh really, I am as well" and so everyone's actually really open about being dyslexic ... and it's all not like a private thing that you don't want to tell anyone about.

Being accepted by their peer group confirmed that they were essentially, as Sam succinctly put it, “average old kids”. Similarly, in their narratives about activities at which they excelled, young people expressed a positive sense of self.

BEING SEEN TO BE COMPETENT

A key insight that emerged from young people's narratives about the activities they were good at doing was that it was important to them to be seen to be competent. Amy linked her sense of competence to leadership and advocacy roles in the scouting movement and her local community. Alex enjoyed outdoor activities but linked his sense of competency to his talent as an artist. Ella and Jodie described themselves as competent young sportswomen. Bowin combined his love of the outdoors and adventure with his skill in martial arts, to characterise himself as an action man. Sam saw himself as good at many things across a broad spectrum of academic, physical, artistic and creative activities. Jordan was good at creative writing, and Bob was proud of his ability to read lengthy science fiction books. By placing themselves in occupational roles in which they were successful, these eight young people were able to express a more positive sense of identity, than that of being “learning disabled”.

DISCUSSION

Without talking with young people directly, in an informal and non-judgmental manner, it is difficult to ascertain how learning difficulties play out in their everyday lives, especially at school. We found, as anticipated, that when young people were invited to discuss their learning experiences from their own perspective, they offered detailed information about their individual learning difficulties as well as their particular strengths. Knowing that children make competent informants, adults need to ensure that they include young people's self-knowledge in processes designed to evaluate or address their learning needs.

We had not anticipated that “understanding and being understood” would emerge as such a dominant theme in the study. Finding that young people need to understand, and have others understand their learning difficulty suggests

(notwithstanding the importance of funding support services) that increasing universal understanding and awareness of specific learning difficulties would make a difference in children's and adolescents' lives.

Our finding that a primary issue for most participants was having their learning difficulties understood, highlighted the importance of supportive learning relationships with their teachers. Teachers already engaged in the business of supporting students with specific learning needs can be assured that their efforts are highly valued.

Conversely, most of the young people told of negative experiences with teachers who did not understand their difficulties. This suggests that there are some teachers who do not understand the particular issues faced by students with specific learning difficulties. Participants were aware of their learning difficulties during primary school, reinforcing the importance of all primary school teachers understanding the characteristics of specific learning difficulties, and consequently the struggle some children face in learning certain skills. It is the responsibility of teacher education providers to ensure that student teachers develop this understanding.

There are ideological debates in New Zealand education circles about the categorisation of specific learning difficulties: this was touched on by some participants. From the young participants' perspective however a culture of understanding in schools was more conducive towards their learning needs being identified and supported, rather than the label used. Participants in this study did not mind being given a diagnostic label, because it enabled them to refute accusations of being “dumb” but, as adults we need to be sensitive to impact of the terms we use.

The insight gained about the importance to young people of being seen to be competent in areas where they have special ability supports the findings of other studies. This suggests building competency in skills and roles beyond the classroom can help to build self-esteem and resilience in young people who have trouble with academic learning (Gilligan, 2000; Passmore, 2003). Adults would be advised to ensure that time and resources invested in addressing learning weaknesses is balanced by opportunities for young people to develop their talents. As seen in studies with adults, talents and abilities are likely to provide a bridge to a successful life in adulthood (Fanchiang, 1996; McNulty, 2003).

The focus of this study was concerned with the perspectives of young people whose learning difficulties had been formally identified and who were receiving varying degrees of educational support. It could be usefully extended to include learners who, unlike the participants in the present study, do not receive any support. Similarly, the views expressed in this study were offered by a small group of young people drawn from similar socio-cultural backgrounds. It would be useful to investigate this issue from the viewpoint of other young New Zealanders. There are many stories, from other perspectives, yet to be told.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate young New Zealanders' perspectives of their difficulties with learning. We found that it was important to participants to understand their own learning issues, as well as to have these understood by others. While participants experienced difficulties as students which compromised their sense of self, their experiences of being competent in other areas of their lives linked to a more positive sense of identity. Without negating the importance of funding issues related to provision of special education support, we found that what makes a difference for young people is developing an understanding of their own learning experiences, having other people (parents, teachers, peers) understand and support them appropriately, and having the opportunity to develop mastery in activities that they are good at doing and enjoy.

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