

**WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING US:
STORIES OF YOUNG NEW ZEALANDERS
WHO
EXPERIENCE DIFFICULTY LEARNING**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Health Science at Auckland University
of Technology

July 2005

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Signed

Dated

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to say a big thank you to the eight young people who agreed to take part in this project. It could not have happened without the gift of your stories. It is a particularly generous gift to let your stories go out into the world under pseudonyms.

I would like to thank the families who allowed me into their children's lives and homes. You may be surprised by some of the stories your children told, I expect you will be moved by others, and you will know there are many stories that could have been told that were not. This is a beginning; I trust the stories will keep being told.

Without the guidance and support offered by my two supervisors, Clare Hocking and Jan Wilson, I might not have arrived at the end of my story. Clare began the journey with me on a wet October night in 2002 when I was unsure of even where to begin. She set me on course and has been my mentor and ally for over two and a half years, as I have explored whole new areas of understanding. Jan inspired me to see how I could bring my love of narrative to a research context and has kept me focused on the process of narrative research.

My long-suffering family have been impeccable in the support they have offered me. My life partner Donald Milne has financially supported me throughout the course of this study. Without his goodwill and support, it would not have been possible for me to undertake this study as a full-time postgraduate student. More than financial support, he has offered me unstinting practical support and encouragement. My daughter Kezia has offered a great deal of support and provided a young person's listening ear. I also offer my thanks to my very patient extended family and friends, all of whom have made space for me to complete this project.

In terms of personal support, I would like to thank my friend and colleague Ann Paddy, who first inspired me to undertake this Masters Programme when I saw her story of success posted on the AUT website. She carried out a presupposition interview with me and has continued to offer me encouragement when I most needed it. Ann, along

with my friend, author Ruth Kerr, have constantly reassured me that learning to be a writer is a challenging journey.

I would like to thank the many individuals and agencies around New Zealand who helped with recruitment of participants. In particular, I would like to thank Trevor and Bev Crosby, organisers of the Central Auckland parents' dyslexia support group, for their special interest and support.

My team of proofreaders Bernard Schofield, Jessica Milne and Don Milne deserve a special mention for willingly taking on this task, under time pressure, and carrying it out so efficiently. I have also appreciated the services of Tania Churches who transcribed most of the interview transcripts.

I am grateful to the Post-Graduate Studies Department, Auckland University of Technology, for providing me with a financial grant, which covered many of the costs associated with undertaking the study such as transcription of interview tapes, travel and other administration costs.

My journey of understanding began with my brother, David Marshall and my sister, Tammy Ward. I acknowledge them both for their faith, their optimism and their well-honed sense of humour. I trust they will tell their own stories in their own time and in their own way.

This thesis reports on research involving human participants. Therefore ethical approval was sought from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee and granted on the 26th of March 2004, reference number 04/39.

Abstract

This narrative inquiry examines the stories told by eight young New Zealanders who have experienced specific difficulties with learning. At the time of being interviewed, they were aged from 9–14 years and participating in regular school classes. For the purposes of the study, being a student was identified as a key occupational role and failing to achieve tasks associated with this role was viewed as failure to achieve role competency.

The issue of learning difficulties has been extensively researched but rarely from the perspective of young people. A primary goal of the study was to obtain young people's perceptions of the experience of learning difficulties. This is consistent with international moves to obtain the views of young people through research.

Narrative interviewing procedures were used and participants were invited to talk about the things they enjoyed doing and felt they are good at doing, as well as the things they had trouble doing. They proved to be capable informants and provided a rich range of narrative data. Interviews were audio taped, transcribed and interview transcripts were synthesised into a story format. Each participant had the opportunity to check their story and give their final consent to its use as data in this thesis. As part of the analytical process, core narratives were constructed to capture the essence of each participant's story, their unique narrative voice, relationship with others and fundamental message. These narratives are presented in full, introducing participants as characters in their own story and revealing the nature of the stories told. In addition, thematic narratives drawn from the stories have been collated into three key categories, which relate to self and learning efforts, relationship with the social world and being occupational.

The narrative analysis found that learning difficulties occurred as a negative interruption in the progressive course of participants' story, with the potential to compromise their sense of identity and well-being. However, the study also found that when participants chose to characterise themselves in relation to occupations or roles in which they felt most successful, they were able to express a more positive and holistic identity than that of being "learning disabled". Furthermore, in the context of an

occupational narrative that included their talents and abilities, learning difficulties were not necessarily the determining factor in how life was for them or where their lives might go.

The implication of the study's findings relate to the importance for young people of not only experiencing competency in significant occupations and roles, but also being seen to be competent. This underpins a positive sense of identity and well-being, which is likely to link to their future. They need to understand for themselves and for those around them to understand, that it is possible to be intelligent yet have trouble with basic numeracy and literacy skills. Empathetic adults have a vital role to play in providing the information, opportunities and supportive context in which young people develop an understanding of their occupational competencies and become competent human beings.

There is a place for further narrative research with young New Zealanders; there are many stories from other perspectives yet to be told. Ongoing research conducted through an occupational lens is needed to understand the way in which young people with learning difficulties develop, or fail to develop, an understanding of themselves as competent occupational beings and how this supports or constrains their transition through adolescence into adulthood.

INTRODUCTION TO THE INQUIRY

Most people when I meet them and get to know them and when I tell them that I've got like a difficulty – it's a total surprise to them and it's like: "wow, really? Are you telling the truth?!" Because, I don't know, maybe it just doesn't occur [to them] that that is [so].

Amy 13

DELINEATING THE STUDY

During the New Zealand autumn and winter months of 2004 (April – August), eight young people, aged 9-14 years, volunteered to take part in this study to tell of their experiences of having specific learning difficulties. The following report is an account of the narrative inquiry undertaken to explore the perspectives of these young New Zealanders. At the time they were interviewed, all eight participants were taking part in mainstream educational programmes, albeit in different schools.

The phrase "mainstream educational programme" is used here to refer to a school setting in which children and adolescents are participating in regular classes with same age peers. The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993) which is inclusive of all students guides learning in this context (Quinn & Ryba, 2000). The word mainstream is used to differentiate regular school settings from special school settings, such as learning support units or special schools for students with intellectual or physical disabilities. In this report, there is no differentiation made between private and state schools. The young participants recruited for this study were attending either a state or a private school, and were following a regular curriculum irrespective of the level of their learning difficulties.

In this report, I have used the term "specific learning difficulties" as consistently as possible, in preference to "specific learning disabilities". However, these two terms are considered synonymous in meaning. Specific learning disability is the term most frequently referred to in literature relating to this topic. It is also internationally recognised as being a general diagnostic category, which includes specific types of learning difficulty: dyslexia (difficulty reading and writing text); dyscalculia (difficulty with mathematical reasoning); dyspraxia (difficulty with sequencing and organising self and

tasks) and attention-hyperactivity disorders (difficulty focusing attention on tasks combined with distractibility and emotional volatility) (Hammill, 1990). [Dyspraxia is now also known internationally as Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (Kirby, 2004; Missiuna & Polatajko, 1995).]

The categorisation of specific learning difficulties into diagnostic types arises from a neurophysiological perspective, which assumes a genetically based physiological deficit inherent in the child (Empson & Nabuzoka, 2004). However, children's specific learning difficulties in an educational context are usually identified as a functional dysfunction, related to the demands of the education curriculum (Empson & Nabuzoka). The New Zealand curriculum covers seven key areas of learning including arts, health and physical education, language and languages, mathematics, science and social studies. Identification of specific learning difficulties tends to link directly to underachievement in tasks intrinsic to the academic domain of a school curriculum, such as the aforementioned literacy and numeracy skills.

Performance issues with literacy and numeracy skills are likely to affect achievement in academic subjects such as languages, science and social studies. Children may also struggle with learning associated behaviours such as attention to task, concentration, memorisation and socialisation. Difficulties with co-ordination may affect their performance in co-curricular activities such as physical education, art, music and technology.

While children with specific learning difficulties are usually identified in relation to their struggle to achieve competency in literacy and numeracy skills, they typically present with average to above average, or even exceptional, levels of intelligence. This characteristic cognitive strength is used to differentiate learners with specific difficulties from those with more global learning delays associated with intellectual impairment, often known as slow learners. The definition of a specific learning difficulty is therefore commonly based both on the recognition of "what it is" (inclusive characteristics) and on "what it is not" (exclusive characteristics) (Chapman & Tunmer, 2000). In line with this approach to defining specific learning difficulties, the recruitment criteria for participants in this study excluded children or 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, and significant conduct disorders.

Based on the sample size, previously identified as including eight participants, this study can be defined as small-scale. However, as Greig and Taylor (1999) pointed out, sample size alone does not class a study as small scale. They suggested that complexity is another defining factor. This study was undertaken for a master's level programme, and was completed within three academic semesters, from February 2004 to July 2005. It was not expected therefore to achieve the level of complexity of, for example, a longitudinal study. The focus of the investigation has been to gain fresh insight into young people's experiences of living with specific learning difficulties, rather than to generate new theory. Therefore the small sample size is considered sufficient to meet the requirements of the inquiry (Sandelowski, 1994).

The age range of the sample group (9-14 years) reflects a stage in middle childhood and early adolescence during which I expected that participants would be confident about being interviewed on their own, reasonably articulate, and able to present their point of view (Engel, 1999; Smith & Taylor, 2000). As the researcher, I commenced the study assuming that young participants would make good informants regarding their own thoughts, feelings and experiences (Curtin, 2000). In addition, I anticipated that by nine years of age children's specific learning difficulties would be likely to have been identified and they would have developed a personal awareness of the characteristics of their own particular difficulties.

The central focus of this inquiry has related to the investigation of young people's point of view, in relation to the influence of learning difficulties in their lives. The question I brought to this inquiry relates directly to this primary intention:

What are the narratives of children and young adolescents (9-14 years) with specific difficulties in academic learning?

This question is broad in nature, to keep the inquiry as open as possible and to ensure that the narratives young people told were not constrained by my existing assumptions. To illustrate this point, one of the primary presuppositions I brought to this study was that the experience of failing to learn in school undermines children's self-esteem and

subsequently the development of a positive sense of self (Passmore, 2003). Keeping the research question as broad as possible allowed for not only the possibility that my pre-existing understanding (and that of other adults) would be confirmed, but also that it might be challenged. Therefore, a secondary question inherent in the inquiry asks:

Are there any new insights that adults can formulate, through understanding the unique perspectives of young people presented through their narratives?

I anticipated that young people's perspectives would likely differ from those held by the significant adults in their lives (family, friends, psychologists, teachers, remedial tutors and therapists) (Curtin, 2000; Engel, 1999; Greig & Taylor, 1999). Within the context of this study, I have used the term perspective to refer to participants' unique understanding of their personal experiences, as expressed through their opinions, attitudes, judgements, personal point of view, knowledge and philosophies.

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE AND STYLE

As I have already indicated, the primary goal of the study was to collect the subjective views of young participants. Therefore, narrative inquiry was chosen as an interpretivist methodology, which fitted this purpose. The narrative research approach is an emergent methodology founded on the notion that every human being is an innate storyteller and that every human being uses this natural ability to make sense of a plethora of personal life events, by forming them into a life story (Atkinson, 2002; Bruner, 1990). Based on the notion that the art of story telling is an innate human ability, which children develop early in life, I anticipated that young people would make able narrators and that their narratives would provide rich research data (Engel, 1999; Mishler, 1996).

Interviewing procedures, using a narrative approach, are usually unstructured, allowing participants to talk freely about their experiences, using natural conversation and story telling (Richmond, 2002). This approach was seen to be particularly suited to the needs of young participants. However, special considerations have applied. As the researcher, I was conscious of the need to be aware of the power imbalance, which inevitably exists between adult inquirer and young participant (Eder & Fingerson, 2002;

Gollop, 2000). I addressed this by taking a friendship role with participants, rather than an authoritative role, and designing the interviews to be as informal and indirect as possible.

Other interpretivist approaches also collect research data based on participants' narratives of personal experience. However, narrative inquiry differs from these approaches in the method used to interpret data. Rather than using complex analytical methods to "organize participants' words into a conceptual schemata" (Draucker & Hessmiller, 2002, p. 204), the narrative inquirer is interested in participants' narratives as phenomena worthy of study in their own right. Narrative analysis may focus on the narrative form (structure) and/or the content (meaningful themes) of stories told by participants in their interviews. The narrative voice of the participants remains a central aspect of the analytical process.

Giving young people a voice as active research participants is a significant way of respecting their human rights (Smith, Gollop, Marshall & Nairn, 2000). As a researcher, I took a respectful attitude towards children's rights. This meant, firstly, providing children with their own consent form as a way of acknowledging their ultimate right to consent or decline to participate, regardless of their parents' consent. Participants' rights to privacy and confidentiality were made clear to them. Respect was also shown for the stories children and adolescents offered in that the stories extracted from interview transcripts were based entirely on the children's own words. Participants were invited to check these stories and to give verbal consent for their use as data in the final report.

As part of the analytical process, the plot of each whole story was encapsulated in a core narrative, which captured each participant's unique narrative voice and message. A full account of this research process can be found in Chapter Four and results of analysis of core narratives will be discussed in Chapter Five. Narrative themes emerging from the content of participants' narratives will be discussed in Chapters Six through to Eight.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Generally young people's views are not formed in isolation from the social context in which they grow and learn. Accordingly, Grieg and Taylor (1999) have emphasised the importance of taking an holistic approach in research with young participants. They suggested it is imperative to socially contextualise children in research studies because they "are not mere recipients of their environment, but they influence what goes on within their worlds and are active in making the environment what it is" (Grieg & Taylor, p. 160). Children and young adolescents are therefore active actors in the world around them, rather than merely passive recipients of its influences. Three key contextual aspects of the young person's world include setting, timeframe and socio-cultural factors at both a personal and wider world level (Greig & Taylor).

In terms of setting, this study is mostly focused on the personal context in which participants act and relate such as home, school and community. The historical time period in which this group of participants is living, the early part of the 21st Century, is also part of their life context. In relation to socio-cultural context, at the time of being interviewed most participants in this study were living in two parent families and came from families that could be described as middle class, in terms of social values and socio-economic status. Most of the participants were of Caucasian descent, drawn from what is currently the largest ethnic group in New Zealand society, and commonly known as Pākeha by indigenous Māori peoples. As stated previously, all of the participants were attending mainstream schools (state or private). Most were living in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, although two were living in rural areas. At a wider social level, the structure and ideology of the education system and the values and attitudes of New Zealand society towards children and education influence the context of participants' lives.

New Zealand School Structure

Educational programmes in New Zealand are provided within a school structure, which begins with pre-school education provided in early childhood centres, such as kindergartens, from 3-5 years of age. By law children are required to attend school between 6-16 years of age (unless given an exemption for Home Schooling), and most

children begin formal schooling at age five. Primary school education is generally provided for children aged 5-10, in classes named as 'Years', that is Year 1 through to Year 6. Some primary schools continue to cater for children up to Year 7-8 but, particularly in the cities, intermediate schools provide an educational programme for children in Years 7 and 8 (aged 10-12). Following intermediate school, children move on to secondary schools (high schools) at about 13 years of age. High schools provide an education for adolescents from Year 9 (third form) until students complete their schooling in Year 13 (seventh form) at about 18 years. Although encouraged to complete a high school education, adolescents are nevertheless legally entitled to leave school at 16. The education system is obliged to offer young people a free state education up to 19 years of age. Following high school, students may move on to study in the tertiary education sector (Technical Institute, College or University).

Primary schools and secondary schools are structured differently. Primary schools provide a more generalised curriculum and children usually spend each year based in one classroom with one teacher. In secondary schools, students are usually grouped into forms or home classes but move to different classrooms to take particular subjects from specialist teachers. In the first two years of secondary school there are usually prescribed core subjects but in higher forms students have more choice over their specialist subjects. The current qualification system operating in most New Zealand secondary schools, implemented by the Ministry of Education in 2000, is the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). NCEA offers qualifications in a wide range of subjects at three levels (1-3) in Years 11-13. Adolescent participants in this study refer to this qualification system.

Beyond the school structure, educational ideology plays a crucial role in constructing the educational context in which children learn. The New Zealand education system is founded on an inclusive ideology of which the core principle is "that all students have the right to receive education within regular school settings" (Quinn & Ryba, 2000, p. 51). An inclusive policy allows students to take part in regular classes "irrespective of their level of ability" (Mitchell, 2000, p. 47).

Special Education Support

In line with its inclusive ideology, New Zealand education policy is building one system that caters for all students, rather than separate education systems “in which children with special education needs receive a different education to those without such needs” (Mitchell, 1999, p. 208). Therefore the philosophy guiding provision of special education services is:

Moving away from categorising students in terms of their disabilities – to making judgements on their needs for educational support; from seeing the reasons for failures at school as residing in some defect or inadequacy within the student – to seeing it as reflecting a mismatch between individual abilities and environmental opportunities. (Mitchell, p. 208)

From this perspective, there has been reluctance within the New Zealand education system to accept what is seen as a purely physiological categorisation of students with specific learning difficulties (Chapman & Tunmer, 2000). I have some sympathy with this view given that diagnostic categorisation of children with specific learning needs tends to medicalise healthy children, even more so when the term “disability” is used.

One unfortunate outcome of the needs based approach is that existing knowledge of neuro-maturational differences, associated with various types of learning difficulties, does not appear to be taken into account, and is even denied (Chapman & Tunmer, 2000; Prochnow, Kearney & Carroll-Lind, 2000). My own experience of speaking with other parents is that it is common for children’s specific difficulties with learning to be down played or misunderstood in a school setting. Nevertheless, I am personally aware of New Zealand teachers with proficiency in this particular field, whose expertise is founded on their personal interest and motivation in pursuing post-graduate education.

Another aspect of the needs based approach is that targeted Government funding is not allocated for a ‘mild’ learning needs category. Targeted funding is made available to provide services for students with very high, high and moderate special learning needs through the Government’s *Special Education 2000* policy. Specialist support teachers known as Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RT:LB) work in schools on a consultancy basis to support children with moderate learning and/or behaviour difficulties. In particular, Resource teachers: Literacy (RT:Lit.) specialise in

supporting classroom teachers working with students with numeracy and literacy difficulties. McCough and Bennie (2003) noted that just over one hundred RT:Lit.s were working nationally to support nearly 2,000 students, either directly or indirectly. RT:Lit.s also provide ongoing assistance for children who have continuing reading difficulties after participating in Reading Recovery, an early intervention programme that picks up emergent readers, aged 6 years, falling behind in their reading skills (McCough & Bennie, 2003). The focus in many of the Ministry of Education's reports on special education is clearly on students with moderate to very high special learning needs, including the most recent review (Local Service Profiling National Report, March, 2005). Overall, the resources that are provided to children with persistent specific learning difficulties are extremely limited within both health and education services, possibly because the percentage of students with these kinds of learning needs remains unidentified.

Concerned parents of children with specific learning difficulties therefore seek assessment and support from privately funded agencies, such as the Specific Learning Disabilities Federation of New Zealand (SPELD), Danks-Davis tutoring services or other providers. Access to private tutoring is likely to correlate to families' economic resources and this has been known to elicit the criticism that specific learning difficulties are a "middle class phenomenon". Countering this criticism are studies which have found an extremely high incidence of dyslexia when investigating literacy levels amongst prisoners (Kirk & Reid, 2001; Svensson, Jacobson & Lundberg, 2001).

INCIDENCE AND VISIBILITY

The New Zealand Government does not officially recognise the use of the term dyslexia to define literacy difficulties (Chapman, Tunmer & Allen, 2003; Vogel & Holt, 2003). Nevertheless, dyslexia is generally understood to be the most common type of learning difficulty. Private agencies providing specialist-tutoring services generally estimate that at least 10% of New Zealand's population experience specific learning difficulties. It is difficult to find empirical evidence to confirm this often-quoted statistic. However, findings from a recent international adult literacy survey indicated that at least 7.7% of New Zealand adults identified themselves as having a reading disability (Chapman, Tunmer, & Allen, 2003). Given that the survey focused on literacy

problems, and not on a broad spectrum of possible learning difficulties, it is reasonable to assume that at least 10% of the population in New Zealand experiences some type of specific learning difficulty.

While support agencies accept that learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, are prevalent in the general population, young people themselves may be unaware that their literacy and numeracy difficulties are common. Therefore, they are likely to view themselves as poor students, particularly in comparison to their peers. As well as this, children with specific learning difficulties do not display any overt sign of neurological disorder and are often referred to as having a hidden disability. To the uninformed observer these children may appear lazy, clumsy, disorganised, or unmotivated and are often unjustifiably labelled as slow learners. Due to these kinds of judgements, schools may not always provide a safe social environment, in terms of children's sense of psychological well-being (Brooks, 2004; Chapman & Tunmer, 2000). Furthermore, children's need for educational support often goes unrecognised because, paradoxically, in their efforts to do the best they can they often mask the difficulties they experience (Abeel, 2003; Chapman & Tunmer, 2000; Crawford, 2002; Levine, 2002).

STUDENT: AN OCCUPATIONAL ROLE

The notion of success or failure as a student links closely with the concept of occupational role competence. Learning undertaken in some type of school setting requires children and adolescents to take on the key life role of student. Trombly (1995) has suggested that "in order for a person to engage satisfactorily in a life role, a person must be able to do the tasks and activities that make up that role within the natural context" (p. 962). Therefore, the student role is defined here as an occupational role in that it encompasses recognised tasks, behaviours and actions. Achieving competence in the occupational role of student is a central issue in young people's everyday lives because they spend a considerable percentage of their time participating in educational programmes.

The student role is also significant in that it regulates children's daily routines (Christiansen & Baum, 1997; Matheson & Bohr, 1997). There is a well-known adage

that *play is the work of children* but once children begin school, education becomes the work of children, hence we talk of schoolwork (Larson, 2004). In my view, a significant aspect of the student role in children's lives relates to the societal expectations placed on it, as a precursor to the adult role of worker. There is a strong cultural link between education and paid work. Young people are repeatedly told that doing well at school will prepare them for doing well as an adult. Academic success is seen as the precursor to getting a good job (productivity) and financial security in the future (Mayall, 2000). Therefore, the expectation for young people to do well in school goes beyond parents and teachers. Society expects its young people to be well prepared and motivated to enter the work force.

WHY THE STUDY IS IMPORTANT

Despite a widespread societal emphasis on scholastic success, attitudes in New Zealand towards supporting students with specific learning difficulties are influenced by a lack of general understanding of how learning difficulties play out in children's lives. Generally I have found that people (both the general public and professional colleagues) have difficulty conceptualising that a person with specific learning difficulties may also be highly intelligent. To increase this level of understanding I have taken on board the view of two New Zealand researchers, Smith and Taylor (2000). They have highlighted the importance of giving young people an opportunity to voice their point of view through research saying that:

Children have been the invisible and voiceless objects of concern, and not understood as competent, autonomous persons who have a point of view. It is time for a new discourse which views children as subjects, rather than objects and as active participants in, rather than passive recipients of research, policy and provision of services. (Smith & Taylor, p. iv)

In a sense, young people with specific learning difficulties represent a marginalised group within New Zealand society in that their difficulties are neither generally visible nor officially acknowledged (Mayall, 2000). This lack of understanding tends to lead to a lack of recognition for specific learning difficulties as an issue worthy of greater political attention. By giving voice to members of a marginalised group, even a small study such as this can help in raising awareness of the issues faced by young people as they live their daily lives. As Bruner (1996) has suggested, whoever creates narrative realities not only confirms what is held to be true but "gains extraordinary

cultural power” by offering the opportunity to see what was previously taken for granted through “fresh eyes” (p. 140). There is an opportunity for children and adolescents, in having their voices heard through the processes of a research inquiry, to gain some cultural power in influencing the understanding of those adults who largely direct their lives.

From a professional perspective I see that it is important to bring an occupational lens to research issues because as Rigby and Letts (2003) have suggested “occupational therapists need to continue generating evidence through research and practice that supports the links among environments, occupational performance, and health” (p. 294).

RESEARCHER’S BACKGROUND

My personal interest in studying the issue of specific learning difficulties is seeded in my memories of the difficulties my brother and sister experienced at school. Today both would be identified as having specific learning difficulties but in the 1960s – 1970s not only were their difficulties not identified, they were very much misunderstood. I have watched my siblings work hard to reconstitute their understanding of themselves and find their niche in adult life. My brother, an avid reader and family raconteur, has a good sense of his competency as a builder, but really he would love to be a writer. My sister, after doubting herself for many years, has recently discovered her passion and talent for art.

The choice of this research topic is also grounded in my 15 years experience as a paediatric occupational therapist, working with children with learning and coordination difficulties (as one of many client groups). In my experience, few children flourish on being constantly reminded of their failings. Something that really stood out for me, in relation to children with learning difficulties, was their lack of confidence and their poor self-esteem. Poor self-esteem appeared to me to be a bigger hindrance to their future success than neurological or learning impairments. This is because I observed that children’s lack of confidence was often combined with a fear of failure. The fear of failure appeared to be expressed as a resistance to trying new or unfamiliar activities, or avoidance of familiar ones that were perceived to be “too hard”. It also seemed to

me that a key benefit of the occupational therapy programmes I offered was that children developed a more positive sense of self-esteem. This enabled them to move beyond the 'fail cycle' (not feeling good about or believing in themselves). My sense was that a positive change in self-perception and an increased sense of achievement, created a turning point in children's lives even when the learning impairment was not fixed. Because of these experiences, my perspective began to change and I became interested in the psychosocial implications of the experience of failing to learn basic numeracy and literacy skills.

Another factor that has influenced my thinking, in relation to this topic, links to my experiences as a parent over the last fifteen years. In this role I have had the opportunity to interact with families and children with learning difficulties as a friend, rather than as a therapist. This has provided me with another perspective altogether. I have shared some of the journey with friends as they have sought to find understanding and support for their children with learning difficulties, often in the face of significant barriers of misunderstanding. I have seen the difference that these parents make through their conscious efforts to support their children in developing their abilities. I have had the privilege of watching these children grow, despite many challenges, into talented adolescents with a strong sense of identity.

These three threads of personal experience have brought me to a place of consciousness around the issue of learning difficulties in young people's lives. They also interweave with new threads related to my ongoing professional development and future practice. During the time I worked with children with specific learning difficulties I was guided by a deficit model of practice. The focus of my therapy intervention programmes was on remediation of neurophysiological impairment, considered to be inherent in the child. However, while not dismissing the existence of neuro-maturational difference, my thinking has shifted towards an interest in the primary role that environment plays in supporting or constraining children's ability to learn and achieve. I have found that the shift in my own thinking aligns with a philosophical shift that has occurred within the occupational therapy profession, particularly within the last decade. Current occupational therapy practice is no longer primarily grounded in a medical focus on remediation of individual impairment or dysfunction. Rather it is based within a new holistic model of health and well-being, which considers the interactive relationship

between a person, their environment and what they need and want to do (Chappro & Ranka, 2005; Rigby & Letts, 2003).

Aligned with this shift in occupational therapy philosophy is the timeliness of the growth in qualitative research as a valid means to study the everyday experiences of ordinary human beings. Within the field of qualitative research is the turn to narrative methodologies, with their appreciation for the storied nature of human experience. This fits with my own interest and love of stories, which is echoed in Frank's (2002) statement, that "narrative analysis begins with an attitude toward stories" (p. 11). The attitude I bring to this study is a strong appreciation for narrative as a way of conveying personal knowledge and experience. Aligned with this notion is my belief that personal stories have the power to create fresh insight or understanding for the listener or reader. An understanding of how story telling could be applied to research was made clear to me in an inspirational presentation on narrative methodology given by one of my supervisors, within the qualitative research methodologies paper I took in preparation for this inquiry.

Another personal reason for doing this study was founded in my interest in the idea of health promotion. This interest is centred in the international discourse, occurring over the last 20 years, which offers changing views of health and well-being. I am interested in the notion that health promotion programmes can serve the interests of a larger percentage of a country's population. The connection to this research topic is that I am aware that specialist paediatric occupational therapists in New Zealand are few in number. In my experience, access to occupational therapy services for children with learning and coordination difficulties is not equitable. Few of the thousands of children who could benefit from such services will obtain them. I am also mindful that there is a limit to how many children any one therapist or remedial tutor can work with in a one-to-one context, no matter how hard they work. Yet information is power. By providing better access to information for a greater percentage of New Zealand's population, across all socio-cultural groups, children with specific learning needs and their families may be empowered to address the issue of learning difficulties in their own way. To achieve this I believe that we need to develop a better understanding of what young people and their families say they need.

Finally, my commitment to this study represents a personal endeavour to update my knowledge in relation to children with specific learning difficulties. In 2003 I commenced full-time study to upgrade my occupational therapy qualifications, undertaking a Master of Health Science degree at Auckland University of Technology. During the course of my study, I have developed an appreciation of how the stories that people tell about their life experiences can inform our practice as clinicians. I have become intrigued with the emerging concept of occupational story telling within my own profession. Through a process of occupational story telling people construct a sense of meaning and purpose in life, framed within the context of what they have done, what they currently do, and what they hope to do in future (Goldstein, Kielhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004). This study represents my own journey to understand specific learning difficulties from the perspective of young people who live these experiences on a daily basis, and whose voices are rarely heard.

OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

Chapter One is the first of nine chapters that make up the structure of this thesis. As an introductory chapter, it has delineated key terms, outlined the study's scope and provided an overview of research methodology, context and background. Subsequent chapters will describe and discuss the inquiry in more detail. Chapter Two reviews literature which affirms the importance of the study, expands the discussion of the study's context and briefly reviews an occupational perspective. The philosophical rationale for using narrative methodology in research is discussed in Chapter Three. Whereas Chapter Four details the actual procedures and methods used to conduct this inquiry. The nature of the narratives told by participants is discussed in Chapter Five. Narrative themes that emerged from participants' stories have been collated into three categories. These are discussed in Chapters Six to Eight, with each chapter representing a key category. Finally, Chapter Nine summarises and discusses the findings of the inquiry as a whole. This includes a summary of expected findings along with those that were unexpected, and a review of what has been learned and what remains unknown as a result of undertaking this inquiry.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is hard to peer through the tangle of adults surrounding children and pronouncing on their needs, and to look clearly at children themselves. It is still more difficult to listen to children seriously and yet more difficult to include children in society rather than excluding them. (Mayall, 2000, p. 127)

If we wish children and adolescents to change their attitude and behavior, the adults in their lives must have the courage and insight to change theirs first. (Brooks, 2004, p.1)

INTRODUCTION

The choice of the literature reviewed in this chapter relates to the study's philosophical position, research approach, key issue and context. I have proposed that it is important for adults to hear and value what children and young adolescents have to say about their experiences of specific learning difficulties. Consequently, I have reviewed literature, which confirms the importance of obtaining young people's perspectives through their active participation in research. Having addressed aspects of young people's participation in research, I have reviewed themes emerging from other narrative studies relating to the issue of specific learning difficulties. There are still few studies using narrative methodology to investigate this issue. However, I have explored themes arising from a small number of studies undertaken with young people and adults. This includes a review of themes emerging from adults' retrospective memories of childhood experiences of learning difficulties.

Individual understanding of the phenomenon of specific learning difficulties is often framed within a context of information offered by others. A brief synopsis of literature is offered illustrating the ideological context in New Zealand. This is followed by a review of the epistemological perspectives developed through research, which guide the thinking of adults who provide educational and support services for young people with specific learning difficulties. Finally, I have reviewed literature, which explains the occupational perspective I brought to this study. Discussion of occupational literature considers the way in which young people's participation and success in significant occupations and occupational roles underpins the development of a sense of identity and psychological well-being.

VALUING YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES

There are limited opportunities for young people to influence the thinking of authorities who govern their lives, however research provides a powerful means of giving voice to their unique views (Grover, 2004; Koch, 1998; Mayall, 2000; Smith & Taylor, 2000). The importance of adults listening to the views of children and adolescents, in matters that concern them, is well supported by New Zealand and international authors across a range of disciplines (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Grover, 2004; Kortessluoma, Hentinen & Nikkonen, 2003; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Reid & Button, 1995; Smith, Gollop, Marshall & Nairn, 2000; Weinstein, 2002).

As indicated in chapter one, children can make an important contribution by helping adults understand issues from a young person's perspective (Smith & Taylor, 2000). Two American education specialists, Reid and Button (1995), identified the voice of children and adolescents as missing within the field of special education. They reflected on the irony that in a specialty area dedicated to improving young people's quality of life, children's voices are virtually absent: "We do not know how they understand their problems and needs. We have studied them, planned for them, educated them and erased them. We have not listened to their voices" (Reid & Button, p. 602). A similar situation exists in New Zealand in that a reform of educational policies begun in 1989 has included government consultation processes with "parents, trustees, teachers and principals", while students have not often been "asked directly about their needs" (Bird, 2003, p. 38). The importance of hearing from young people who experience learning difficulties is supported by Abeel's (2003) memoirs. Abeel, who was diagnosed at 13 as being both gifted and learning disabled, remembered speaking to many groups of educators across middle America about her learning difficulties. She reports that she received feedback from educators regarding "how valuable it was for them to hear about having a learning disability from a student's perspective" (Abeel, p. 11). It is this often missing voice that I see as a valuable source of fresh understanding for adults interacting with children with learning difficulties, whether it be as parents, teachers, therapists, psychologists or remedial tutors.

Carr (2000), an experienced New Zealand pre-school educator and researcher who believes that children's perspectives can be obtained through natural conversations

conducted in everyday settings, supports the notion that children's perspectives play an important role in influencing adult understanding. As a result of an ethnographic study she undertook with preschool children to examine their perception of aspects of their learning, Carr concluded that children's perspectives are an essential part of the educational process. Her recommendation was that there are "two major projects for adults in an early childhood centre or a classroom ... the first is to seek the children's perspectives, and the second is to understand their own" (Carr, p. 53). Similarly, education researchers Okolo, Ferretti, and MacArthur (2002) reported on insights offered by an experienced American teacher, using a social constructivist approach to teaching students with mild learning disabilities in a mainstream class setting. The teacher interviewed reflected that:

I have been enlightened by a student's viewpoint; something that I never thought of in that manner, it took a child to help me see a different angle. Listening to kids in the classroom has helped me become a better teacher because I have learned to think like children think. (Okolo, Ferretti, & MacArthur, p. 311)

In making a mental shift to look at things through her 10-year-old students' eyes, this teacher felt she was better able to understand the importance of incidents from their perspective. She was therefore prepared to react to children's concerns differently (Okolo, Ferretti, & MacArthur, 2002). Brooks (2004), Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School, has emphasised the importance of adults being able to empathise with children's learning difficulties and the subsequent impact on their sense of self and well-being. He has said that he regularly invites children he works with to write stories about their experiences and then reads them at his workshops with adults "so that parents, teachers, and doctors can gain a better understanding of how children feel and can be more helpful to them" (Brooks, p. 2).

Another source of insight into childhood experiences and perspectives is through retrospective studies which explore adults' memories of being children. However, while there is benefit in asking adults to reflect on childhood experiences, adults cannot help but be selective in remembering early life events (Gross, 2004; White, 1998). Australian researcher Miraca Gross, internationally renowned for her expertise in studying children's experiences of living with exceptional intelligence, advocates obtaining young people's views in current time, while they are still young. Her rationale for advocating this approach is that "young subjects can describe their feelings, impressions or desires with an immediacy that is not possible from the removed

perspective of adulthood” (Gross, p. 41). In line with this view, American researchers Whiting and Lee (2003), in their ethnographic study with 23 pre-adolescent children in foster care, reflected that most of what was understood about growing up in foster care was based on retrospective studies with adults. They suggested that they chose to carry out their study with young children, while they were actually in care, because “younger voices are generally not heard” (Whiting & Lee, p. 288). The justification I extrapolate from these studies for interviewing young participants is that there is a form of temporal congruence in investigating childhood issues at the time they are being experienced.

As well as being timely, young people’s perspectives are important because, like adults, they have a subjective understanding of their own experiences (Gollop, 2000; Grover, 2004). Gollop, an experienced New Zealand researcher specialising in children’s issues and published author on children’s rights, has suggested that children’s views should be sought “directly from the children themselves” because they are the experts when it comes to their own “feelings, thoughts and perceptions” (p. 18). This contrasts with the traditional positivist approach, which has tended to focus on children as objects of research investigation (Gollop, 2000; Grover, 2004; Mauthner, 1997; Weinstein, 2002). Gollop has suggested that historically “much of our knowledge has been gleaned from quantitative research measures utilising participant observation, surveys, questionnaires or highly structured interviews” (p. 18). She has further reflected that children’s voices will only be truly heard when researchers come to interviews with open minds, regarding research outcomes and willingness to learn something from young participants.

One of the criticisms of doing research with children is offered in relation to their reliability as informants (Curtin, 2000, Scratchley, 2004). However, based on a full review of the literature on interviewing children, Curtin, an experienced school-based occupational therapist, stated that “children can be reliable informants and provide accurate accounts of their experiences” (p. 295). She challenged the adult bias that children are less knowledgeable and that their views are less meaningful or less valuable, suggesting that children are “different from adults, not inferior” (Curtin, p. 297). Similarly, Scratchley, researcher with the Department of Sport and Leisure Studies at the University of Waikato, has challenged the view that children make less

reliable research informants than adults. She carried out a study using a mixed methodology with 160 children aged 7-13 years to directly seek their perspectives and knowledge about health issues and health education. Her conclusion was that “children have a wealth of knowledge and experience about health and health issues and what they have to say is worth listening to” (Scratchley, p. 112). In accordance with these views, I assumed that children would make reliable informants in this study and have discussed this in more detail in Chapter Four.

While it is important to give children a voice in matters that concern them, Smith and Taylor (2000) have pointed out that this voice should not be seen as isolated from their environmental context. Young people’s perspectives are very much grounded in their social contexts, which include family, school, community and wider society. This overarching view of the importance of giving children a voice, yet recognising that their perspectives are centred within social context (contextualisation), is also emphasised by other authors (Dockrell, 2000; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000). The relevance for a researcher in acknowledging children’s voices as being grounded within their natural context is that children can be seen as active agents in their world, rather than passive recipients directed by the surrounding social structure (Davis, 1998; Scratchley, 2004). As seen with adult participants, children’s voices are likely to express varying views reflecting the diversity of their socio-cultural contexts (Davis). When young people are understood as active agents in their social worlds, and their voices are valued, it is easier to recognise that their voices are missing in society (Mayall, 2000).

As discussed earlier, researchers interested in children’s issues draw attention to the lack of children’s perspectives in research (Smith & Taylor, 2000). Weinstein (2002) suggests that this “lack of interest in and respect for” children’s perspectives relates to a historical context in which children’s rights have been “extremely limited” (p. 91). Giving children a voice through participation in research studies is a potent way of respecting children’s rights as they are outlined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Smith, 2000; Davis, 1998). Internationally implemented in 1989, and ratified in New Zealand in 1993, this legislation requires that all children are afforded the right to express their views on matters that concern them. Not only does this legislation underpin children’s right to have a say, it also

encapsulates the principle that those views should be listened to and given due consideration by adults (Bird, 2003; Davis, 1998; Wood & Tuohy, 2000). The New Zealand Government's document *Agenda for Children* (2002) further supports the principle that children have a right to participate in matters that concern them and to influence the thinking of adults making decisions on their behalf. For adults, the value in respecting this principle and valuing children's views is that opportunities are provided to gain fresh understanding and insights.

TALKING AND LISTENING: A NARRATIVE STUDY WITH YOUNG PARTICIPANTS

As discussed in Chapter Four, I chose narrative methodology as a particularly suitable approach to use in obtaining the views of young participants. I searched for other studies using narrative approaches specifically with children or adolescents with learning difficulties, but found very few. Zambo (2004), an American professor of educational psychology and child development, reported using an unstructured interview process in her study with 11 young students with dyslexia. Her intention was to allow "each participant to tell his/her story in a way that was most suited to his/her interactional style" (Zambo, p. 84), as a means of exploring children's educational experiences from their point of view. Her own perspective was that it was important to consider the social-emotional side of dyslexia in young people's lives, rather than primarily focusing on an analysis of learning deficits.

Three main themes emerged from Zambo's (2004) analysis of data. The first, "feeling different, being defiant yet hurting inside" (Zambo, p. 87), related to her participants' experiences of their dyslexia not being understood in mainstream school settings, which made them feel different. They attempted "to preserve their sense of self by avoiding tasks" (p. 88) that were difficult or covering their difficulties with disruptive behaviour. A second theme related to "the impact of learning about the dyslexic brain" (p. 89). Zambo found that being given "a rational explanation for their difficulties" and learning that their experiences were "perfectly normal" and experienced by others enabled her participants to reframe their sense of self-worth (p. 89). Finally, even when things changed for the better she found that "scars last forever" so that it is better for negative experiences of humiliation not to occur in the first place (Zambo, p. 90).

Zambo concluded, "It would have been impossible to understand the educational experiences of these children without talking to them" (p. 91).

Zambo's (2004) study was interesting because of her research approach and the similar age range of her study's Grade 5-9 participants, as compared with my study. However, her study differed in that her participants, having failed in mainstream school settings, were placed in a private American school specialising in special education for students identified as learning disabled. Her study was also not concerned with occupational themes, which have been a central part of my study.

In another American study, six adolescents participating in special education programmes in public schools were asked what being called learning disabled meant to them (Reid & Button, 1995). As a result of listening to their participants' stories, both in interviews and via written narratives, education specialists Reid and Button were concerned by the way in which students were disempowered by the education that was meant to serve them. They concluded by asking, "How can we develop their talents and show appreciation for their humanity?" (Reid & Button, p. 612).

The emotional themes in these American studies are similar to stories I have heard from the New Zealand children in my study but the educational context is different. There are no differentiated special education programmes for students with specific learning difficulties in New Zealand. This is why it is important to conduct narrative studies with young participants in a New Zealand setting.

LOOKING BACK: ADULTS REMEMBER CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

While the focus of this study relates to young people's perceptions of specific learning difficulties, I also reviewed literature discussing adults' retrospective memories of learning difficulties experienced in childhood. My rationale for doing this was to provide a basis for comparing the themes that emerged from the adults' retrospective narratives, with those offered by young participants. As with narrative studies involving young participants, I found there were few studies specifically using narrative methodology in relation to adults' retrospective accounts of their learning difficulties. Nonetheless, I found two American studies which specifically used narrative research

approaches. To broaden my perspective on the kinds of stories adults tell, I supplemented information offered in research reports with that offered by other literary sources, such as autobiographies and articles in the popular media.

A strong theme that emerged in retrospective stories offered by adults, on their learning difficulties, is the link between negative childhood experiences and a compromised sense of emotional well-being in adulthood, experienced as feelings of low self-esteem and anxiety (Abeel, 2003; Crawford, 2002; Daniell, 2004; Fanchiang, 1996; Golberg, Higgins, Rashkind & Herman, 2004; McNulty, 2003; Riddick, Sterling, Farmer & Morgan, 1999). Memories of feeling different, and indeed feeling 'stupid' as children, were carried into adult life. Some adults reported that as children they developed strategies to cover up their learning difficulties in order to appear more competent, and to avoid the negative reactions of others (Abeel, Crawford, Daniell). Others reflected that finding out as adults that they were dyslexic dispelled the fear of actually being dumb (Daniell).

On the positive side, adults remembered that support and encouragement from significant adults made a difference to their abilities to compensate for negative effects of learning difficulties in their lives (Fanchiang, 1996; McNulty, 2003; McWhirter, 1985; Patton, Polloway, & Schewel, 1992). In adulthood, an ability to strategise and be persistent in solving problems had enabled some adults to develop their talents and participate in society in useful ways (Fanchiang). Other adults were conscious of missed opportunities due to avoiding tertiary education (Daniell, 2004). Some studies indicated that being successful in adult life was not a matter of overcoming or fixing learning disabilities, but rather it was a matter of finding useful compensatory strategies to overcome barriers (Patton et al.). Adults reported that one of the elements that underpinned their success in later life was finding a niche in the adult world and by learning to compensate for literacy and numeracy difficulties in a work context (Fanchiang; McNulty).

I was particularly interested in McNulty's (2003) narrative study because as a social worker and psychotherapist he approached it from a psychosocial perspective. Using a narrative approach, he demonstrated it is possible to find common threads of psychosocial experience amongst individual stories, such as the link between negative educational experiences and self-esteem in childhood and adulthood. He examined the

life stories of 12 young adults identified with dyslexia, during childhood. Because he had himself grown up with a reading disability, to avoid the possibility of bias, McNulty had his interpretive procedures reviewed by two academic specialists, one in the field of ethnography and one in life story research. As a result of using a narrative approach he uncovered what he called a “collective emotional story” (McNulty, p. 371) in relation to his participants’ shared experiences with dyslexia. He suggested that this story included narrative threads such as participants knowing they had learning difficulties from early in their childhood; feelings of self-consciousness and difference; being aware that others saw them as different; experiences of being misunderstood; and experiences of public failure, with resulting feelings of shame. This highlights the value of doing narrative research with sample groups whose biological characteristics are usually considered more heterogeneous than homogenous, to reveal common or shared experiences.

One of McNulty’s (2003) key findings was that “even under the best circumstances, participants’ self-esteem issues followed them into adulthood and resulted in an added sense of insecurity” (p. 378). This finding was confirmed by an English study (Riddick, Sterling, Farmer & Morgan, 1999) which focused on the personal well-being and educational experiences of 16 university students (including mature age students) with dyslexia. Data was collected from the sample group using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The English study compared participants’ levels of self-esteem and anxiety with a control group of students without learning difficulties. Riddick et al. found that their group of participants had “significantly lower self-esteem” when compared with a matched control group (p. 227). The sense of low self-esteem revealed in these studies related directly to performance difficulties experienced in literacy or numeracy skills as children.

Self-esteem also emerged as a theme in the narrative study conducted by Fanchiang (1996) who used a modified life history approach with one young man who had experienced learning disabilities. Fanchiang, a Californian doctoral student, was interested in her participant’s occupational history and experiences, particularly with regard to how these had helped him to adapt to his learning difficulties. She found that her participant remembered the way in which childhood occupations had facilitated the development of his sense of self and his growth towards adulthood. He recalled that

his participation in specific occupations, orchestrated by his parents, built his self-esteem and gave him a sense of achievement through his success in work tasks, even as a young boy. In particular, he credited his mother with helping him build a positive sense of himself by teaching him strong values around goal setting and work tolerance. His parents' support throughout his childhood led to him finding work as an adult that suited his abilities.

Likewise, McNulty (2003) found that participants in his study identified that being understood and supported by family, friends and professionals was critical in helping them to compensate for their learning difficulties. McWhiter's (1985) self-report described his relationship with his parents as being a partnership. He explained that in a partnership approach, parents and children work together, with the specific learning disability positioned as the 'antagonist'. Another aspect of McWhiter's positive relationship with his parents was that he felt it was easier, with their support, to face his learning weaknesses. He reflected: "when one generally feels good about one's self, then problems are more easily acknowledged" (McWhiter, p. 317).

Factors that played an important role in building McNulty's (2003) participants' self-esteem and ability to cope with their difficulties were explanations, which emphasised their strengths. However, Golberg, Higgins, Rashkind and Herman (2004), in a longitudinal qualitative study which followed up 41 participants who had received remediation of learning difficulties, noted that their participants remembered as children their abilities "were often the 'losers' in the trade off between remediating weaknesses and developing strengths" (p. 231).

The importance of developing strengths and abilities as children is underpinned by Golberg et al.'s (2004) finding that certain participants achieved self-sufficiency as adults by capitalising on a special ability or interest. McNulty (2003) also suggested that although his participants' "life long struggles" with learning had "added sense of insecurity" to their lives, their abilities were important in compensating for childhood difficulties and for developing a "niche" for themselves in the adult world (p. 379).

Themes that arise in research literature are fleshed out in autobiographical literature, perhaps because the authors are able to process and interpret their own thoughts,

feelings and perceptions. Autobiographies also provide more detail and a greater range of experiences, particularly within the context of everyday life. Autobiographies written by two American women, Samantha Abeel (2003) and Veronica Crawford (2002), provided a powerful personal account of the frustrations associated with being highly intelligent, yet struggling to achieve basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Prior to beginning school Abeel (2003) remembered a carefree early childhood and that she felt like any other child. She began her school years with an idea of herself as 'smart' but this perception changed when she realised she was falling behind her peers in her literacy and numeracy skills. These learning struggles directly affected her self-esteem and social skills, making her feel alone and different. Although she had friends and did not feel 'picked on' by her classmates, she remembered that she lost self confidence, became frustrated and confused, felt alone and began to withdraw socially leading to a struggle with depression in adolescence and early adulthood.

Similarly, to participants in research studies, Abeel (2003) credited her parents as being her key source of support and advocating for her, despite years of having their concerns downplayed by education personnel. Crawford's (2002) parents were also a main source of support in her life. In fact she acknowledged them for "saving her life" by providing her with the opportunity to develop her talent for music, despite her inability to read music. Crawford writes that in her sixth Grade year at school her teachers informed her parents that she was not "very intelligent", but even as she struggled academically her parents looked for a way to preserve her self-esteem:

As my parents explored their options, they decided to find something I could do well. One thing they knew for sure was that I had some musical talent, and lucky for me, we had an organ at home. My parents found an organ teacher, and did I ever learn quickly! This was one of the most important things my parents did for me, and it may have saved my life. The sacrifices they made to get me there – the many drives an hour out of the way to go to the right teacher – helped me develop my skills. My mother was committed to helping me find success even though she was exhausted from working long hours; she made sure I had a way to show my ability. She knew that this was critical. (Crawford, p. 38)

The turning point in both women's stories was when their learning difficulties were identified. Abeel's exceptional level of intelligence and dyscalculia, was formally identified at age 13, while Crawford's significant level of dyslexia and dyscalculia was not identified until she enrolled in college as a young adult. A theme that comes through powerfully in these autobiographies, in comparison to the research studies, is that of

'double jeopardy'. Combined with a lack of recognition by others, Abeel and Crawford's stories indicated that they went to considerable effort to hide the extent of their learning struggles. They were successful at doing this because their gifts and talents masked their learning disabilities, but conversely their learning disabilities masked the true extent of their intelligence. New Zealand authors point to a similar situation with gifted students in New Zealand because of the conception that high intelligence and learning difficulties cannot co-exist (McFarlane, 2000; Moltzen, 2000; Sturges, 2004).

During the time I was undertaking the study, I became more conscious of the level of discussion on learning difficulties, particularly dyslexia, appearing in the New Zealand media. It became more apparent to me that the popular media could play an important role in developing a level of community awareness. An example of this was a *Listener* article, which portrayed some of the themes emerging from the literature previously discussed. The interviewees, two young New Zealand women, reflected on their experiences of growing up with dyslexia (Daniell, 2004). They recalled the impact of negative school experiences on their self-esteem, which had persisted into adulthood.

One young woman remembered her emotional reaction to school: "I didn't want to go to school for a long time. I hated school. It was horrible. I thought it was the worst place" (Daniell, 2004, p. 28). The other reflected that her confidence was damaged due to her learning struggles and she felt that she would have succeeded more if she had not been held back by "lack of confidence in my ability to be able do some things" (Daniell, p. 30). Her struggles affected her motivation to keep trying: "I basically didn't think it was worthwhile. I thought, 'I can't do it, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to study'" (Daniell, p. 29). As with studies previously discussed, these young women's difficulties with literacy and numeracy had persisted into adulthood.

In common with adult memoirs captured by research literature and autobiographies, these two young New Zealand women recalled not understanding their own learning struggles as children. They also reflected that people around them, including teachers, did not understand their difficulties either. Similarly, they experienced a turning point when their dyslexia was identified. One identified as dyslexic at age 10 remembered a "huge sense of relief" (Daniell, 2004, p. 29) when she finally understood why she was different but she also found little accommodation was made for her in a school context

after having dyslexia identified. The other young woman had recently been diagnosed as having high-level dyslexia, aged 34. Nevertheless, she reflected that finding out she was dyslexic was preferable to embracing her “worst fear” (Daniell, p. 29) that she was stupid.

Both of these young women had found their niche in adult life, using their intelligence and talents. One was undertaking a tertiary course, and commented that ironically she experienced more support and assistance at a university level than she had at school. The other young woman had avoided tertiary education because of her belief she was not smart compared to her peer group. As an adult she was socially confident, with a good job, but saw University as a missed opportunity, because she now believed she might have done quite well there if her confidence had not been previously damaged (Daniell, 2004).

Finally, the internet offered the optimistic story of Māori actor, Grant Roa, known for his role in the successful New Zealand movie *Whale Rider* (*Learning for Life ACE* website, 2004). Like other adults, in recalling his childhood experiences, Roa remembered that at school he masked his dyslexia and lack of reading ability by using his intelligence to develop a strategy of watching and listening. He also covered his inability to read by being entertaining, a comedian, and excelling at sport. He represented New Zealand at an international level in Karate and discus throwing. However, despite his obvious talents, by his early adolescence he had decided that he must be intellectually ‘slow’. As he moved into a career as an actor, he was forced to face his lack of reading ability when he was asked to do a ‘cold read’ in an audition. His mother helped him find a reading tutor and after six months of tuition, he succeeded in learning to read and now reads competently, including for pleasure. Roa’s story offers a positive message, triumph over dyslexia. His mother makes an appearance as an ally. If there was a common thread running through all the retrospective perceptions of adults, it was that others either supported them on their learning journey or made their lives more difficult through lack of understanding.

IN NEW ZEALAND: ANY OTHER NAME BUT DYSLEXIA

The understanding and perspectives that professionals and parents hold about specific learning difficulties is very much influenced by the lens through which they look at the issues. This in turn influences the messages, information and kind of support services offered to young people as they live with the experience of learning difficulties. Mitchell (1999), Professor of Education at Waikato University, in a review of a decade of intensive political change in special education in New Zealand has described this field of education as “a battleground as protagonists have vigorously debated a wide range of issues” (p. 199). Unfortunately a vigorous debate amongst adults, whatever their expertise, does not address the needs of the young people whom educational institutions aim to serve. Dr. Bird (2003), from the School of Education at Victoria University, has studied the discourse of what young people need in relation to special education support. She has pointed out that, within this discourse, the missing voice of the young people it concerns has largely gone unnoticed. Bird has further suggested that what is required is a “complete re-thinking of our stories about children’s needs” (p. 39). An example of this is that one of the participants in this study talked about being in a school where “they did not believe in dyslexia”, and he found this school did not accommodate for his learning needs. At individual, professional and institutional levels I believe we need examine the stories we tell about what young people need, and consider if they fit with reality of children’s experiences.

In terms of meeting young people’s specific learning needs the story in New Zealand is a muddled one. As I indicated in Chapter One, at a government level, the official story denies the validity of the term dyslexia (although this term is commonly used in everyday society) (Chapman, Tunmer & Allen, 2003). In taking this position, the New Zealand government differs significantly from other English speaking countries (Holt & Vogel, 2003). In a study of six English-speaking countries, American researchers in the fields of literacy and educational technology identified New Zealand as the only country whose government had not formally recognised specific reading disability (dyslexia). Despite the lack of official endorsement of specific learning disabilities as a special needs category, Holt and Vogel found that New Zealand has the highest rate of self-reported specific reading disability amongst the English speaking countries surveyed.

This may relate to the fact that despite an absence of formal government recognition, there is a reasonable level of public awareness in New Zealand (Chapman, 1992).

Chapman (1992) credited the level of public awareness of specific learning difficulties in New Zealand to the politically active agency, the Specific Learning Disabilities Federation of New Zealand (SPELD). Chapman suggested that, following its inauguration in the 1970's, the SPELD organisation actively lobbied and campaigned to develop national awareness of specific learning difficulties at both public and government levels. However, despite extensive lobbying by parents, professionals and agencies over many years the New Zealand government has not changed its official position. In essence the difference in perspective, between the government's ideological position and those of agencies who work to identify and remediate children's specific learning difficulties, is seeded in vigorous paradigm debates, or as Mitchell (1999) aptly describes them "paradigm clashes" (p. 204).

Mitchell (1999) identifies three key paradigm clashes, one of which, "Individual Deficits vs Ecological Considerations" (p. 204), I see as particularly relevant to this study because it underpins the question of whether learning difficulties are a health or an education issue. In relation to identifying the causes and characteristics of specific learning disabilities, this debate is centred in clashes between the "medical model" and "ecological paradigm" (Mitchell, p. 204). The New Zealand government's perspective is influenced by the latter perspective, in which social and environmental factors are seen to act as hindrances to learning. In particular, a strong lobby group of prominent New Zealand educationalists have resisted the medicalisation of learning difficulties, which they have seen encapsulated in diagnostic terms such as dyslexia (Chapman, 1992; Chapman, Tunmer & Allen 2003; Chapman & Tunmer, 2000; Mitchell).

The focus of the medical model is towards diagnosing impairment in the child and offering "some form of professional intervention and remediation" (Mitchell, 1999, p. 204). This does not fit well with New Zealand's inclusive education policies, which take a "non-categorical approach to educating children with diverse abilities" (Prochnow, Kearney & Carroll-Lind, 2000, p. 157). The story, however, becomes muddled, because current special education needs categories are termed 'very high', 'high' and 'moderate' levels of special learning needs. Yet it is evident that to access services

within these categories children need to have identifiable medical, sensory, physical disabilities, language disabilities or conduct disorders (Prochnow, Kearney & Carroll-Lind). In much of the Ministry of Education's own literature, it is clear that resources have for some time been targeted towards students with very high to moderate levels of special learning needs, based on identifiable disabilities (Mitchell, 2000). Some provision is made for students with mild learning needs within the New Zealand Special Education Grant (2000). However, a report commissioned by the government on its use, suggested that funding for children with specific learning difficulties in New Zealand was at that time inadequate or even non-existent (Burke, 2000). A recently published report (*Local Service Profiling National Report, 2005*), based on a round of public consultations on special education services conducted during 2004, confirms that the Ministry of Education's focus continues to be directed towards students with high levels of special learning needs.

LEARNING DIFFICULTY: PERSONAL DEFICIT OR SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION?

Intense paradigm debates surround the issue of specific learning needs, not just within New Zealand but also internationally (Chapman, 2000; Mitchell, 2000; Poole, 2003). The medical and ecological paradigm debates have tended to dominate research into the causes and effects of specific learning difficulties. The medical perspective has focused on investigating the neurobiological causes of learning difficulties, as well as developing strategies for intervention (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling & Scanlon, 2004; Stiles et. al, 2003). Stiles et al., researchers at the Departments of Cognitive Science and Radiology, University of California, have pointed out "dramatic changes in cognitive ability observed throughout childhood mirror comparably significant changes in the developing brain" (p. 641). Therefore, it is not surprising that there is an overriding scientific interest in brain structure and function in relation to learning difficulties, given that neuro-maturation is seen to be closely aligned with cognitive function. An extensive body of research, over a number of decades, has focused on the investigation of abnormalities inherent in individual brain structure and function, thought to underlie difficulties with learning (Vellutino et al.). Dudley-Marling, an American professor of education specialising in research on special education, has referred to this research as being concerned with an "in the head" pathology, seen to be "hardwired" in students themselves (p. 482).

Neurobiological research continues to make advances in explaining brain function using new non-invasive research techniques, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), to compare brain function in both typically and atypically developing children (Stiles et al., 2003). An emerging philosophical trend within this field of research is to view children with learning disabilities as demonstrating an atypical variation of normal brain development (Gilger & Kaplan, 2001). From this recent biological perspective, individual variability in neurobiological characteristics, rather than conformity to a known diagnostic pattern, is seen to be the key feature of learning disorders (Gilger & Kaplan, 2001; Stiles et al, 2003; Vellutino et al., 2004). Critics point out that diagnostic categories are not a good fit for children with learning difficulties because they are all different and “have more differences than resemblances” (Levine, 2002, p. 46). The findings from more recent research may fit better with their observations that, rather than fitting discrete categories, children exhibit very mixed maturational and learning profiles.

In contrast to the biomedical research, the ecological approach to investigating learning difficulties focuses on studying the relationship between the person and the environment, (Weinstein, 2002). Rather than a focus on individual deficits, the ecological perspective argues that what must be taken into account is that “learning and learning problems dwell in the activities and cultural practices situated in the context of social relations rather than in the heads of individual students” (Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 482). In fact, Dudley-Marling has suggested that “learning disability is only intelligible in the context of schooling” (p. 484). Weinstein has extensively studied educational settings in which children learn, and has pointed to human relationships as being the primary context in which “our capacity to learn is nourished” (p. 1). Her work highlights the way in which adult beliefs, assumptions and expectations significantly shape both the learning environment and learning achievements of students.

Results from ecological studies have challenged the notion of learning difficulties being “attributable solely to neuro-maturational variance” (Vellutino et al, 2003, p. 28). In an extensive review of over 40 years of research on dyslexia, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, Vellutino et al. discussed the results of ecological studies which proposed that the percentage of students with reading problems caused by biological

factors is significantly smaller than is usually estimated. They have suggested that these findings “are quite in keeping with the contention that reading difficulties in beginner readers are, in most cases, caused primarily by experiential and/or instructional deficits” (Vellutino et al., p. 28).

Whatever the cause of children’s learning difficulties, paradigm debates and fixed thinking do not serve to address the issues children face in their everyday lives. I have only touched on a few of the debates, which shape the messages in children’s worlds. As Bird (2003) has suggested, we need to re-evaluate the stories we tell and explanations we offer young people in making sense of their difficulties. We may then find we are working with a “constrained view” (Poole, 2003, p. 168).

OCCUPATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: DOING, BEING AND BECOMING

As part of my own re-thinking of children’s needs I have found an occupational lens useful in providing a fresh angle. The following review of occupational literature is offered to support the perspective that children are occupational beings and that learning difficulties represent a constraint in the process of “being, doing and becoming”, (Wilcock, 1999, p.1).

Occupation, Doing and Well-being

A core concept in occupational philosophy is that people across the age span are *occupational beings* with an innate biological drive towards purposeful action (Clark, 1997; Primeau & Ferguson, 1999; Kielhofner, 2002; Wilcock, 1995, 1999; Wilcock & Whiteford, 2003; Yerxa, 1998). This innate need for action drives people to engage in an extensive and complex variety of everyday occupations such as paid or unpaid work; education; caring for self or others; and play or leisure interests (Kielhofner, 2002). Occupations in this context are broadly defined as every goal-directed activity that people do in their daily lives, which occupies them and their time (Kielhofner). Based on an understanding that there is an innate human need to ‘do’, occupational theorists have suggested that engagement in occupation is vital for human health (Clark, 1997; Wilcock, 1993, 1995; Wilcock & Whiteford, 2003; Yerxa, 1998). This instinctive need for action is seen to work in partnership with a person’s more

consciously acquired needs and values to provide a sense of “purpose, satisfaction, fulfilment and pleasure”; in other words a general sense of well-being (Wilcock, 1993, p. 23).

Well-being can be defined as a subjective sense of health, based on positive feelings about one’s ability to act in relationship to environmental demands and expectations (Wilcock, 1998). As Wilcock and Whiteford (2003) have pointed out, inability to act in relationship to environmental demands and expectations is likely to have a negative impact on a person’s sense of well-being. They have suggested environmental settings which do not accommodate for individual difference, whether concerned with education, leisure, socialisation, or employment can disable humans as occupational beings.

Health and well-being, as conceptualised by occupational theorists, is then a holistic construct. In this way, the occupational perspective aligns itself with the ecological definition of health, proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO), rather than the more traditional view of health as the absence of disease or impairment (Law & Stewart, 2003; Wilcock, 1998; Wilcock & Whiteford, 2003). Occupational theorists, however, expand the ecological view of health, which focuses on the interactive relationship between person and environment, to include occupation. Yerxa (1998), for instance, has suggested that the occupational view of health is concerned with “a balance of physical, mental, and social well-being attained through socially valued and individually meaningful occupation” (p. 110). It is this concept of health that I have used to view the experience of specific learning difficulties as one that has the potential to compromise an individual’s sense of well-being.

Occupational Competency

Children, like adults, flourish when they participate in purposeful activities that give them an opportunity to develop their natural capacities into skills. Therefore, the rationale for perceiving specific learning difficulties to be a health concern is based on the notion that children’s sense of well-being is closely linked with their sense of competency; what they do and how well they do it (Primeau & Ferguson, 1999). A positive sense of self-understanding is built through using inherent abilities, which

Wilcock (1998) has described as “the building blocks of unique occupational natures and personalities” (p.47). Accordingly, Matheson and Bohr (1997), in their model of human development, proposed that occupational competence is built when an individual’s personal capacities develop to meet the demands of the task at hand, influenced by certain environmental factors (affordances). Using one’s natural abilities and developing occupational competence in real life situations such as home, school and community is seen as a “vital part of human development” (Law & Stewart, 2002, p. 640), and an essential component of positive self-esteem.

Consequently, when children are unable to meet performance expectations in a classroom context this experience is likely to have a negative impact on their sense of self and well-being (Primeau & Ferguson, 1999; Wilcock & Whiteford, 2003). The link between competency and health was illustrated by Passmore’s (2003) finding that participation in leisure activities significantly influenced adolescents’ mental health “through enhancing competency” (p. 81). Similarly, in his study with ‘at risk’ adolescents, Gilligan (2000) found that using their talents to achieve competency in personally meaningful activities built a more positive sense of self worth, in contrast to a previously negative one. Building a sense of competency in a particular talent or skill area is seen then as a basis for forming a positive occupational identity.

Occupation and Identity

Studies conducted from an occupational perspective, also draw attention to an inextricable link between occupation and identity (Christiansen, 1999; Clark, 1997; Kielhofner, 2002; Liaberte-Rudman, 2002; Matheson & Bohr, 1997). Occupational theorists suggest that a key link between occupation and well-being is based in the direct relationship between occupation and identity. Liaberte-Rudman found a “dialectical relationship between occupation and identity” (p.17), based on findings from three of her qualitative studies. She defined this relationship as one in which an occupation directly influences the development of a person’s self-understanding and identity, while a person’s identity equally influences choice and preference for certain activities (Liaberte-Rudman). Kielhofner (2002) succinctly summed up the relationship between occupation and identity by saying: “as each person lives a life, he or she develops an occupational identity” (p.143). Occupational identity has been defined as

“the degree to which a person has internalised a positive sense of self-understanding; for example, has an image of the kind of life one wants, sees oneself in a variety of occupational roles and has interests, values and confidence” (Goldstein, Kielhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004, p. 122).

Another important component of occupational identity highlighted in literature is self-efficacy, which is a belief in one’s ability to perform a task (Passmore, 2003). The thoughts and feelings an individual has about using his or her ability to achieve, or not achieve, is as important as gaining the skill (Kielhofner, 2002; Passmore 2003). In this regard occupational identity links closely with the concept of occupational role competency (Christiansen & Baum, 1997; Matheson & Bohr, 1997). As discussed in Chapter One, the occupational role of student is central in the lives of young people. Occupational roles not only provide a means to develop personal capacities and a sense of self, they are also a significant way of interacting with others (Kielhofner, 2000). In school settings, children and adolescents with specific learning difficulties are able to, and do, unfavourably compare their own educational performance with that of their classmates, adding to their sense of incompetence (Weinstein, 2002). Kielhofner (2000) suggests, “Whatever way we come to think of and experience ourselves in a role becomes part of our self-understanding” (p. 72). Therefore, learning achievement or underachievement underpins young people’s sense of themselves as ‘good’ or competent students versus ‘poor’ or incompetent students. Furthermore, being a student is a public role performed within an environmental context in which one’s successes or failures are not only evident to oneself but also to others (Levine, 2000).

Occupational Setting

Environmental context is an important component of being occupational. Law and Stewart (2003) have defined the results of performance in occupational roles as “an outcome of an interactive or transactional relationship between person, occupation and environment” (p. 5). Muhlenhaupt (2003) suggests that, in a school setting, this relationship is unique for each student, and occupational performance is “optimized” when there is a “good ‘fit’ between person, environment and occupation dimensions” (p. 181).

In terms of the fit between person and task, the concept of 'just-right challenge' is an important one because lack of challenge leads to student boredom, whereas too much challenge leads to anxiety and stress, and consequent disengagement in the learning process (Czikszentmihalyi, 1997). In terms of interpersonal relationships, Weinstein (2002) has emphasised the importance of "psychological resources and environmental support" in student performance, finding that "teachers' understanding of their students' attitudes and fears, strengths and weaknesses" made "all the difference in overcoming obstacles to learning" (p. 298). While a young person brings personal capacities to any learning task, environmental factors play a significant part in either supporting (enabling) or constraining (disabling) their occupational performance (Kielhofner, 2002; Muhlenhaupt, 2003; Primeau & Ferguson, 1999). This holistic perspective is an important aspect of supporting young people to develop their abilities to become competent learners, because its focus is wider than an emphasis on supporting the child to fit the environment. Often the changes that can be made may not be large, nor costly, but simple adjustments to tasks, routines or social interactions.

SUMMARY

This chapter has reviewed a range of literature, which supports the importance of listening to the views of young people with learning difficulties, through their active participation in research. A small number of narrative studies with young and adult participants were reviewed, as a way of exploring what is already known about the individual experience of specific learning difficulties. Themes emerging from these studies provide a point of comparison for the results of this study, which will be discussed in Chapter Nine. A synopsis of relevant literature has been presented which describes the ideological context in New Zealand and the paradigm debate surrounding this research issue. This literature has been reviewed as a means of considering how the official story about specific learning difficulties influences the decisions made in relation to information and support offered to young New Zealanders with specific learning difficulties. A discussion of occupational literature provides background information about the disciplinary lens I brought to this study. Chapter Three will discuss another aspect of the research lens, narrative methodology.

CHAPTER THREE

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Storytelling is in our blood. We are the story telling species. (Atkinson, 2002, p. 122)

The stories we tell and listen to shape who we are. They give body to our own experience and take us beyond the confines of everyday life into the past, the future, the might be. Without living in a world of stories, children can never attain full literacy. (Engel, 1999, p. vii)

INTRODUCTION

Critics question whether narrative analysis is indeed research, but Koch (1998) has indicated this kind of interpretive research is not a soft option in terms of its rigour. Narrative processes demand “analytical skills that move beyond mere documentation” and the skills of “writing, analysing, reflecting and rewriting do not always come easily” (Koch, p. 1184). The intent of Chapter Three is to place this study within a theoretical context in relation to its philosophy, methodology and ethics. Discussion begins with the constructivist paradigm, which provides an epistemological umbrella for interpretive research methodologies. This is followed by a discussion of the rationale for using a narrative approach in research.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL UMBRELLA: CONSTRUCTIVISM

As one of a range of interpretivist research approaches, narrative methodology derives its philosophical position from the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism takes an alternative stance to that of the positivist paradigm, which informs a more traditional approach to scientific research. A researcher, working from a positivist perspective, takes the role of an objective observer, investigating discernible characteristics related to an object, person or the environment. Observation is carefully controlled and quantified as an objective means of discovering new knowledge or truth, the results of which can be verified by being reproduced. Much of what is currently accepted as scientific knowledge in Western society has been developed using these standardised procedures. However, critical thinkers in the social sciences have challenged the notion that this established scientific method is the primary means to construct knowledge (Schwandt, 1999, 2000). Constructivism rejects the idea that there is one

fixed 'reality' or truth to be discovered through neutral methods of investigation, particularly in relation to human subjects (Crotty, 1998). By way of contrast, the constructivist point of view sees knowledge as socially constructed by human beings as they interact with the world and each other (Crotty). Furthermore, reality is seen not as a fixed phenomenon, but rather as relative to individual experience and fluid in relation to context and time (Guba, 1990).

Over time, a large number of quantitative studies have been carried out where children have been the observed objects of research and their behaviour measured or quantified. Greig and Taylor (1999) have questioned the emphasis on observation in quantitative research studies involving children as participants. In their view, children's understanding of self and the world is innately subjective. That is, children and adolescents live their lives socially engaged in a world of supportive, or non-supportive others. What they know to be true is constructed in relationship to the world around them. Because their understandings are constructed in situ, the assumption that they are knowable through objective observation and measurement is brought into question. Within their social context, children "are both the observer and the observed" (Greig & Taylor, p. 37). A constructivist research perspective acknowledges and respects children as "dynamic beings", interacting within their world to develop individual perspectives and personal realities, relative to their "context and culture" (Greig & Taylor, p. 38). The focus of this study has therefore been centred on what children and adolescents understand to be true about the experience of learning difficulties, as constructed in relationship to the world around them.

While the inquiry has been generally framed under the umbrella of the constructivist paradigm, the social constructionist perspective more specifically informs it. Social constructivism emphasises "the inextricable link between 'self' and 'social structures', particularly the interrelationship between 'self' and 'language'" (Crossley, 2000, p. 9). Language is essential to the construction of narratives in which the individual forms, presents and expresses self. Many authors describe how the socially constructed concept of 'self' is expressed through an individual's telling of personal narratives and language is essential to this process (Bruner, 1990; Crossley, 2003; Engel, 1999; Riessman, 2002; Sarbin, 1988; Wortham, 2001). The notion that self is constructed through story telling is particularly relevant to the young participants in this study, who

were not only engaged in the process of telling their personal story, but also in the ongoing developmental task of constructing a unique personal identity in relation to their personal sense of reality (Engel, 1999).

Social constructivist thinking expands beyond the concept of an individual creating a subjective 'social reality' through interaction with his or her environment (Crotty, 1998). It also takes into account that humans are born into pre-existing, socially constructed, collective perspectives of 'reality' and truth (cultural, religious, political or economic), which directly shape individual experience and behaviour (Crotty, 1998). In this study, home, school, and communities are seen as forming the pre-existing social context into which children are born, which shapes their understanding of 'social reality' as played out in their everyday lives. School provides a particularly crucial social setting for children and adolescents. In this context, they experience either affirmation of self, through achievement of personal skills and abilities, or are exposed to the public ignominy of failing to achieve (Levine, 2002). As indicated earlier, narrative provides a powerful way to communicate personal knowledge of particular experience, whether it is positive or negative (Frank, 2002; Koch, 1998). Under the social constructionist umbrella, as well as providing a means to study the interactive relationship between self and the social world, narrative research can be an effective vehicle for communicating children's knowledge, relative to their own experiences and social context.

THE STORIED LIFE: THE IMPETUS FOR NARRATIVE RESEARCH

Making sense of life experiences in a story form is a primary theme emerging from the body of literature discussing narrative and human nature. Narrative psychologists suggest that humans are innately geared towards narrative forms of thought and speech, and that this characteristic begins early in life (Bruner, 1990; Engel, 1999; Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986). Although narrative is essentially a form of language, the human drive towards narrative modes of communication is seen to encompass more than a desire to describe life events (Engel). Also emphasised in literature is the notion that the human propensity towards narrative provides a means to make sense of life as it is lived. Diverse and chaotic life events and experiences are brought together and synthesised into an ordered narrative format. Flowing on from these two themes of

narrative inclination and sense making is the proposal that through narrative expression people constitute a sense of personal identity, which they represent within the context of autobiographical stories (Bruner).

Narrative and Human Psychology

Key theorists have described human psychology as being fundamentally narrative in structure (Bruner, 1990; Crossley, 2003; Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986). Mishler suggested that narrative structure is embedded in the human mind as a “natural psychological unit” (p. 67). This notion is compatible with Sarbin’s notion of the ‘narratory principle’. Sarbin defined this as being the principle by which “human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures” (Sarbin, p. 8). He explained that narrative structures guide our thinking and action because “our plannings, our rememberings, even our loving and hating, are guided by narrative plots” (p. 11). The overarching importance of narrative communication to human life is emphasised by Sarbin’s proposal that narrative acts as a “root metaphor for human psychology” (p. 3). As a root metaphor, narrative provides an archetypal analogy which serves to provide a frame of reference for explaining the complexities of human social behaviour. Sarbin argued that narrative provides a rich metaphor for interpreting human agency because it “calls up images of storytellers and story telling, heroes, villains, and plots, and in the narrative that is dramatized, images of actors performing and engaging in dialogue with other actors” (p. 11).

This psychological capacity to frame life experiences in narrative terms is seen to develop early in children, without need for “explicit training or instruction” (Mishler, 1996, p. 68) and prior to sophisticated linguistic skills being acquired. The drive to organise life experiences narratively is recognised as being geared towards making meaning (Bruner, 1990). Technological analogies are often used to describe human psychological processes metaphorically but, as Engel (1999) reflected, “unlike a computer, we are always seeking and creating meaning. And meaning is what is most important about narratives” (p. 64). Bruner also suggested, the “central concept of human psychology is meaning” (p. 33).

Human psychology is not formed, however, independently of social context. Bruner (1990) discussed the significant role that social culture plays in shaping the narrative nature of “human life and the human mind” (p. 34). While supporting the concept of an individualised drive towards narrative thought, speech and action, Bruner emphasised the role of cultural influences:

While we have an “innate” and primitive predisposition to narrative organization that allows us quickly and easily to comprehend and use it, the culture soon equips us with new powers of narration through its tool kit and through traditions of telling and interpreting in which we soon come to participate. (p. 80)

This embedded orientation towards cultural narratives leads theorists to comment not only on the “narrative fabric of self” but to argue “that human life is itself narratively structured” (Freeman, 2004, p. 63). The idea that social life is itself storied extends into the idea that we are born into pre-existing cultural narratives with existing archetypal themes and plots that determine our social relationships, behaviour and sense of life purpose (Bruner, 1990). These cultural narratives provide the tools for addressing one of the recognised challenges of everyday human life, that of “creating order” (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986, p. 112).

Narrative and the Meaning of Life

Creating order is essential as Crossley (2003) suggests because “just to get on with the most mundane practicalities of everyday life, we need things to hang together, to make sense, to have some sense of connection” (p. 296). Psychological processes such as narrative thinking, reasoning, remembering, imagining, and communication are an effective way of “organizing perception, thought, memory and action” (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986, p. 123). Humans continually use these narrative processes to reflect on the disconnected experiences of everyday life. As “interpretive creatures”, we are driven by a need to explain “what is happening in and around us” (Crossley, 2000, p. 10). At an individual and a wider social level, language as narrative dialogue provides the medium through which people create chronological sequence, connectedness and a sense of order amongst their disparate events and experiences within the context of a story (Crossley, 2003; Robinson & Hawpe; Sarbin, 1986).

The importance of creating order from the diverse experiences, through storying, is that it also creates “meaning and substance” in life (Crossley, 2003, p. 298). Creating

substance in life is important because “when shaped as narratives, lives come from somewhere and are going somewhere” (Frank, 2002, p. 5). Story telling is a way of addressing the great existential questions about the purpose of life:

Story telling is an occasion when people co-author responses to Tolstoy’s great question of what shall we do and how shall we live: not permanent answers applicable for the rest of their lives, but crucial if provisional answers that guide what to do next and how to live now. (Frank, p. 8)

The act of telling personal narratives is then an integral part of everyday life, which serves to create meaning around particular experiences as life is being lived. The meaning of individual life is constructed by interweaving a number of smaller narratives into a common plot, creating an autobiographical story which connects past, present, and future aspects of life (Atkinson, 2002; Crossley, 2003). It is through the “process of autobiographical selection” (Crossley, p. 294), choosing what to include and what to ignore, that we connect with and take responsibility for our own life. Sclater (2003) summarised the concept of making sense through narrative and linked this to self, saying: “narratives not only help us organise and make sense of experience, and not only help us imbue our lives with meaning, but in these very acts of meaning-making, the human subject sculpts a narrative identity” (p. 318). Central to every autobiographical narrative then, is the notion of self (Bruner, 1990).

Narrative and Self Identity

The idea that identity is constructed through autobiographical story is central to the rationale for using narrative approaches to study human nature. Engel (1999) suggested that “early notions of identity are intimately related to, and flow out of, saying who we are to others and to ourselves through the narratives we construct about our experiences” (p. 186). She also suggested that the telling of stories is “perhaps the most essential symbolic process we can use to experience ourselves” and the ability to express self in narrative language begins early (Engel, p. 185). For example, a study conducted with nine Israeli toddlers, monitoring their unsupervised conversations, found that “spontaneous co-construction of narratives occurs among peers without any assistance from adults even before the age of three” (Aviezer, 2003, p. 378). Aviezer’s finding was remarkable because such young children had not been previously recognised as having the required interpersonal competence or linguistic and cognitive skills to construct

narratives in this way (Aviezer). Beginning early, the telling of stories continues to be “both pervasive and central during childhood” (Engel, p. x).

The central role of narrative throughout childhood links directly to the notion that through telling stories to others “we construct ourselves” (Engel, 1999, p. 185). Crites (1986) succinctly summarised the link between narrative and identity, saying, “being a self entails having a story” (p. 162). The two key ideas, ‘being a storyteller’ and ‘having a personal story to tell’, encapsulate important themes, such as the enacting of self and the construction of self as character. In the narration of an autobiographical story, the narrator takes on the dual roles of performer and author; physically telling the tale as well as presenting self as the central character in “recognizable story lines” (Wortham, 2001, p.1).

Autobiographical narratives used in research studies are initiated within an active story telling process, based on a relationship between the participant, as narrator, and interviewer, as audience (Wortham, 2001). The narrator appraises his or her audience, looking for signs of interest and reaction, pitching the story to make an effective impact by adjusting his or her tone of voice or gestures, and acting like a “particular type of person” to give dramatic emphasis to the story (Wortham, p. 17). Narrative self is represented in two ways as a person who is physically present and telling the story, and as “the narrative figure in the life story” (Crites, p. 162).

It is possible to explore the essence of this narrative figure by considering the notion of narrative voice. In the written form of the spoken or enacted story, Engel (1999) has suggested that the notion of narrative voice acts as a metaphor which “shares some characteristics of ‘voice’ used in a physical sense” (p. 154). In the written form of an oral story, characteristics of the narrator’s voice can be seen to be reflected in the type of language and tone used. Language may be rich or sparse; linguistic devices such as metaphor and analogy evident or certain phrases repeated for emphasis. Emotional tone may be conveyed through humour or direct expression of feeling or personal statements. In essence narrative voice represents the “story expressed through a person” and Engel has linked this to the concept of “the speaking personality” (p. 153). Studying narrative voice may then reveal something of the storyteller’s sense of self. The importance of the link between identity and self-narrative is encapsulated in the

notion that “without a coherent story of a personal past” a person can feel “acute unease” (Crites, 1986, p.162).

Narrative and Feeling Good: Psychological Well-Being

Well-known narrative theorist Mary Gergen (2004) suggested that many research studies, including her own, “indicate that the kind of story a person generally tells about some period in his or her life can have a dramatic consequence for that person’s well-being” (p. 270). For instance, Gergen found in one of her studies that older people who told stories about voluntarily giving up activities “were healthier and happier” than those who felt no such sense of choice (p. 270). Likewise, in a study focusing on “the psychosocially constructed autobiographical self and the psychosocial quality of life among young and middle-age adults” (p. 475), McAdams et al. (2001) found that the type of narrative adults told reflected their psychosocial adaptation in adulthood.

McAdams et al. (2001) proposed that individuals construct their life story in relation to a “redemption or contamination sequence” (p. 474) which is seen to link to psychological well-being. A redemption sequence is created when the narrator tells a personal story that transforms a negative life event into one that has a good outcome. A contamination sequence occurs when a previously good or positive life incident is seen to decline into being a negative one. McAdams et al. found that: “redemption sequences were positively associated with self-report measures of life satisfaction, self-esteem and a sense of coherence and negatively associated with depression” (p. 483). When people construct a positive meaning from negative life events “they tend to show better adjustment and health down the road” and, conversely, people “who see the good as turning into bad are less optimistic about the present and the future for their own lives” (Mc Adams et al, p. 483).

Changing or transforming one’s understanding of a negative incident or experience to reflect a more positive meaning is recognised as a psychological process known as ‘reframing’ (Gerber, Reiff & Ginsberg, 1996). In their review of literature on reframing, Gerber et al. argued that this process is particularly relevant to people with learning disabilities. They saw successful reframing of experiences of learning difficulties as being vital to “employment success and adjustment in adulthood” (Gerber et al., p. 98).

Reframing changes the perception of reality so that people are able to accept both their learning strengths and weaknesses, and view themselves as being able to achieve success. Furthermore, reframing is a dynamic process, ongoing through the life span, and “does not happen all at once” (Gerber et al., p. 101). Autobiographical narrative provides a natural context in which reframing can occur. However, once told, autobiographical stories do not necessarily stay fixed in time.

Gergen (2004) reflected that sustaining a stable story is often important to individuals, as a way of maintaining a sense of identity. However, personal narratives are not necessarily stable and can be told from other perspectives, at any time. In a study exploring the degree to which people were able to review their story, Gergen found there were psychological benefits for a participant in reviewing and changing her life story, in that she felt “happier” (p. 276). Crossley (2003) also discussed how narrative processes can be “used to rebuild” people’s “shattered sense of identity and meaning” when they are confronted by disruptive life events (p. 287). The construction of personal narrative therefore provides a way to reframe disruptive experiences, such as learning difficulties, which threaten psychological well being. During childhood and adolescence there are long-term implications for construction of self through story telling, such as future understanding of self and well-being in adulthood (Bruner, 1990; Engel, 1999; Sclater, 2003).

THE KIND OF STORIES TOLD

There is an archetypal story form embedded in many cultures, across history, that frames human story telling (the monomyth) (Joseph Campbell, 1956; Gergen 2004). When stories conform to this style of story telling we generally find them satisfying. Mary Gergen succinctly summarised the monomyth as follows:

The story is of a hero who sets off on a quest. As the hero confronts various challenges – fearful, dangerous, powerful, and/or seductive – he is changed. He becomes wiser, more powerful, and more spiritual. (p. 271)

Gergen (2004) has also pointed out that traditionally there have been significant gender differences in the type of stories told by men and women. She has reported that in her own work as a researcher she has found that while men’s stories frequently fit the monomyth structure, women’s tend to diverge. Essentially, the hero’s story is one

of personal empowerment, and it is a human characteristic to want to be seen as heroes of our own stories (Fleischmann, 2005). I have used the hero concept in this study, for both genders, as a way of capturing the importance of participants taking charge in their own life stories.

Narrative style is one of the strategies most frequently taken from the field of literary criticism and used in narrative analysis to differentiate story form (Lieblich, Rivka-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). This strategy defines the kind of story told in terms of a classic narrative typology based on four classic narrative styles: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire (Lieblich et al.). However, taking into account Gergen's views, I considered the possibility that limiting analysis of narrative structure to a classic typology may not do full justice to stories told by young female participants. Mary Gergen (2004) has discussed that the monomyth is traditionally told from a male perspective, with the hero presumed to be male and female characters playing supporting roles. She has proposed that girls need stories "which approximate the monomyth" (Gergen, p. 271) rather than traditional tales that place them in passive roles waiting to be rescued. I have therefore applied the hero concept to all participants in this study, regardless of gender.

I have also applied what has now become a classic tool, developed by Mary Gergen in partnership with Kenneth Gergen, to analyse the development of a particular story line, or plot, over time. Gergen and Gergen (1986) identified plot progression as taking three key directions: *progressive*, where the protagonist's story line "advances steadily" towards a positive outcome; *regressive*, where the story line "takes a course of decline"; and *stable*, where the plot is in a "steady" phase because there is no real change occurring (Lieblich, Rivka-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998, p. 89). Using these concepts, story tone and plot movement, it is possible to see what shape one individual's story takes and to compare multiple stories with each another.

The notion of progressive and regressive plot direction fits well with Polkinghorne's (1996) concept of two basic life plots victimic and agentic. He has suggested that these differing plots underpin the tone of children's individual life stories from a young age. This life tone is either one of "optimism and hope" (agentic) or "mistrust and resignation" (victimic) (Polkinghorne, p. 301). He defines a victimic plot as one in which

“the protagonist is passive and receptive” (p, 301). Characters in this type of plot do their best to avoid the impact of the negative experiences, rather than seeking “positive possibilities”, and feel like their lives are “shaped by conditions beyond their control” (Polkinghorne, p. 302). Whereas in an agentic plot, protagonists have a sense of purpose, are confident in their abilities and have a sense of being able to accomplish their own goals (Polkinghorne).

As well as the archetypal form and plot direction of stories, I have considered other story forms as being relevant to this study. One of these is the notion of counter narrative. Based on research with participants who had experienced traumatic life events, Carney (2004) suggested that triumphant stories of survival from severe physical or psychological trauma, promoted through modern media, have become so embedded in the Western psyche that Western society is most receptive to survival or recovery stories, which idealise their survivors. She reflects that the expectation in society is “that the victim of survival, though battered, will ‘overcome’ or ‘move on’ or, best yet ‘triumph’ over trauma” (p. 202). Carney’s concern is that a fixation on the overcoming or ‘turning bad into good’ in Western consciousness has the effect of denying the counter narrative where the individual has not overcome or is not triumphant. Therefore, there is little tolerance in society for a story where the protagonist shares a counter reality to that of ‘over comer’. Such stories risk being denied, or ignored.

Another type of narrative I considered is the adventure narrative (Scheibe, 1986). Scheibe proposed, “The form of human activity known as adventure has a central role to play in the construction and development of life stories” (p. 130). He maintained, “People require adventures in order for satisfactory life stories to be constructed and maintained” (Scheibe, p. 131). The compulsion towards adventure depends on individual temperament for whom the ordinariness of life is a trial and sees adventure as a “compulsion to play”, a means to “avoid the seriousness [of life]” (Scheibe, p. 148). Adventurous activities can be seen as a kind of mini drama being played out so that an individual can engage in an activity with an element of risk, put life on the line, and return safely to triumphantly tell the tale. In this sense, Scheibe likened the participation in adventure activities to a replay of the romance narrative in which the hero sets out on a mission to overcome some quintessential challenge and returns

triumphant, having achieved the task at risk of life and limb. Adventure stories frequently featured in interviews with the young participants in this study.

Finally, I have taken into account the idea of occupational story telling. Occupational narratives can reveal unique personal perspectives about the complexity of occupational roles and occupations, and the part they play in a person's life (Clark, Ennevor & Richardson, 1996; Goldstein, Kielhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004; Molineux & Rickard; Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). Gathering occupational stories is seen as a valuable way to "make sense of what people do" (Molineux & Rickard, 2003, p. 54). Kielhofner (2002) has suggested, "Both our identity and our competence are reflected and enacted in the stories with which we make sense of and go about doing our occupational lives. In the end, our adaptation, or lack thereof, is reflected in how we tell and enact our occupational narratives" (p. 127).

USING A NARRATIVE APPROACH

In discussing the philosophical rationale that underpins narrative methodology, I have highlighted the innate drive human beings have to tell stories (Atkinson, 2002; Bruner, 1990; Clandinn & Connelly, 2000; Mishler, 1996; Riessman, 1993; Sarbin, 1986). Myths, legends and folklore are seen as providing the archetypal form of the stories that people repeatedly tell in everyday modern life (Bruner; Engel, 1999; Frank, 2002; Gergen & Gergen, 1986). As has already been discussed, we tell stories not only to entertain others, but also to organise and make sense of our experiences (Bruner; Engel; Molineux & Rikard, 2003; Riessman, 2002; Sarbin). In doing so we interpret our own lives, create a sense of identity and develop an individual purpose or direction in life. This understanding of the central place of narrative in human life provides a useful theoretical framework for narrative methodology, which seeks to understand human experience.

Narrative researchers Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that because humans "understand and experience the world narratively", it makes sense to "study that experience narratively" (p. 17). Connelly illustrated this concept with a story about Jean Clandinin's previous involvement in a quantitative research project with children with

reading difficulties. For the purpose of evaluation, children's experiences were computed into tests scores. However, Clandinin looked beyond the scores:

She knew these children knew something about their stories as children told them to her and knew something about the stories that their teachers and parents told them. They were much more than their test scores. Their lives were filled with complexities, with hopes, with dreams, with wishes and with intentions. Though the research community, with its reverence for numbers, focused on correlations, Jean thought about the children's lives. (Clandinin and Connelly, p. xxiv)

Other narrative researchers have also reported their change in direction, from traditional methods, towards using narrative methodologies in the study of human experience (Draucker & Hessmiller, 2002; Riessman, 2002). This has typically occurred as experienced researchers have become aware of the rich information contained in long narratives told by participants in response to structured interview questions. Originally, because interviewers were expecting a more concise answer, long narratives were perceived as having drifted from the focus of the investigation. It is through this customary use of personal narrative in qualitative research, combined with the recognition that participants' stories are in themselves sources of rich data that narrative procedures have emerged as a methodology in their own right (Riessman). In a research context, narrative philosophy informs a variety of different approaches including life history, narrative inquiry, case study, and ethnography.

Narrative approaches collect narratives using unstructured interviewing procedures that recognise and respect the natural conventions of oral story telling. The conventions of story telling allow participants to tell their narratives in a natural way, rather than being constrained by more formalised interview procedures (Engel, 1999; Richmond, 2002). The form that a life story takes is as of much interest to narrative researchers as its narrative themes, particularly with regard to what it reveals about the participant's life patterns and sense of self. Narrative approaches enable the researcher to take a co-author role in synthesising and reporting the narratives collected, to preserve the integrity of each participant's story. There is an emphasis on hearing the participant's voice, which implies that narrative methodology is a good fit for this inquiry.

Theorists have argued that the narrative approach is a powerful way to give research participants a voice because "story telling has been used for centuries as a powerful

vehicle for communication” (Koch, 1998, p. 1182). Over the last 25 years, from the late 1970’s to 2004, the use of a narrative approach has steadily increased, representing a ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences. Narrative methodology has subsequently developed to become an interdisciplinary process crossing a variety of disciplines including psychology, ethnography, oral history, education and the new discipline of occupational science, which informs occupational therapy practice (Bruner, 1990; Goldstein, Kielhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993; Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000).

As an emergent methodology, the rationale for using narrative methodology in research is now well documented. However, its methods and procedures are not as well prescribed as more established qualitative approaches, which also use personal narrative as data, such as grounded theory or phenomenology (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). While qualitative research has gained standing in the research world, narrative methodology, as an emergent approach, attracts its critics.

NARRATIVE TRUTH

As previously acknowledged, critics tend to question the value of personal stories as a source of research data (Frank, 2002; Koch, 1998). One of the challenges levelled at narrative methodology, by “the knockers”, concerns the question of the truthfulness of people’s narratives (Frank, p. 7). However, narrative methods, in contrast to the positivist perspective of objective truth, approach the issue of truth differently. Conle (2000) reflected, “What counts in narrative inquiry is the meaning that actions and intentions have for the protagonists” (p. 52). Atkinson (2002) who suggested that the meaning of story is more important than its exact details supports this view. Atkinson has proposed that:

Historical truth is not the main issue in narrative; telling a story implies a certain maybe unique, point of view. It is more important that the life story be deemed “trustworthy” than that it be “true”. We are seeking the subjective reality, after all. (p.134)

In this inquiry, I have accepted the narratives of the young participants as being trustworthy. By way of example, I did not formally interview parents to cross check the facts of children’s stories. During informal conversation when I arrived for interviews or was taking my leave, parents often confirmed the facts of their children’s narratives

without being aware they were doing so. For example, one mother asked if I realised that her daughter “did a bungee jump last week and organised the whole thing herself?” I formed the impression, from parents’ informal comments, that young participants in fact tell quite ‘sparse’ stories in terms of detail. Rather than over-dramatising their difficulties in their stories, it seemed to me that they tended to minimise them. Parents often shared information with me that demonstrated just how difficult school situations really were for their children. Another mother shared an anecdote of her daughter’s misery of failing yet again to achieve in a class project, and hiding out in the girls’ changing room to recover from her upset. Despite the insights parents might have potentially offered, I chose to highlight children’s competency as research informants by setting out to present stories compiled only from information given by the participants themselves. Interesting background narratives offered by parents have not been included, but any clarifying detail provided by parents is contained in footnotes.

SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the philosophical rationale that underpins narrative research methodology. It has been suggested that human life is itself storied because as human beings we use narrative thought and communication processes to make sense of life experiences and to construct a sense of self-identity. The fact that our understanding of our world and ourselves is narratively constructed has been put forward as a justification for undertaking research using a narrative approach. It has been further suggested that narrative methodology provides a good fit for this inquiry because it enables young participants to make sense of their experiences within the natural context of ordinary conversation and story telling. In relation to this claim, the actual methods and procedures used in this study are described next, in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

If you haven't had dyslexia or anything like that you shouldn't even try to - unless you interview children, like you have - even try to just sort of go "oh, yeah, kids like dyslexia. Kids want to have dyslexia. They do not get picked on at school - nothing happens to them". If you just say that and say "that's what I know", when you've done nothing to research it or anything, I think that's like absurd.

Bob, 11 years

INTRODUCTION

The researcher's role in narrative research is a comprehensive one: as collaborator; a 'listener' providing an audience for the construction of the story during an interview, an interpreter during analysis, and as author in presenting participants' voices through written stories to a wider audience of readers. Chapter Three has discussed the philosophical focus of the methodology, whereas this chapter describes the methods and procedures by which it has been carried out. These have included the recruitment of participants, dissemination of information to potential participants and their families, and obtaining consent from volunteers. Also included are interviewing methods for collecting data, analytical processes for processing the data and procedures for documenting and discussing results. I undertake to illustrate this research process, in this chapter, with the aim of providing the reader with 'sign-posts' for evaluating the study's worthiness (Koch, 1998).

The study's rigour is grounded in the integrity of these methods and procedures (Angen, 2000). In relation to human participants, rigour is also grounded in the integrity of the study's ethical practices such as affirming participants' right to informed consent, confidentiality, and to sight and approve the use of interview data. Ethical approval for the study's research design was sought through the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee and granted on the 26th of March 2004 (see Appendix A).

SAMPLING METHOD

I selected snowball sampling as a recruitment method. This involved using word of mouth networks to disseminate research information to individuals and agencies who might help recruit volunteers who met the study's criteria (Grbich, 1999). My choice of snowball sampling was influenced by my perception that there are significant numbers of children in the population experiencing specific learning difficulties. I was also aware of an existing communication network made up of parent support groups, agencies, and professionals working in the field. Based on these factors, my expectation was that it would be reasonably easy to recruit a sample group of eight to ten participants.

My two research supervisors, observing the amount of data my first few interviews generated, recommended that a sample group of eight participants would be likely to provide enough data for a masters level study. As the goal of the study was to elicit participants' perspectives, with a view to gaining new insights, the sample size of 8 participants has been considered adequate for this purpose. Rather than the size of the sample group, the integrity of the collected data may be evaluated in terms of the richness of the information obtained from participants' interviews (Sandelowski, 1994).

Participant criteria

The main criterion for recruitment of participants was that they had experienced specific learning difficulties. In information provided to recruiters, children and families, types of specific learning difficulties were specified as being: difficulty reading and writing text (dyslexia); difficulty with mathematical reasoning (dyscalculia); difficulty with sequencing and organising self and tasks (dyspraxia); difficulty focusing attention on tasks combined with distractibility and emotional volatility (attention deficits) (see Appendices B, E & F). Essential criteria also included children's age, 9-14 years; New Zealand citizenship, and participation as students in regular classrooms. Gender, ethnicity and geographical region were not considered essential criteria but were taken into account.

Participants were also required to have been evaluated as having one of the specified types of learning difficulty. Formal identification of specific learning difficulties was recognised as being provided by Educational Psychologists (Group Special Education

or Private). Assessments provided by professionals working within Child Health Services and private agencies, such as the Specific Learning Difficulties Federation (SPELD), were also accepted. While participants needed to have been formally identified as having some type of specific learning difficulty, they did not need to be receiving, or have previously received, specialist intervention or learning support.

In line with the usual approach to categorising children with specific learning difficulties, children with learning delays resulting from other types of disabilities were excluded from the study (Chapman & Tunmer, 2000; Empson & Nabuzoka, 2004; Hamill, 1990). Exclusion criteria covered any child or adolescent with sensory impairments such as hearing or vision disabilities; neurodevelopmental disabilities such as cerebral palsy, head injury, or acquired neurological impairments following acute or chronic illness; global developmental delay due to congenital syndromes such as Down's syndrome or Autism. Children with conduct disorders, such as significant psychosocial difficulties, were also excluded.

RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES

I began recruitment with an introductory e-mail to key agencies providing services and support for children and their families. Some of these agencies replied enthusiastically supporting the concept of the study. Once I had received ethical approval, I distributed one hundred and fifty pamphlets, designed by myself (see Appendix B), to potential recruiters around New Zealand. These included individual professionals working with children with special learning needs, agencies such as the Learning and Behavioural Charitable Trust (LBCTNZ), Specific Learning Disabilities Federation of New Zealand (SPELD), Danks-Davis Tutoring, Talk Link, Child Health Services, Dyspraxia Support Group of New Zealand, and a Dyslexia parent support group. I also met with the Team Leader of Group Special Education's Māori Focus Team to present some information about the study.

Pamphlets were designed to provide children and their families with a general introduction to the study. Agencies or individuals who agreed to act as recruiters were asked to pass the pamphlets on to families with children they felt might be interested and who met the criteria. I anticipated that, if young people were interested in taking

part, their parents or caregivers would contact me directly. I set up an 0800 telephone number for this purpose, which was printed on the introductory pamphlet. No direct referrals were taken from recruiters, although two rang me to check whether a particular young person met the required criteria. Other options provided for families to make contact were an e-mail address and a postal box.

In designing the study, I made a conscious decision not to recruit children directly through schools. This was due to my concern that it might be difficult to protect young people's anonymity if their participation in the study came to the attention of their classmates or teachers. I also felt that it was preferable that the first point of contact be made with parents or caregivers because this would respect their role as children's guardians. A good outcome of this decision was that participants recruited for the study were all in different schools representing a variety of settings including both private and public, city and rural schools, at primary, intermediate and high school levels.

The recruitment process generally worked as planned with most parents making contact by telephone, and two did so by e-mail. One potential participant rang me herself and her parents confirmed that they had given consent for her to volunteer. An informal screening process was used during the initial telephone call to check that recruits met the study's criteria (see Appendix D). Once I ascertained that the child met recruitment criteria, and parents expressed an interest in proceeding, separate parent/caregiver and children's information sheets and consent forms were forwarded to them by post, or by e-mail attachment (see Appendices E, F, G, H). Following a minimum 'cool down' period of one week, I made a follow up phone call to see if parents and children were willing to volunteer.

In all, fifteen parents contacted me to express interest in participating in the project. Of these, ten confirmed their child's willingness to participate. One mother reported that her children had decided not to take part after reading the information sheets. She commented that this was because their learning difficulties had been identified early, they felt that they had received good support throughout their schooling and they did not feel learning difficulties were a "big issue" in their lives.

The recruitment process was successful in that more volunteers than required contacted me. While more boys than girls volunteered to take part, I chose to balance gender numbers through purposive selection. I made contact with a wide range of potential recruiters and received many expressions of goodwill towards the study. While I recruited the first three participants quickly, it took more time than I had anticipated recruiting a small research sample. This was my first real surprise in carrying out the project.

I learned that engaging with potential recruiters is an important part of the recruitment process. Overall, I found the best recruitment response was from people who knew of my background, or with whom I spoke in person. I also received a good response from professionals who had experiences of their own children struggling with learning difficulties, or parents who had the opportunity to talk with me about the study. Unfortunately, these respondents often knew of young people experiencing learning difficulties but they fell outside the stipulated age range. My understanding now is that it takes time for a recruitment process to gather momentum, particularly when participants are sought from vulnerable or minority groups. An indication of this was that two inquiries were received after interviews had been completed and analysis of data had begun. Once interviewing of all eight participants was complete, and they had given a final consent to the data being used in the study, remaining volunteers were sent a letter thanking them for their interest but saying they would not be required.

PARTICIPANTS' CHARACTERISTICS

In the spirit of allowing the young participants to speak for themselves, I deliberately chose not to formally interview parents for background information about their children. I therefore did not set out to collect detailed demographic information about the participants. However, I have documented some background information told to me by the participants themselves during interviews, by their parents, or based on my own informal observations. Confirmation of details was only sought from parents as required to determine whether prospective participants met the inclusion criteria. Where it was evident a participant's level of verbal skill demonstrated an exceptional level of intelligence I checked this with the participants' parents. They confirmed this ability level with information taken from the psychologist's report.

As mentioned earlier, I sought participants who were likely to be articulate. I assumed that this was a realistic expectation because in many cases young people who have specific difficulties with reading and writing text are particularly talented at expressing themselves orally. This indeed proved to be the case. Most of the participants were extremely articulate and very able when expressing their views. One participant with expressive language difficulties was not as voluble, but she was thoughtful and reflective when answering questions and was keen to participate.

Of the eight participants included in the study four were girls, aged 13-14 years, and four were boys, three aged 9-13 years. Based on my observations of the participants' home environments, during interviewing, I believe that the participants can be identified as coming from middle class sociocultural backgrounds. In terms of ethnicity, seven of the children were Caucasian New Zealanders (Pākeha) and one was identified as Pākeha-Cook Island Māori, by his parents. All of the children were New Zealand citizens. As noted previously, all of the participants were learning in regular classes: two in state rural schools, four in state city schools and three in private schools. Two participants were at primary school level, two were at an intermediate school level and four were at high school. It was common for children to refer to being moved to different schools as their parents sought to provide a better educational match for their learning needs.

In terms of types of learning difficulties, seven of the participants had been identified as having dyslexia and the degree of this ranged from mild to high-level. Within this group, two had been formally identified as gifted (exceptional range of intelligence), three were identified as having an above average level of intelligence. It is interesting to note the presence of two intellectually gifted participants in this small sample as I did not make any attempt to specifically recruit gifted students. Only one participant was identified as being dyspraxic. (I am aware that there has been an international agreement amongst professionals to use the term Developmental Co-ordination Disorder, instead of developmental dyspraxia, but the participant concerned was unfamiliar with this term and I have used the label known to her. I do not think this is in any way prejudices the study's integrity; the term dyspraxia is still in use).

One participant identified as dyslexic had also been formally identified as having attention deficit and expressive language difficulties. I felt the level of her level difficulties, as she described them in her interview, were at a more significant level than I had in mind at the start of the study. However, she had not met the criteria for special education support within a moderate learning needs category, possibly because she did not have any physical or sensory disabilities, nor any behavioural difficulties. After careful discussion with my principal supervisor I decided to include this participant's story because it is not dissimilar to those of other participants, although her needs for learning support are greater. Her story highlights the pitfalls of trying to rigidly categorise children and adolescents' learning needs, whether categories are labelled 'needs based' or diagnostic.

DATA COLLECTION: INTERVIEWING

In preparation for interviewing young people, Curtin (2000) recommended that the researcher examine his or her own beliefs around children's ability to respond in an interview situation. I believed the children would make competent informants. However, during a presupposition interview I identified that I had some degree of uncertainty around *my* ability as novice researcher regarding interviews with young participants:

I'm nervous about the actual interviewing [process] because it's a different form of interviewing, it's not like interviewing parents and children as part of a therapy assessment in clinical situations. I'm nervous about whether I'll get it right and that I won't muck it up for the children's sake, so I don't waste their story and I don't waste their time. I've got the prompts there but I think, because obviously we talk as adults everyday - you have those conversational skills with adults, I'm not sure how that goes with children. The goal is to use a conversational style, trust the process and just stay present with the actual conversation ... I think there are different levels of listening and it's being able tune in and really hear what [the participants] are saying so you can ask a question which will extend what they are saying, for instance, and not make assumptions that you actually understand what they mean. (Sheryn Marshall, Presupposition interview, 2004)

I was buoyed by Eder and Fingerson's (2002) report that "some interviewers have found young respondents eager to be listened to in a non-judgemental and accepting manner" (p. 186). I found that the young participants in this study were indeed keen to offer their point of view.

In general, experienced researchers have advised that young participants give the best information when they are interviewed on their own, but in using this knowledge, the

interviewer must be more sensitive to the needs of young participants than to the research agenda (Gollop, 2000). Accordingly, I sent information sheets to children and their parents outlining participants' rights, one being the right to have a support person present. An example of this right being understood is that the youngest participant, aged nine, asked to have his mother present at the interview. When he felt comfortable, he allowed his mother to leave and carry on with other activities. All other participants consented to being interviewed on their own. However, as the preference of the youngest participant demonstrates, it is important to be sensitive and aware of the individual needs of young participants.

Some authors have also commented that children are generally more comfortable when interviewed at home (Curtin, 2000; Gollop, 2000). I arranged to interview all participants in their own homes, although I made provision to use another venue if families preferred. Participants chose the room in which they would be interviewed (research information sheets had indicated the participants' bedrooms would not be used as this was a private space). In most cases, a separate lounge or home office was used, except in two cases where children felt comfortable in more open family areas. I found that children's right to privacy was well respected by their families and I was particularly impressed with the way in which siblings provided a respectful space for the interviews taking place in their home. Interviews were scheduled, usually after school or on Saturday, to fit around young people's school routines, extracurricular activities, weekend sport, teenage sleep patterns, and farm chores (Gollop).

As previous discussion makes evident, I chose a narrative approach for collecting data in face-to-face interviews with young participants. Interviews were audio taped, with the consent of participants and their parents, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Narrative interviewing allows for an informal conversational style of interaction with young participants, with pre-prepared questions (prompts) used only as required (see Appendix J). Experienced interviewers have recommended asking questions in a way that young participants can respond to questions by expressing positive thoughts before negative ones (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Gollop, 2000). In preparing the interview prompts, I therefore planned to ask participants about the things they enjoyed doing and felt they were good at doing before proceeding to questions about their difficulties.

I planned the opening trigger question to be: "I'm wondering what are the things you really love to do?", however, I didn't always use these exact words. As a way to establish rapport, I had previously suggested that participants bring something of interest to them to discuss at the interview. Some participants responded to this suggestion and had things already set up to show me such as photographs of pets; certificates earned at school; stories and poems they had written; samples of school work; cartoon drawings and hobbies. Therefore, I varied the wording of the initial prompts to fit the situation: "That's a good way to start ... because the first thing I was going to ask you was to tell me about something that you enjoy doing".

As other researchers had suggested, I found that indirect questioning was more useful than direct questioning (Gollop, 2000). When I slipped into asking closed questions, I found the participants invariably answered with a "yeah" or "no". A participant might say "also I'm quite good at singing" and I would respond "are you?" getting the response "yeah". Whereas when I followed this up with the prompt, "tell me about your singing" I got a very full description, not just about singing, but music in general. I also found that asking questions that were too long and wordy had the same effect as asking a closed question, getting the response "what?".

Another suggestion I found useful was to use third person questions. These are less confronting than direct questions, such as asking if the young participant's opinion was the same as his/her peer group. I found third person questions framed as "some children/adults say/think ... how about you?" enabled participants to emphatically agree or disagree and they were usually very ready to offer their own opinion, philosophy or anecdote (Gollop, 2000).

At the commencement of each interview participants were told they could refuse to answer any question they did not feel comfortable with by saying "I don't think I'll answer that" or something similar. Only one participant took up this suggestion by saying "I don't really want to answer that question", about her early experiences at school, but it was an indicator that it is important to make it clear to children that they do not need answer all questions just because an adult is asking them.

Allowing young participants to set their own pace and have a sense of control is an important way of engaging them in an interview process that feels safe (Curtin, 2000; Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Gollop, 2000). There were indications for me that participants felt a sense of control during their interviews. I was invited by one participant to come into the dining area to view his framed artwork and by another to move to the next room for a demonstration on the family keyboard. In two interviews, the adolescent participants 'took charge' of the physical setting, ensuring that I was comfortably seated and one offered me "something to drink". One participant took responsibility for turning on the tape at the beginning of the interview when she noticed that I had forgotten to do so. Two children felt free to suggest they leave the room to collect samples of their writing or artwork. These instances indicated that participants felt relaxed and had some sense of control over their own involvement in the research process. This did not detract from their ability to focus their attention or their ability to tell their stories. It also confirmed the advice of more experienced interviewers, to be flexible and adaptive in interview situations with children and adolescents (Eder & Fingerson).

It is important during interviews with young participants to maintain an informal and non-directive tone, but the overall success of the interview depends on the interviewer's ability to establish a rapport (Curtin, 2000; Gollop, 2002). On one occasion, I did not begin the interview with the positive opening prompt relating to what the participant enjoyed doing. Instead, I invited her to tell me about "your experiences of having a learning difficulty?" I did this because in two previous interviews, the two articulate adolescents had spontaneously begun their narratives by choosing to talk about their earlier experiences of learning difficulties. I found in this case the participant took longer to relax and only began warm to the interview when she realised that I was not reacting to her negative statements about school. In subsequent interviews I took care to begin with the more indirect opening prompt, "tell me about the things you love doing", as originally planned. I felt this approach established a better rapport with participants.

An indirect approach helps to address the inherent power imbalance between an adult interviewer and young participant (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Gollop, 2000). Gollop cautioned that researchers need to be sensitive to the fact that children and adults

have different levels of language and cognitive skills. One of the benefits of narrative interviewing is that this power imbalance can be addressed by using a collaborative interview style. As indicated earlier, I deliberately avoided taking a position of authority, and used my first name to establish a friendship role rather than an authoritative role. In this way I found that the interview process with young participants was particularly enjoyable. One of the highlights of the research process for me was the opportunity to converse with young people, freed from my parental impulse to comment on what they had to say in any judgemental or authoritative way (Eder & Fingerson).

By establishing a reasonable rapport with participants, I found that they sometimes offered personal stories, which were not pertinent to the inquiry. These included underage driving of a car (with parental supervision), the fun of writing simple computer viruses, misbehaviour at school of which parents were obviously unaware, aspects of accepting parents' divorce that were difficult, and thoughts on difficult relationships with extended family members. I made sure that participants were aware of their rights to have a say in what was or was not available for use as research data and two participants asked that their negative comments about school culture and classmates not be used. This indicated children's willingness to open up when they felt safe and the need for an interviewer to be particularly respectful of the position of trust they are placed in with regard to information shared. Participants were generally able to identify for themselves those parts of a narrative which they did not wish to make public and these were not usually an essential part of the plot.

In general the participants appeared to be aware of and understand their rights to choose whether they took part in the interview, answer particular questions or not, as well as their right to confidentiality and privacy. At least three of the children commented that they should not have mentioned other people's names in their interviews, demonstrating awareness that they might compromise their right to privacy. Participants were assured no real names or identifying characteristics would be used in the final report.

DATA ANALYSIS

No matter how well the adult-child power imbalance is addressed during interviewing, ultimately the researcher holds the final power in the analysis of data and presentation of results to the wider world (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). The same respect shown towards young participants during interviewing can be applied in the analysis of interview data by giving participants a say about what data is presented.

Adaptability is one of the strengths of narrative research but its flexibility can also be a challenge for a novice researcher. As discussed in Chapter Three, the rationale for using narrative methodology is well described in literature, but as Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, (1998) have noted there is less guidance regarding procedures:

There are few manuals or prescriptive guides for conducting research work step by step – not only the result of the relative infancy of this type of methodology in psychology and other social sciences but the consequence of the very nature of such research. (p. 170)

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) have pointed out that the flexible nature of narrative methodology has tended to preclude the development of prescriptive methods and procedures. I found the lack of prescribed methods most daunting when it came to data analysis. Nevertheless, there are a number of authors providing guidance based on their own experiences of narrative analysis (Clandinn & Connelly, 2000; Crossley 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber; Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000; Mishler, 1991; Molineux & Rikard, 2003; Richmond, 2002; Riessman, 1993, 2002). I found this body of literature was invaluable as a guide, helping me develop the analytical process I used in this study.

Narrative Lens

Analysis of data is a critical process in research because it is the interpretive process which makes the inquiry more than a story telling exercise (Riessman, 2002). An important tool that any researcher brings to the analytic process is their interpretive 'lens'. This is influenced by personal background (pre-existing knowledge and assumptions), the nature of the research issue, and the approach taken. The lens I brought to this study is a three-fold one, which encompasses two theoretical perspectives I have previously discussed, that is the autobiographical presentation of

self and occupational concepts of health and well-being. The third part of the lens is the theoretical perspective, which has guided my reading of the narrative text.

The autobiographical element of this three-fold lens is imbued with my personal understanding that there is value in learning from people's experiences, framed as a personal story. Paired with this is narrative theory, which proposes that self-identity is encapsulated in autobiographical accounts of life events told to another person (Bruner, 1990; Sarbin, 1986). Examining how participants presented themselves, and their experiences, within the context of their self-story was an important aspect of data analysis.

The second part of the lens, occupational science, focused my attention on the link between participation in significant occupations and participants' sense of self and well-being. Also taken into account was participants' sense of sense of competency in key life roles, such as that of student. Along with these concepts environment was considered as an important agent, either supporting or constraining participants' ability to do certain occupations (Townsend et al., 2002; Goldstein, Kielhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004; Kielhofner, 2002; Letts, Rigby & Stewart, 2003).

The first two parts of this theoretical lens have already been outlined in Chapters Two and Three. Therefore, the third part of the lens, which has guided the development of analytical procedures, is discussed more fully here. Of all the literature I reviewed around narrative analysis, I found Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1998) model for reading a narrative the most useful. It clarified for me the distinction between analysis of the narrative structure of stories (form), and analysis of what was said (content). Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber have proposed four modes for reading narrative data (pp. 12-18).

Modes for Reading a Narrative

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) presented an analytical model in which they identified two key dimensions known as *holistic versus categorical* and *content versus form* analysis (p. 13). A *holistic* focus is applied to analysis when a story is taken as a whole and parts of it are interpreted in relation to the rest of the story. Contrasting with this focus is a *categorical* approach to analysis in which one participant's story or a

number of participants' stories are divided up into parts and collected together into categories or themes. Analysis of story *content* refers to examination of what the narrator said happened, to whom and how they felt or thought about it. The analysis of story *form* considers its structure in terms the storyline (plot) and context; its style, complexity and coherence; and characteristics of the narrator's voice or use of language. Lieblich et al. (1998) combined these four sub-dimensions to offer four modes of reading a narrative.

They have presented their model as a four cell matrix, which I found easier to visualise by putting it into a diagrammatical form (refer to Table 1). However, as Lieblich et al. (1998) have been careful to point out, their model is not one in which the matrix cells are fixed by rigid boundaries. Instead, each cell actually represents either end of a continuum, or somewhere in between. They have suggested that researchers using this model are likely to find themselves at one end of the continuum or the other.

Initially I was drawn to the mode of reading labelled categorical-content. I was interested in maintaining a holistic approach to the analysis of participants' stories but I had a primary interest in what the young people had to say about their experiences. An analytical process may cross the boundaries of more than one cell in this model, according to the particular research focus. As Lieblich et al. (1998) suggested, I found that it is difficult to entirely differentiate what people say (content) from how they say it (form). While I started out interested primarily in the content of participants' narratives, I developed an awareness of how aspects of story form, such as plot, style and narrative tone, can reveal characteristics of the narrator's life course and identity. In studying content, I found that some categorisation helps to organise themes and reveal narrative threads inherent in individual stories. Categorisation of themes also makes it possible to compare individual stories. My thinking began at one end of a continuum and I found that, guided by this model, it shifted to be somewhere in the middle. Thus, the method of analysis that emerged in this study has included elements of holistic-form and categorical-content modes of reading.

Table 1. *Four Modes of Reading Narratives: Adapted from Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, Zilber (1998)*

<p style="text-align: center;">Holistic–Content</p> <p>Uses complete life story and focuses on content in it</p> <p>Analyses a part of story in relation to the core narrative</p> <p>Familiar in case study approach</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Holistic-Form</p> <p>Analyses the plot or structure of whole life story</p> <p>Looks for “turning point”, climax</p> <p>Narrative style – romance, comedy, tragedy, satire</p> <p>Plot structure – ascend/descend</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Categorical–Content</p> <p>Content analysis</p> <p>Categories are defined in terms of ‘what is said’ about the studied topic</p> <p>Parts of whole narrative that fit a category are gathered together</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Categorical-Form</p> <p>Analysis of stylistic/linguistic features e.g. metaphors, active v. passive text</p> <p>Analysis of cognitive/thought processes</p> <p>Emotions revealed in the narration of events</p>

Note. Based on text taken from *Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation* (p. 13) by A. Lieblich, R. Tuval-Mashiach and T. Zilber, 1998. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Developing a Method of Analysis

Analysis begins with the transcription of audio data into text. A professional transcriber transcribed interview tapes, and I checked the transcripts for accuracy by listening to the audio tapes while reading the script, making corrections as required. This also provided me with an opportunity to review and reflect on the interviews.

In the next stage of analysis, I used the five-step process, described by Molineux and Rikard (2003), to synthesise data from interview transcripts into stories. A first draft of each participant’s story was crafted by eliminating my interview questions and comments, along with any comments that participants had already indicated they did not wish to have included. Key events in participants’ narratives were identified and

woven together to form a coherent story structure. Synthesis included reordering events into their chronological sequence, beginning with early childhood, to form the story's plot. By this process, each interview transcript was crafted into a mini life story or biography using the participant's own words as much as possible. Linking sentences or words were used to create a narrative flow as required. These initial drafts were refined through further reading and editing.

As suggested by Gbrich (1999), I took care to retain participants' style and language, important when "editing first-person narratives" (p. 184). When large portions of direct quotes are used in participant stories it is important to acknowledge this as a form of co-authorship between participants and researcher (Gbrich). With the notion of co-authorship in mind, I took the stories back to participants for further checking and for confirmation that the narratives reflected the story they wished to tell. Editing of spoken grammar was only done as suggested by the participants themselves. Most of the editorial changes participants asked for were in fact minor and concerned correction of grammar or facts, or in a few cases elaboration of a narrative. This suggested I had captured the overall essence of the stories that participants told. I also obtained participants' final consent to use these stories as sources of data in the final report.

The idea of forming interview transcripts into stories came to me early in the study when I realised that reading many pages of an interview transcript was likely to be of little interest to young participants. When I offered the first participant, the opportunity to read through his transcript, he read the first four pages and said "that'll be alright". However, I immediately saw this did not meet the intent of giving him a say in how his data was used. Taking the interview data back to young participants in a story form made it more interesting and readable for them and contained all the material I intended to use. Four participants chose to read their story for themselves, offering comments about editing as they went, and four asked to have stories read to them, offering comments as they listened. This I found was a meaningful and interactive process and gave participants a further opportunity for some degree of control in the research process. Once the participants had confirmed that their completed story reflected the story they wished to tell, and had given final consent for its use, it was evident that I needed an analytical tool to manage the data.

Analytical Tool

Richmond (2002), in a report of her study undertaken with adult learners, presented a story map grid which incorporated components of self identity, time and social context. This concept catalysed an idea of how I also could use a grid to develop an analytical tool. Using this idea I developed a story map grid, different in design to Richmond's, but particular to the purposes of this study, incorporating the elements of form and content (see Table 2).

Table 2. Story Map of Young Participant's Narratives

FORM				CONTENT		
Core Narrative	Narrative Style And Direction	Narrative Voice	Other Voices	Self and Learning	Social World	Being Occupational
Events Plot Protagonist Message	Turning points Archetypes Past Present Future	Self identity Tone Language Metaphor Analogy	Allies Foes Dialogue	Difficulties Abilities Strategies Getting help	Family School Friends	Significant occupations Competency Roles

To compile insights about each participant's story, I drew up eight individual grids on pages of a large art pad. Insights were drawn from repeated readings of each participant's story, crafted from interview transcripts. Stories were examined for the themes, which could be categorised within the columns of the grid. One reading looked at presentation of self as a character revealed through use of language, emotional tone, humour, or positioning of self in relation to others. Other readings reviewed what events participants chose to talk about and themes revealed; aspects of context such as key settings and relationships; life roles, and elements relevant to participation in occupation, such as interests, successes and failures. The grid was used to collate key

insights in columns with the headings: *core narrative*; *narrative style and direction*; *narrative voice* and *other voices* for form. It also collated key content themes related to *self and learning*; *social world*; and *being occupational*. Insights from each section of the grid were used to develop the results of analysis, which will be discussed in Chapters Five to Eight.

STUDYING NARRATIVE FORM

Form is the cohesive structure, which gives a story its shape. I used five basic questions to look at the shape of the stories told by participants, which revealed something of their unique perspective of self and their place in the social world. These questions are reviewed in the following discussion.

Core Narrative: What is the Story About?

The question ‘what is this story about?’ applied to the whole stories, which were constructed from interview transcripts and reviewed by all participants. The main actions and events were then noted, then these were woven together to create a core narrative to encapsulate the plot of the larger story. As well as capturing the essence of the larger stories, core narratives revealed the way in which participants chose to present themselves as characters in their own stories. They also enabled me to present the storytellers and their messages within the main body of the thesis. These core narratives will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Narrative Direction and Style: What kind of story is this?

The story line or plot moves the story along and brings it to a resolution. The question ‘what kind of story is this?’ considered two factors: the direction the story line took, and its narrative style. In supervision sessions, we discussed the application of the usual classic genre tool applied to narrative interpretation. However, I was concerned there was a risk of my being diverted into trying to fit young participants’ stories to a genre, rather than coming to their stories with an open mind. I therefore decided to instead ask the basic question, ‘what kind of story is this?’ This allowed for the possibility that some stories might fit within an archetypal story form and others might not.

Narrative Voice: Who is Telling the Story?

One of the central aspects of a story is the voice of the narrator. The question ‘who is telling the story?’ looked at the self-identity disclosed by the narrator during story telling. As discussed in Chapter Three, narrative voice is expressed in the act of telling, and the narrator is seen to be a “speaking personality” (Engel, 1999, p. 153). An audio recording picks up physical characteristics of the narrator’s voice, such as pitch, tone, and emotional expression. However, certain visual cues, however, are lost including facial expression, gestures and body posture. When oral stories are transcribed into a written format, both the visual and auditory cues of narrator’s story telling performance are lost. Nonetheless, though the physical voice is no longer present, close reading and interpretation of the text reveals aspects of narrative voice inherent in the written story. Analysis of narrative voice looks at characteristics, which reveal how the narrator presented self such as pace, pitch and tone as well as the type of language used. Emotional tone may be conveyed through humour, direct expressions of feeling or personal statements. Use of language may be rich with adjectives and metaphor, or sparse; phrases may be repeated for emphasis.

As the central character in his or her own story, the narrator presents more than one view of self, including a past self, a present self (evolved from the past), or a future imagined self. Along with these temporal aspects of self, he or she may present facets of self that appear in either a positive light (hero) or a negative light (anti-hero).

Voices of Others: What Does the Narrator Say About Others?’

While a narrator’s identity is presented as the protagonist in his or her own story, an interdependent positioning of self and others plays an integral role in the construction of this self (Wortham, 2001). The question ‘what does the narrator say about others?’ looked at how the narrator positioned self in relation to other in his or her social world. Analysis focused on how participants positioned themselves in relation to others as a victim or a hero or even anti-hero. The narrator also ‘voices’ other characters by providing them with a dialogue. These other voices are also caused to speak like recognisable types of people, either in a supporting role as a good character (ally) or as a bad character (villain). McCallister (2004) suggested, “one’s identity is entirely the

product of interaction with others. As children participate in the vast range of social situations, they collect impressions of themselves that coalesce to form a sense of who they are, as well as a narrative frame work that helps explain the world and their place within it” (p. 425).

Core Message: What Can We Learn From this Story?

Asking ‘what can we learn from this story?’ highlights the point of the story; in other words the essential truth or message the narrator is conveying about their experiences (Sarbin, 1986). However, a story’s message is not always explicitly stated and the skill of the analyst is to reveal the message through a process of study and interpretation (Sarbin, 1986). The analytical process revealed a unique message inherent in each of the participants’ core narratives, and these are discussed in Chapter Five.

STUDYING NARRATIVE CONTENT

The participant stories collected in this narrative inquiry represent individualistic constructs of reality. The purpose of a qualitative research is to focus specifically on individual perspectives. However, Bruner (1996) suggests that a focus on personal reality does not preclude the possibility of “universal themes emerging from individual narratives” (p. 137). The possibility that a personal narrative has something in common with other stories supports the practice of bringing highly individualised stories together for analysis and comparison. In analysing the content of the participants’ whole stories in this study, I looked for both unique and common themes. These are presented in Chapters Six through to Eight.

As discussed earlier, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) have suggested various ways of categorising themes drawn from the content of narratives. One of their suggestions was to order categories or themes within the parameters of a theoretical model. I chose three primary categories drawn from the occupational perspective discussed in Chapter Two. The three key categories encapsulate participants’ sense of character (self) as they interacted within their social environment (social world), through participation in a variety of significant occupations (being occupational). Each category is made up of a number of sub-themes.

To identify the themes in each story I used the story map tool I developed and discussed earlier (see Table 3). Identifying primary themes required many readings of each individual narrative. On the first reading, I went through each story and listed key things mentioned by that narrator. I examined each individual list and identified recurrent themes such as favourite activities, school subjects, bullying, social skills, type of learning difficulty, family relationships and other relationships. I then coloured coded each event according to its category. I did this for each child, compiling a individual summary for each participant's story. I then collated individual summaries into a group summary, identifying which participants had offered narratives on which themes. Three key categories emerged with sub-themes, and the results of this content analysis, as has been already indicated, are presented in Chapter Six to Eight.

A sample of the story map tool as used for one participant is presented on the following page (see Table 3). It is presented in a summarised form as the three content columns had too much data to be presented in this format. This was the point of using the tool, as a means of organising the abundance of information.

Table 3. Story Map for Alex

FORM				CONTENT		
Core Narrative	Narrative Style And Direction	Narrative Voice	Other Voices	Self and Learning	Social World	Being Occupational
<p>Up until 10 years was an average student then realised he couldn't keep up with peers so became behaviourally disruptive.</p> <p>Mother sought help and was shifted to a more understanding school. Still has learning difficulties but sees future as an artist.</p>	<p>Contamination sequence – failing to learn</p> <p>Redemptive- overcome behaviour problems in class</p> <p>Turning point when gained self understanding of weaknesses and strengths</p> <p>Agentic plot – hope for future</p> <p>Occupational narrative – talented in art, future as an artist</p> <p>Adventure narratives</p>	<p>Competent artist</p> <p>Optimistic - sees a future</p> <p>Accepting of LD - OK to be dyslexic</p> <p>Honesty – disruptive behaviour</p> <p>Saddened/surprised by memories</p> <p>Adventurer</p> <p>Realistic – strengths and weaknesses</p> <p>Positive re. abilities</p> <p>Humour</p> <p>Confident</p> <p>Self as hero and anti hero</p>	<p>Non- supportive teachers</p> <p>Frustrated Dad</p> <p>Mum as ally</p> <p>Uncle - dyslexia</p> <p>Father's cousin as mentor</p> <p>Psychologist as seer</p> <p>Long term friends</p> <p>Classmate as complainer</p> <p>Older boy as hero</p> <p>Peers as allies</p> <p>Peers as bullies</p> <p>Remedial tutor as helper</p> <p>Unmet expectations</p>	<p>Art as a passion</p> <p>Becoming aware of LD at 10</p> <p>Disruptive behaviour</p> <p>Difficulties with reading, maths and spelling</p> <p>Maths – brain freeze</p> <p>Reading – still difficult, affects other things</p> <p>Strategies to cope</p> <p>Tutoring</p> <p>OK to be labelled</p> <p>Explanation of LD helpful</p> <p>Moving schools</p> <p>Discouragement</p>	<p>City school</p> <p>School – non-supportive culture compared with supportive setting</p> <p>Classroom – too noisy</p> <p>Family – supportive parents, extended family as mentors</p> <p>Environment – love of bush/outdoors</p> <p>Supportive classmates</p> <p>Clear instructions, structured routines - helpful</p> <p>Time span of story = Year 6 – 8</p>	<p>Occupational role as Artist - not academic</p> <p>Self as artist</p> <p>Art – gives life meaning, gifted</p> <p>Not confident trying new things</p> <p>Likes to be original</p> <p>Occupations discussed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • schoolwork • basketball • ice hockey • soccer • driving car • sky diving • play station • computer • bush hiking • model making

RESEARCH RIGOUR

There is an impression that qualitative research is easier [compared with quantitative methods] but in fact getting the ethics application ready to put into the Ethics Committee, makes me realise the amount of rigour that is actually involved. I meant the amount of detail that had to be prepared [was extensive]. (Sheryn Marshall, Presupposition interview February 2004)

In the scientific world, research rigour underpins the validity of a study, ensuring “trustworthiness and authenticity” (Edmen & Sandelowski, 1998, p. 208). Critics of qualitative methodology have argued that it lacks the rigour of quantitative research and therefore is not truly scientific. On the other hand, many qualitative researchers have argued that the term rigour is not applicable to qualitative research. Davies and Dodd (2002) suggested that the narrow positivist definition of rigour is the problem rather than the concept of rigour. Rigour is an essential element in all good research. As a concept applied to qualitative research, rigour refers to the importance of providing “faithful accounts of the real world” (Angen, 2000, p. 289). Angen has recommended that the term validation be used in qualitative research in preference to the term validity, which relates to reliability of statistical results. According to Angen, validation of a study is possible through an ongoing “process of confirmation” (p. 393) which depends on two key elements: ethical procedures and a full disclosure of the processes used via documentation. Making all aspects of the research process open and visible makes it more accessible to being evaluated for its worthiness (Angen).

To ensure rigour in this inquiry, I have documented methods and procedures as fully as possible. In addition, I have used reflexivity, which is also recognised as a means of promoting rigour and integrity in qualitative research. Van Amburg (1997) suggested that we are able to act as “responsible human agents” using our self-reflective capacity because it enables us to reflect not only on our beliefs but also on the “quality of our intentions and motivation” (p.189). Angen stressed that the aim of reflexivity is not to claim to eliminate bias in research but rather to make the researcher’s perspective and changes in it, apparent in relation to the topic studied. As recommended, I explored my existing beliefs, assumptions, experience and knowledge in a presupposition interview with a postgraduate colleague experienced in offering this type of interview. The interview was transcribed for the purposes of review. I consciously used reflexivity on an ongoing basis to examine my changing

perspectives and positions within the inquiry, and recorded this reflective journey in a research journal (Gbrich, 1999).

In relation to rigour in qualitative research, a good methodological fit is taken as a given. Another factor is the worthiness of the research issue itself, in other words its relevance and usefulness to the group of participants it concerns (Angen, 2000). Children are not often directly asked for their opinions on issues that concern them (Mayall, 2000). There was a degree of direct benefit for young participants, in that the study provided them with an opportunity to express their views. As has already been indicated, there was a possible indirect benefit of influencing adult understanding of learning difficulties (Curtin, 2000; Gollop, 2000; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Smith & Taylor, 2000). Confirmation of the importance of the issue recently came from talking with a young film director about some of my findings. She confirmed that participants' experiences, as I understand them, were compatible with her own memories of growing up with dyslexia.

A further factor is that this research process has been monitored and guided by two experienced research supervisors. One supervisor has particular expertise in the field of occupational science and the other expertise in narrative methodology. Supervision meetings of one to two hours duration have been held at least monthly throughout the inquiry, and occasionally more frequently, as needed. These sessions have provoked a great deal of thought and self-examination, as well as support for working through challenges that have arisen.

An additional informal source of peer support and review has been offered by a Narrative and Discourse Research support group, which I attended on a monthly basis at AUT, throughout the course of most of the study. Group members include novice and experienced researchers, working at both masters and doctoral levels. The support and advice received through this group has been invaluable, including help with practical details as well as philosophical and ethical concerns. In a more formal presentation, offered in October 2004 to a peer group of fellow postgraduate students and clinicians, I outlined the analytical process that I had developed for use in this inquiry. It was encouraging to receive positive feedback about the process as it was presented.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical issues relating to privacy, confidentiality and informed consent, in research with young people, are similar to research involving adult participants. Ethical practice requires that formal consent is obtained from participants prior to data collection. However, in relation to young participants, consent is also required from parents and caregivers. I provided separate consent forms for parents and for children to signal children's right to decline, even when their parents had given consent (see Appendices G, H). I also undertook to provide full explanations of the research project so that participants could make an informed choice about volunteering. Written information about the project was provided in more 'child friendly' language, as compared to the information sheet provided to parents (see Appendices E, F). Children were not expected to read the entire information sheet. Rather, parents were asked to discuss the information with their children to ensure they understood what the project was about and their rights as a volunteer.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the United Nations Bill of Children's Rights (Article 12, 1989) endorses the right of young people to have a say in matters which concern them (Smith, Taylor & Gollop, 2000). Sensitivity to children's rights guided ethical practice through out the inquiry. Even though formal consent had been obtained, at the start of each interview I reminded young participants that they had a free choice about continuing to participate or not. They were also reminded they could choose to withdraw from the interview process at any time. Thomas O'Kane (1998) pointed out "ethical acceptability" in research with children is increased when methods used give children a sense of having some control over the research process and "are in tune with children's ways of seeing and relating to their world" (p. 345).

Another important ethical practice is to maintain confidentiality around participants' identities in the reporting of data (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). I expected that children might not fully understand the concept of confidentiality, therefore it was important to explain to them how their personal information would be protected. The idea that I, as the researcher, was bound by a code of confidentiality seemed to appeal to the young participants. While they in fact had no difficulty grasping the concept of confidentiality, they did not entirely agree with its necessity. Participants wondered who and what they might need protection from; it was clear that they were unaware of the politics of the adult world. Some of the participants showed they were

respectful and thoughtful of other people's privacy, commenting that they should not have used their teacher or friend's name during the interview.

Participants were invited to choose their own pseudonym, as a positive way of reinforcing their right to anonymity (protection of their identity) (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Most participants were bemused by the need for a pseudonym, saying they were happy for their real name to be used. Following an explanation of why a pseudonym might be necessary, all but two readily chose their own pseudonym and the remaining two said they would be happy with one chosen by the researcher. While doing the final check of their narratives, two participants chose to change their pseudonyms and two changed the spelling of the names. Although most participants indicated they were happy to use their real first name, it is clear that they took ownership of their pseudonyms. Curtin (2000) commented that other researchers have reported children requesting to use their real names. However, these researchers still recommend using pseudonyms to protect children in the future as well as the present. Narratives collected in research interviews represent a 'snap shot' in time and participants' perspectives are in a state of change. The anonymity that a pseudonym provides protects a participant's identity from becoming trapped in that moment time, or in a researcher's interpretation of it. Over the course of time, participants remain free to reconstruct and publicly tell their own story.

Finally, in checking and editing the content their own story participants were given a final opportunity to consent to it being used as data. All of the participants gave their consent for their story to be used. This completed the participants' direct involvement in the study and their contribution to the research process was acknowledged with a thank you letter and a small gift, either a CD voucher or book token according to their personal interests. To avoid the possibility of coercion, participants did not know prior to participating that this gift would be forthcoming. Parents played a vital role in enabling interviews to occur and were also thanked for their support by letter.

TREATY OF WAITANGI

Modern New Zealand is a diverse multicultural society, which was founded on a bicultural contract (Treaty of Waitangi, 1840) between two cultural partners, indigenous peoples known as Māori and the British Crown, on behalf of British colonists (Bishop, 2003). As an educational institution, the Auckland University of Technology is committed to bicultural governance. It asks postgraduate students

undertaking research projects to take account of the three principles of the Treaty of Waitangi: participation, protection and partnership. Māori children with literacy difficulties are an identified group within New Zealand mainstream schools. I saw my responsibility under the treaty was therefore to ensure that Māori children and their whanau had the opportunity to chose to participate in the project.

To meet the principle of cultural protection (safety) I needed to reflect on my own awareness of Māori cultural values. I met with Mr Toby Curtis, Deputy Vice Chancellor of Māori Advancement, AUT who provided me with cultural advice, regarding the possible participation of Māori children and their whanau (family). Mr Curtis recommended that I improve my Māori pronunciation and I enrolled in Te Tauihi Te Reo 1, an AUT Māori language course for beginners. I also met with Richard Smith from the AUT Māori Research Advisory Committee, who reviewed my project for its suitability, regarding the inclusion of Māori families. He was familiar with narrative methodology and confirmed its potential flexibility in responding to cultural needs.

Snowball sampling did not prove to be a successful method for recruiting Māori children. A young Māori educationalist, who accepted some pamphlets for distribution commented that she believed it was unusual for Māori families to seek formal identification of learning difficulties through an educational psychologist. I therefore approached a local branch of Group Special Education (GSE) for help with purposive sampling. They expressed a willingness to assist me through their Māori focus team. I was required to make small changes to my ethics application and the AUT Ethics committee approved these. Unfortunately, this process took time and was not completed by the time I moved into the next stage of the project, analysis of data. In hindsight, I now realise that I needed to build relationships within the Auckland Māori community before beginning the study. It was not feasible to try to do this within a restricted academic period.

The fact I did not recruit Māori children does not suggest that this issue would not be of importance to Māori children and their families. A fellow post graduate Māori student participating in the same qualitative research paper, shared her adult son's story with me; it echoed a similar theme to many of the stories reported here, participation in activities that he was good at doing, such as sport, was really important.

SUMMARY

This chapter has described the overall design of the research project by detailing its methods and procedures. I have presented the analytical process I developed, guided by available literature. Ways of ensuring the rigour in the project have also been discussed in relation to interviewing and management of data. In particular, this chapter has sought to make ethical practices visible. These practices have included the protection of participants' identity, the right to confidentiality, and the right to have a say in the data used. Results and findings that emerged from the processes described in this chapter are presented in Chapters Five to Eight. Chapter Five looks at the form stories took, while Chapters Six to Eight discuss content. In essence, Chapter Four has recorded the extensive learning journey that I undertook as a novice researcher.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHAPING THE STORY

When I was younger I was a good writer. I was quite keen at it too. It was like my favourite subject. One time, I remember, I wrote this really long story for standards. The whole writing block what we did is write a story - [then] we got to have free choice - but I took up the whole free choice time just writing. And I wanted to write in my own morning tea.

Sam, 9

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this chapter is to focus on the nature of the stories told and to examine elements of the story structure. Following on from this chapter, Chapters Six through to Eight, will discuss narrative themes revealed by an analysis of the stories' content. The written story does not quite impart the physical presence of the eight storytellers in action. Nevertheless, some of this presence is captured by the emotional tone and humour of the written stories. To understand the nature of the stories told, I applied the basic questions I have discussed in Chapter Four.

To answer the question "what is the story about?" core narratives have been crafted for each participant encapsulating the plot of their whole stories, and these are presented in this chapter. In relation to the question "what kind of stories are these?" the narrative style and direction of the storyline of each core narrative will be discussed. Answering the question "what is the narrative voice?" reveals something about the narrators' characterisation of themselves within their stories. The question "what are the other voices?" addresses the narrator's sense of self in relation to others. Finally, by asking "what is the point of the story?" a core message is offered for each story.

THE STORIES TOLD

An important point I would like to make about the core narratives presented here is that they have been co-constructed by nine storytellers - eight participants and me (Gergen, 2004). While the young participants offered their narratives in an oral form, I have acted as master storyteller, collating many small oral narratives into a textual whole story. There have then been two phases to creating the core narratives; telling the story, and writing it. With this in mind, I consider that the stories have been co-authored by me and the eight young people who narrated them (Engel, 1999). Here

then are nine storytellers, of different ages, taking the floor in alphabetical order: Alex (12), Amy (13), Bob (11), Bowin (13), Ella (14), Jodie (14), Jordan (13), Sam (9) and in the background, myself (51).

ALEX'S STORY

Maths gives me brain freeze but Art is fun!

Alex saw himself as an average student until he was about ten years old, so he was shocked in Year 6 to realise that he could not keep up with his classmates in academic learning. He became behaviourally disruptive in class; annoying other students because he did not know what he was meant to be doing and he got bored. His father was frustrated by his drop in performance and his mother was worried, so she arranged for Alex to be assessed by an educational psychologist. Alex was found not only to have dyslexia but to be intellectually gifted (a high level of intelligence). The psychologist's explanation of dyslexia, and how it affected his learning skills, helped Alex to understand his difficulties. Understanding that he has dyslexia has made a real difference to Alex and he no longer has any behaviour problems in class. His favourite subject at school is art, and he is good at it. He finds art so easy and so much fun to do he cannot imagine anyone not enjoying it. However, one of his frustrations with learning is that maths is either so easy he finds his mind drifts off and he finds it impossible to concentrate, or it's so hard he gets "brain freeze" and can't think at all. He perceives that previous schools "have not been right" for him, such as his last school which "did not believe in dyslexia". However, he has now moved to a school where there is a supportive culture and Alex feels secure there. At this school, other students talk about having dyslexia, so being dyslexic does not feel like a big deal. Recently an older boy even stood up for Alex when he was being teased about being slow with his schoolwork. Although Alex recognises he still has difficulty with reading, spelling and some areas of mathematics, he also is confident that he has a special talent. Art is one of the most important things in his life. He has framed dyslexia as a way of helping him perceive things differently, and as linked to his artistic ability. Now aged twelve, Alex is already emerging as a talented artist who sees art as the key to his future. He looks forward to being an architect or a builder, because "building something big would be nice".

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

The story line in Alex's core narrative starts from a point where he has no difficulty with learning, and perceives himself to be just like every other student. His story's progressive course is interrupted by the sudden realisation he is not actually doing as well as his peers (McAdams et al., 2001). Alex reacts by becoming behaviourally disruptive in class and the plot direction regresses into one in which he is no longer a competent student. A positive turning point occurs when his mother seeks help from an educational psychologist. With the support of significant adults in his life, Alex

faces the learning obstacles and diminishes their importance in his life. Alex's storyline moves into a redemptive phase (McAdams et al.). He regains his equilibrium, accepts of his learning difficulties, and chooses to focus on his talent for art. His story again moves forward and this progressive trend continues as he anticipates his future.

In its style, Alex's narrative echoes the archetypal story form, the monomyth, identified by Joseph Campbell (1959). Alex's life path has been blocked by the obstacle of failing to achieve in school, something he previously believed he could do. In facing his dyslexia and diminishing its threat, Alex presents himself as the hero in his own story. Dyslexia has not disappeared from his life, but it is no longer the interloper over which he has no control. Alex is able to imagine a future for himself with a strong sense of life purpose, which is centred in his passion for art. Alternatively, Alex's story can be viewed as an occupational narrative; this will be discussed further in Chapter Eight.

Narrative Voice

The overall tone of Alex's narrative voice is optimistic and he presents himself confidently through positive personal statements: "I'm pretty much sort of up high [with] like my art and creative abilities to make 3D models and things like that". The central character presented in his story is self as artist. Not only does Alex choose to pitch himself as an artist, but also he portrays himself as a competent artist. It is apparent that this view of self is more central to Alex's construction of identity than being dyslexic.

Another aspect of Alex's voice is honesty. He readily tells of behaviour problems in class which I have not asked about and gives a glimpse of another Alex, almost anti-hero, who diverts attention from his learning difficulties by annoying his classmates. While he promotes his abilities, by confidently voicing the things he can do well, he is honest in suggesting that this is not a global confidence: "I'm fairly confident but not in all areas. I think in areas of trying new things I would definitely be confident in that, definitely. But something that I know I'm not too good at - I don't really want to do again".

Other Voices

Alex's classmates are significant other characters in his story because, by comparing himself and his scholastic abilities with his peers, Alex realises he is less competent. He also characterises himself as an irritating and annoying presence for classmates, who are getting on with their own work. Alex's view of himself, in comparison to the other students, shifts from a positive to a negative one. These uncertainties about himself are reinforced by his parents' voiced concerns. His father is annoyed with him, and his mother is worried. He characterises his mother as an ally, who takes action on his behalf, and an explanation is sought from the psychologist.

The psychologist positioned as seer, or wise elder, clears up the mystery of his learning struggles. As charismatic adults, his mother and the psychologist create an opportunity for Alex to revise his view of self (Brooks, 2004). He moves from troublemaker back to ordinary student, albeit with dyslexia. Schools also feature in Alex's story as powerful entities with a collective social voice. They either deny the existence of his dyslexia or provide a culture of acceptance and understanding. In an unsafe culture Alex avoids facing 'the dragon' but in a supportive culture Alex is able to come to terms with dyslexia, finding supportive voices amongst his peers, who share the journey.

Core Message

By paring Alex's whole story down to a core narrative the essential message which emerges is that focusing on his primary talent has been crucial in helping him to develop a more positive sense of self. Alex offers an optimistic message that, despite experiencing the disruption of learning difficulties, knowing he is good at something is important. Although he still gets brain freeze with mathematics, Alex recognises he is talented in something. The essential message of his story is that *being good at art makes a difference*.

AMY'S STORY

Spelling doesn't bug me - I just get on with life!

Amy's carefree, outdoor preschool life was interrupted when she started school and realised that the learning tasks she was being asked to do, like reading and spelling, were "too hard". She was aware that her mother was worried about her difficulty with academic learning and Amy remembers that when her mother

approached the school with these concerns the teachers repeatedly reassured her there was “nothing to be concerned about”. Amy reflected that, because she was young and did not know any different, she did not understand why she found reading and spelling so hard. She therefore accepted they were hard to learn, just as the teachers told her. Amy moved to another school in Year 5 where her learning difficulties were immediately discovered and an excellent teacher in Year 6 was a big help. However, Amy thinks she made the most progress in reading while at intermediate school, with the regular support offered by a particularly good reading mentor. She is still not fond of reading though, preferring to read short stories rather than whole books. It would have to be an extremely interesting book to grab her attention and she finds those books are rare. Now that she is at high school, thirteen-year-old Amy finds that spelling is still tricky but she does not let her dyslexia bug her. Her philosophy on life is to “just get out there and do it - do everything you can – have a good time while you can!” Doing everything you can includes outdoor camps and adventurous activities, like flying and bungee jumping. Besides adventurous activities, Amy enjoys networking with a large group of friends of all ages. She has never had any problem making friends and finds that most people do not believe her when she tells them she has a learning difficulty. Amy recognises that she has a particular talent for public speaking and is confident in using this to advocate for a good community cause. She tends not to think too much about the future because she focuses her energy on today. Her overriding perspective is “life is great”.

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

Amy’s story begins with an idyllic and carefree preschool life, which is interrupted by starting school, and finding that learning to read and spell is “too hard”. Her story takes a regressive turn early in the plot. The regressive trend continues as Amy reminisces about her mother’s struggles to get the teachers to acknowledge Amy’s learning difficulties. A progressive turning point in Amy’s story emerges when her learning difficulties are finally identified and a supportive teacher helps her move forward. At the time of telling her story, Amy has reached the point where she understands and accepts her learning difficulties. However, she is giving her reading and spelling difficulties no quarter because there are too many other good things to be doing. She is just getting out there and enjoying life, neither looking back with regrets nor looking forward to the future with any anxiety. Focused on living for today, Amy’s storyline has stabilised and is centred in the present. There is a conspicuous absence of anxiety about exams or other potential challenges.

While Amy describes a significant level of dyslexia (at 13 she still finds it difficult to read chapter books), rather than seeking to overcome dyslexia, she is downplaying its meaning in her life. She does not see dyslexia as a big challenge to be overcome; it is “no big deal”. By emphasising her drive to get out and do adventurous activities, Amy chooses to characterise herself as an adventurer. As seen in the discussion on

adventure stories in Chapter Three, participation in adventurous activities creates a form of romance narrative in which the hero sets out on a mission to overcome a risky challenge, such as bungee jumping, and returns triumphant to tell the tale (Scheibe, 1986). The real challenges for Amy are the ones she creates for herself, bungee jumping or learning to fly. In this way, although her storyline is disrupted by learning difficulties, she presents an optimistic life story.

Narrative Voice

One of the noticeable characteristics of Amy's narrative voice is a very upbeat tone, and she presents a view of herself as an energetic and go-getter personality. In narrating her story, Amy uses a running thread of positive phrases to convey her optimistic outlook that it is best to "just get on with life" (rather than worry about having dyslexia). Upbeat phrases are often linked with the things she likes to do: "get out there and get dirty and have a good time [outdoor activities]"; "like do everything - if it freaks you out, go and do it" [bungee jumping]; "I just get out there and do it [adventurous activities like flying]". Even when she feels a bit nervous, it does not stop her, or cause her to avoid a challenge, because "I just get up there and do it [public speaking]". Although Amy emphasises her positive perspective on life, she nevertheless honestly acknowledges that spelling "bugs her a bit". She admits that dyslexia *is* felt in her life, but refutes dyslexia as a primary factor in her life: "it just doesn't seem to get to me that much [trying to read]". In downplaying her learning difficulties and voicing her positive outlook on life Amy presents herself as an exceptionally confident, happy and outgoing thirteen year old who is focused on living life to the full, and is grounded in the present. However, Amy balances her "live for today" perspective, by emphasising her sense of social responsibility and willingness to use her oratory ability to advocate for a good cause on behalf of others.

Other Voices

Amy places her younger self in a victim role in relation to the voices of her first teachers who kept assuring her and her parents there was nothing wrong (Polkinghorne, 1996). This did not fit with the reality of what Amy was experiencing but, because she was so young, she accepted that the teachers must be right. Amy's mother sought help for her but it was not until her parents moved her to another school that she escaped the voices of false assurance and discovered the truth. A supportive teacher helps Amy find her equilibrium, followed by a reading mentor who helps her make progress in reading. Positioning herself in relation to strong allies, a

supportive mother, teacher and reading support volunteer, Amy moves beyond the victimisation of her early years. More recently, she places herself in a wide network of friends, which reflects the secure position she believes she holds in her social world. Amy's quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates that she has succeeded in avoiding being defined or stigmatised by dyslexia. The voices of those who do not believe she has dyslexia in fact mirror back her social presentation of herself as a normal, active and socially outgoing teenage girl.

Core Message

The overriding perspective in Amy's story is that she does not let learning difficulties bug her. "Life is great, just get out there and get on with" is a prevailing theme in her story. Taking a positive attitude to life and focusing on activities that she can succeed in supports this outlook. It also allows Amy to resist being defined by others with regard to her difficulties. She has succeeded in presenting a positive self-image to the world. Amy's story suggests that *a positive attitude to life makes all the difference.*

BOB'S STORY

Learning to read was hard but I finally figured it out!

At the age of seven, Bob realised he had a reading problem. He was placed in a reading group with a non-English speaking student, a new immigrant to New Zealand just starting to learn the language. Bob befriended the new boy who began making rapid progress and was advanced up a reading level, leaving Bob behind in a 'group' of one. Bob was left to muse that "he'd just come in from a different country, learning how to speak English, and they stepped me down from this group because apparently I wasn't good enough to even be in his group". While Bob was finding it very difficult to learn to read, he used to look at the books in his room and wish he could read them. His mother encouraged him by saying he *would* be able to read them one day, and his father kept him interested in books by reading to him every night. As well as encouraging him at home, his parents arranged for special tutoring. Bob never gave up trying and one day he realised he was able to figure out some of the words on the page and he began to read! He decided to play a trick on his Dad. When he was on his own he read a few chapters ahead in the Harry Potter book his Dad was reading to him at night. Then he pretended to know what was coming - as if by magic! Now aged eleven, Bob is an advanced reader and reading is his favourite activity. He particularly loves thick science fiction books that come in series. His best day at school was when, after he finished his maths, his teacher let him read a book for the rest of the day. Bob thinks his social status at school is not high, because he does not fit into the sporty culture of the school. He prefers to make up his own non-competitive games so the other kids don't call him 'loser'. He also does not see himself as belonging to the high achievers group in

class, because “I’m good at reading but apart from that things that I’m good at are not too much”. Reading is Bob’s current passion and if he thinks of the future, it is to imagine a relaxed, rule free life for himself at home, with his dog.

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

The plot of Bob’s story starts from a low point in his life, as a seven year old facing the huge hurdle of learning to read. It is a particularly low point for Bob because reading is something he wants to do. The odds seemed stacked against him when he cannot even keep pace in reading with a classmate who does not speak English. Reading is a highly valued occupation in his family so he keeps persevering with the task, never giving up. The struggle is an essential part the plot because it highlights his eventual victory. As Bob pours over the pages, trying to make sense of the words, he achieves a breakthrough. At the point he realises the words are beginning to make sense, his story takes a progressive turn. To a certain extent, having overcome the obstacle of not being able to read, Bob’s story stabilises and there is a sense of resting on his laurels. He spends his time enjoying his reading ability, even using it as a shield against other difficulties, like not being good at physical activities. He is not looking ahead to the future too avidly, but pictures himself as a slightly eccentric future character, man with dog, free of domestic rules.

By focusing his story around his success in learning to read, Bob builds a character that the reader can admire, an over-comer. The story line in Bob’s story also fits quite well with the archetypal monomyth in which the hero sets out on a quest to overcome certain challenges and returns victorious. By finally achieving his goal of being able to read, he can take his place within the literary culture of his family.

Narrative Voice

Bob can be justifiably proud of his ability to read and he is able to look back on his earlier negative experiences with a sophisticated sense of wry amusement. With a sense of empathy for his younger self, Bob’s narrative of his early reading failure is imbued with ironic humour. There is a cynical edge in his reminiscence of the unsympathetic way his younger self was treated; he muses “apparently I wasn’t good enough to even be in his group”. While Bob is now happy to claim to be an advanced reader for his age, he presents himself pretty much as a one talent wonder: “I like reading and I’m good at reading but apart from that things that I’m good at are not too much”. While he speaks empathetically of his younger self, there is still a tone of

self scorning towards his present self. Throughout his interview, he uses negative phrases to describe his abilities in many other activities, such as “I love swimming - I'm not good at swimming though”. His consistent voicing that he is not that good at anything else, implies a level of compromised self-esteem. Nevertheless, in learning to read against the odds, Bob chooses to present himself as a hero in his own story, rather than a loser.

Other Voices

Bob also positions his parents as key allies on his journey to learning to read. Their voices are central in his story, his mother's optimism and encouragement and his father as a reading buddy. Both of them hold the value for reading as an important activity, maintaining the belief that Bob can learn to read. In contrast to the support and sense of belonging he feels at home, he positions himself on the social fringe at school where to be placed in competitive situations is to risk the humiliation of scornful voices who call you a loser. Though not actually excluded, Bob does not feel socially accepted in his school environment because “if you collect War Hammer - and you're like really into painting them and stuff - you're not exactly like the coolest kid in the world”. While his social status at school is still less secure, now he can read, Bob is no longer odd man out in his home environment.

Core Message

The primary message that comes through in Bob's story is encapsulated in the narrative thread of overcoming his reading difficulties. Bob can present himself as a skilled reader, even while he lacks confidence in his ability in other activities. He frames his life around this key competency so that Bob's favourite day at school is when he can read his book for ‘most of the day’. The essential message in Bob's story is that *through perseverance, something that seemed too hard can be achieved*; he kept trying and he finally figured out how to do it.

BOWIN'S STORY

I like my life full of action!

Until he was six, Bowin thought he had a perfect life. He started school at five with great confidence and was “right up there” with the “popular people”, but as time went on he began to realise that something was not quite right. He realised he was finding it tricky to learn to spell and do maths. Then, when he was six, his parents'

separated and his perfect world fell apart. He remembers his primary school years as being marred by bullying and until recently, he believed that daily bullying was the cause of his learning difficulties. During this period of his life, Bowin changed schools a few times and he found it hard to make friends, so he developed a role for himself as the “rejected loner”. He found that as the years progressed and the work got harder his learning difficulties increased, particularly with mathematics. However, for Bowin, studying martial arts was something that made a difference. Martial arts have always been there for him, keeping him going through the difficult years. A turning point for Bowin was starting afresh at intermediate school and discovering his talents in Science, Social Studies, English and speech making. He found that the bullies stopped bullying him because he was surer of himself. Other students, recognising his talents, responded to him in a more positive way, including the girls! At 13 Bowin tends to compare himself to his ideal of an all round, good at everything, popular superhero. He feels he falls short of that mark. His Karate instructor, however, has been a significant mentor noticing when Bowin loses faith in himself and helping him re-focus on his many abilities. More recently, Bowin owns that the loner role has become a performance - one he can choose to adopt or not. He is adjusting to the idea of himself as more popular. Bowin in fact has many talents and a huge range of interests, which give him the active life he loves: martial arts, soccer, drama, music, speech making, drumming, song writing, youth club, and adventure activities like bungee jumping, tramping and other outdoor skills. He imagines himself in the future as a highly skilled soldier, which would utilise his high energy levels, draw on his ability to be responsible, and fulfil his love of adventure and the great outdoors. “If I died in the classroom doing work I would be really, really sad. Whereas if I died in the SAS doing – because my parachute hadn’t opened because I’d jumped off a plane – that would be kind of like that I would be there doing it”. If he did try any other career, he says he would get really bored.

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

The story line in Bowin’s narrative starts from a high point in his life, when everything is going well, but at six years of age a number of negative life experiences combine together to create a regressive trend. As learning difficulties, bullying and coming to terms with his parents’ separation continue throughout his primary school years; his storyline becomes stabilised at a low point in his life, which he describes as “like a depression”. However, starting intermediate school provides a positive turning point and he finds that life begins again. Even though Bowin is nervous about life letting him down again, and wonders if he can trust the future to be as good as he imagines, he nevertheless has certain aspirations, which link to his future self. His life story is in a stable “good” phase with the promise of moving forward in a progressive direction.

Bowin’s story of his middle childhood fits the “good things turning bad” scenario (McAdams et al., 2001, p. 474). At this stage, the plot of his story is reminiscent of an archetypal story form. Similarly to the hero in a classic tragedy Bowin is “defeated by

the forces of evil" (the bullies) and is "ostracized" socially (Lieblich et al, 1998, p. 88). Overcome by negative experiences in his life, Bowin develops an understanding of himself as the "rejected loner" However, as he approaches adolescence he discovers his talents (his talisman) and the plot of his story becomes agentic, meaning Bowin develops a sense of confidence, competency and a determination to accomplish certain goals (Polkinghorne, 1996). By overcoming his negative experiences, life becomes good again for Bowin. However, in comparison to the idealised young self he introduces at the beginning of his story, Bowin is left a wounded hero. Therefore, he still harbours some anxiety about his abilities and his future. Even with all his recent successes, he has times when he unfavourably compares himself to the idealised image of a superhero.

Bowin also tells a story rich in the variety of things he loves to do and is good at doing. He ably constructs a sense of purpose for his life, centred within a busy routine of activities. He integrates his past and present experiences, linking them to an imagined future based around his particular skills. The way in which Bowin's story can be characterised as an occupational narrative will be discussed in Chapter Eight.

Narrative Voice

As soon as he has checked where he should begin, "do you want me to just kind of start from the beginning?" Bowin proceeds to narrate his story with little interruption or commentary from me. He rarely looks for any prompts but on the rare occasion when he runs out of something to say, he prompts *me* saying "next question!" He has a reputation for being a gifted storyteller, this is evident in his rich use of language, metaphor, and the many analogies used to illustrate ideas throughout his story. He frequently evaluates what he has just said and expands on his own ideas without being asked, using the phrase "what I mean by that is". Bowin also adroitly evaluates his own narrative tone saying, "I smile when I say, 'I've got this problem with maths' - but really I'm hating maths to the gut".

Bowin ably embodies his story as a "speaking personality" (Engel, 1999, p.153). One of the ways in which the strength of Bowin's speaking personality is made evident through his pervasive use of direct personal statements, emphasising what he perceives to be his strengths: "I'm very, very good at symmetry and geometry"; "I found I was really good at, like Science". As well as direct personal statements about his abilities and weaknesses, Bowin frequently uses analogies to emphasise how strongly he feels about certain things and why they are important to him. He

emphasises the importance of getting outdoors and being active by referring to the ignominy of dying doing mundane indoor activities, compared with the worthiness of more adventurous activities.

While Bowin does not hesitate to describe himself as a victim of bullying, he has found his voice not as a victim, but more as a wounded hero. There is, however, a consciousness that, whatever his experiences in the past, Bowin now speaks with confidence and authority. He narrates his story with honesty, humour and a degree of mature philosophical reflection. When I assume something about one of his statements and remark that he seems to be looking ahead positively, he corrects my assumption by revealing how he honestly feels. "I'm really nervous about my future. I am really scared about my future. I don't want my future to come, OK. I want to stay how it is - because life is good now".

Other Voices

At the start of his story Bowin is one of the popular crowd. However, during his primary school years the bullies are significant characters whose voices mirror his own sense of fallen social status. Because of difficulties with getting on with his peers, Bowin positions himself as a social outcast. One of the ways that he knows he has regained ground is when he receives more positive acknowledgement from his peers. His social position changes for the better. The bullies no longer bother him, he is becoming popular and his talents are noticed. He realises his rejected loner role is just that, a *role* which he can choose to adopt or not. However, because he has not quite shaken off his sense of being different he has days when he loses sight of his competent self. His martial arts instructor is an important voice reflecting back to him the image of the talented adolescent boy he really is, enabling him to reposition himself as a hero in his own story.

Core Message

Bowin's story has many powerful themes starting out with his young self who has it all, loses everything, moving to his adolescent self who arrives at a new beginning and re-establishes himself as hero in his own story. In this regard, Bowin's narrative has a strong redemptive message, one of hope. Things can go wrong, turn bad, but it is possible to come through the bad times to a good life. The turning point in Bowin's story is clearly linked with discovering his talents and being seen to be competent by

others. The essential message in Bowin's story is that *discovering my talents has made all the difference*.

ELLA'S STORY

I'm expected to 'buckle down' but I totally hate school!

Seven months ago, fourteen-year-old Ella discovered that she has mild dyslexia. Up until then, although she knew she had a problem with spelling, she did not see herself as dyslexic. Her mother became concerned by her teachers' comments in her end of Year 9 school report. The report mentioned "distractibility and difficulties in concentrating" but did not mention Ella's spelling problems. Her mum arranged for Ella to be assessed by an educational psychologist and organised ongoing tutoring. Knowing she has dyslexia has not made a great difference to Ella, but remedial tutoring has helped improve her spelling a bit. Ella remembers enjoying being at primary school, even though she was kept in at break-times to work on her spelling. However, after nearly two years at high school she declares that she now "hates school altogether". She finds that her spelling difficulties affect her ability to perform to the standards expected of her in an academically demanding school. She hates having to learn German, reasoning that if she can't spell in English she can't spell in German either! As the curriculum work gets harder, the teacher's expectations increase, and formal exams loom, Ella finds that being in school gets worse. Although she has good friends willing to help her with class work, she still gets behind. School is not totally grim because she loves physical education, anything to with sport, and drama. However, Ella feels pressured by constant lectures to "buckle down and work" for the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), and personal messages that she is not "meeting her potential". She is therefore not looking forward, with any sense of enthusiasm, to three more years of high school. She has not yet imagined a future for herself in the adult world, though with a touch of black humour she jokes that retirement is a future ambition. She is, however, interested in travel and adventurous activities like kayaking and bungee jumping.

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

Ella's story line has hit a low point in relation to her negative feelings about her learning experiences at high school. While Ella had trouble with spelling in primary school, she enjoyed school and did not think of herself as dyslexic. However, the regressive trend in her story does not so much relate to finding out she is dyslexic as it does to the fact that Ella does not feel that things are changing for the better. She cannot imagine a more positive point in her life beyond her current negative school experiences. Ella's story offers a plot in which she is not overcoming learning difficulties, nor coming to a place of philosophical acceptance. Her experiences of learning in a high school context have brought a negative scenario into her life (McAdams et al., 2001). Things at school were "alright" when she was younger and

now they are not. It is therefore hard to look ahead. Ella's experience fits with McAdams et al.'s proposal that the negative messages, inherent in a contamination sequence, make it hard for people to believe that "their best intentions will generate fruitful outcomes" (p. 483). The mantra Ella hears everyday, "just work hard and you will achieve your potential", does not fit with her personal reality. When good experiences turn bad, it is harder to be optimistic not just about the present but also the future (McAdams et al.).

Ella's degree of dyslexia is mild, and others expect her to do well. However, she is in no frame of mind to take a "make the best of things" approach to school. She is clear that she hates school. Ella is not framing her reality within a classic storyline of overcoming against the odds, nor even trying to defeat the dragon of negative experience. She is instead, as a bit of an anti-hero, refusing to comply. In this regard, Ella's story provides an alternative perspective to the narratives of other participants. As a counter narrative it sits outside the culturally preferred narrative style of the over-comer, its important message may be at risk of being underestimated by others.

Narrative Voice

A distinctly angry tone comes through in Ella's story, evident in her choice of language and direct statements of feeling about most school subjects: "I hate it, I could kill it". For the reader this may seem strong language to use to describe experiences of school lessons, but it does emphasise Ella's depth of feeling. In her use of evocative terms with strong meanings, Ella provides a glimpse of what lies behind her anti-school attitude. The angry tone also voices a sense of lack of control over her own learning programme. She "*has to do German*" even though she "hates it" and "sucks at it". Ella has a resigned tone when she talks about anticipated exam failure; she believes that in NCEA examinations "they fail you for not being able to spell". Ella's angry tone is in effect a protest about the injustice of having to do things to a certain standard when dyslexia impacts on her ability to achieve the standard required.

Despite an overriding theme of how much she hates school, humour is not missing from Ella's story. Her angry tone changes to an animated one when she tells her entertaining stories of high jinks in class. Ella's main characterisation of self is as a disaffected student, with moments of anarchy. Despite this, Ella presents herself as a previously good student and there is a sense that her current disaffection is firmly

grounded in her present circumstances, preventing her connecting with her past image of herself as a good student and her potential self as an achiever.

Ella cannot yet see past everyday demands, to imagine her future; she is in the process of reforming her identity. She has lost her previous image of herself as “not dyslexic”; an ordinary student. Ella presents as an intelligent girl who, without accommodation being made for her dyslexia, is at risk of giving up on the struggle to reaffirm her status as a competent student.

Other Voices

While Ella characterises her mother as an ally she does not experience her teachers as allies and positions herself as being offside with them. Ella’s teachers have not noticed the extent of her learning struggles and she feels unsupported by them. Her relationship with the teachers is fraught with difficulty because, from Ella’s perspective, the overriding pressure to achieve is encapsulated in their voices. The teachers are no doubt voicing the mantra they see as being expected of them by the education system: “to do well in NCEA you just need to put in the work and you will get good results”. Philosophically offside with her teachers, Ella aligns herself with a disruptive group of classmates. However, she reveals her ability to take things in her stride by not making a big deal of the teasing she experiences from her friends. When her friends tease her, Ella takes no offence because she feels well accepted by her peer group. Performance issues rather than social difference affect Ella’s attitude to school.

Core Message

From Ella’s perspective life in an academically demanding school sucks when you have dyslexia and the teachers do not understand how that affects your ability to perform. Ella hates school but there is a sense that if she was able to adjust the way she did some of the tasks, and if she could have some choice over her subjects, things could be different. Ella’s teachers recognise she is an intelligent student but her core message is *I can’t reach my potential if I can’t do the work.*

JODIE'S STORY

I enjoy school and learning but exams are just too hard!

Jodie remembers that it was her mother who first became concerned about her learning difficulties and she recalls needing special help with her language skills before she started school. Since she began primary school, Jodie recalls having difficulty with reading, writing and maths. However, she is good at P.E., swimming and cross-country running. She has also enjoyed playing Netball throughout her school years and is now part of a successful team. Some of Jodie's teachers have been a significant support to her. However, she has needed extra help in class and remedial tutoring throughout her schooling. Over the last few years, the provision of extra support, such as teacher aide hours, has been variable and affected by her school's budget constraints. Now she is at high school and facing exams, Jodie's need for teacher aide time has increased but the school is unable to afford the amount of support she needs. Therefore, Jodie's parents are paying a remedial tutor to work with her in school time and they pay for teacher aide hours to supplement the few the school are able to provide. Growing up on a farm and helping with work that needs to be done, Jodie has developed a very good work ethic. This has flowed over to her attitude at school. Jodie loves school and learning, and sees herself as a behaviourally "good" student. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for her to hang on to the idea of herself as an able student. Although she loves school, she finds that "some days are hard!" As hard as Jodie works, she just cannot manage to pass any exams. Her exam marks are "really low" and she does not feel good about that. Despite her many practical skills, Jodie is not yet able to see past her learning barriers to imagine what she might do or become in the future.

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

Learning in a school context has always been challenging for Jodie; she has always known that and so have her parents and teachers. Nevertheless, she has always persevered and done her best. However, with exams looming, there is a definite sense that Jodie is facing a critical point in her school journey. Her story line has taken a regressive turn in relation to the demands of exams; they are "too hard". The quest Jodie has been set is to obtain education qualifications that will provide a key to her future. Jodie is willing to apply herself and do her very best, literally battling the odds, to secure the rewards the education system promises. Her story, however, is not exactly fitting with the archetypal theme of the hero who wins the prize through courage and commitment to the quest. At present, the odds are beginning to look insurmountable.

Narrative Voice

Although expressive language does not come as easily or spontaneously to Jodie as other participants, she is quite reflective about the questions she is asked. She expresses herself assertively when she realises that I might be forming the impression she does not like school. She quickly scotches this impression by strongly emphasising that she likes school. Having emphasised this point she is careful, however, not to minimise the degree of difficulty she faces, reflecting, “Some days are hard”. In voicing her feelings about school, Jodie presents herself as a realist. She does not have to pretend that things are any way other than they are to take a positive view of school. However, there is a stoic component in Jodie’s voice. Despite experiencing a significant level of difficulty with literacy and numeracy skills, Jodie characterises herself as a good student. She is motivated to learn and to keep working hard, trying to do her best no matter what the odds. Jodie’s stoicism is not a grim one, however, and when asked how she feels about her low exam achievement she comments with irony “well, I’m not pleased”. No tone of rebellion emerges in Jodie’s voice; she differentiates herself from the “naughty kids group” who do not get on with their work. Jodie has not given up on herself as a learner. However, recently exams have presented an enormous hurdle and there is finally a hint of a discouragement creeping into the narrative tone of her story.

Other Voices

Jodie positions herself as a behaviourally good student in comparison to other students who she observes also have learning difficulties. In terms of obtaining the extra resources she needs to support her learning, Jodie is dependent on the good will of supportive adults to advocate on her behalf, such as her parents and some teachers. Her parents’ considerable support extends to funding the extra services she needs in a school context. Jodie’s story is interesting because it is the only one in which the voice of ‘government policy’ makes an appearance. Her learning needs have been evaluated as not meeting the moderate level of extra learning needs that would entitle her to targeted special education support.

Core Message

One of the messages of Jodie’s story is that the degree of difficulty with learning does not necessarily indicate the extent to which a student might engage in the school programme. Jodie enjoys her school’s structure and routines and feels she

has a place in her school setting. However, despite her willingness to engage in the student role Jodie is conscious that she faces considerable barriers in achieving qualifications. The essential message I have taken from Jodie's story is: *I'm willing to work hard, but hard work is not bringing me success.*

JORDAN'S STORY

One friend makes all the difference

One of the biggest worries for Jordan has been around friendship and she feels that being snubbed by other girls is worse than being taunted. Social exclusion by her peers has been one of the most 'hurtful' experiences in her life. Her earliest memories of being in kindergarten are of being alone, feeling scared, trying to play with the other kids but finding they wouldn't let her. She says, "I always thought that was sad". Jordan prefers not to talk about her first year in school because it was even harder than kindergarten and her difficulty in making friends continued. At school, Jordan found the classroom too noisy, and she used to react really badly in class. She also found it hard to do her schoolwork because it took her a long time to remember facts. She has no trouble remembering long-term events and says, "I don't get that". She finds doing maths particularly difficult, and feels she is "bad at that". She is good at creative writing but thinks she tends to give up easily with schoolwork in general. Jordan links her learning difficulties, and her hypersensitive reactions to dyspraxia and she has been open in using this term with her classmates. She feels that over time they have gradually come to accept her. However, Jordan has often felt different from her classmates, and not always sure that she belonged to the class. Because of these experiences, for a long time Jordan thought that "one good friend would make all the difference". She often wished she could be at the same school with a friend she had known since she was little. At thirteen, Jordan now feels she is "getting through dyspraxia" and things are changing in her social world. A girl at school has befriended her and she now finds she has about four friends. Having friends, and someone to talk to at school, does make all the difference. In contrast to her world at school, Jordan has seen her home as a sanctuary. Her parents have always been there for her, her mum sticks by her, her dad makes her laugh, and her cat has been a good friend. She is thinking she might follow her grandfather's example, to become a photographer.

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

The story line of Jordan's core narrative begins at a low point in her life when she is experiencing difficulty socialising in kindergarten and the regressive trend continues as she starts school and things get even more difficult for her. This phase settles into a stable pattern of just being socially different. More recently, a positive turning point has occurred in Jordan's storyline as she sees things beginning to improve on the social front. This more progressive trend is reflected in her glimpse towards a possible future.

By way of narrative style, Jordan's story starts out with a plot in which she is the victim of an inhospitable world (Polkinghorne, 1996). However, Jordan sets out on a life quest to solve the puzzle of her social exclusion and to find the one true friend who will make all the difference. Through the hand of friendship, she finds her social world is indeed changing and having succeeded in her quest she realises that she is no longer a social outcast. She recasts herself as a character with a future, and photography captures her interest. Interestingly, Jordan was the only girl to imagine a future self and her narrative shows the emergence of a possible occupational identity.

Narrative Voice

Jordan begins her story with the sad narrative tone of a self who is not a loner by choice, but is definitely on the social fringe. She directly and succinctly expresses her feeling "I always thought that was sad". The sadness of her narrative voice relates to her younger self and as she moves into the present, her tone lightens. Jordan's view of herself as socially different has changed for the better but she offers personal statements that question her sense of competency: "I'm bad at that"; "I just give up easily". Bemusement creeps into her voice; however, as she tries to figure out why she is good at some things and not others, "I don't get that". Her sense of humour emerges and shines through as she describes the antics of her cat and members of her extended family. Having started in a sad place, Jordan brings her story to its resolution by expressing a more optimistic sense of herself and her future.

Other Voices

Jordan's core story is very much centred in her social world so it is not surprising that it is crowded by many other voices, which influence and reflect how she sees herself. In relation to her peers she positions herself as socially rejected; this is hurtful, and it confirms her self-understanding of being different from her classmates. While she positions herself in the wider world as socially isolated and snubbed by others, at home she positions herself in a warm family context. Her mum is supportive and always there for her; her dad makes her laugh and even her cat has helped her. Home provides a sanctuary from life's struggles. However, as Jordan makes friends, and believes things are changing on the social front, she is beginning to position herself in the wider world with increased confidence and even a sense of optimism.

Core Message

Jordan makes the message of her own story explicit in emphasising that one of the most painful experiences in her life has been experiencing social rejection. Her learning difficulties have come second to this experience. She has always wanted to fit in socially because she believes that having friends makes a difference. The essential message of Jordan's story is that *it is important to fit in and have friends*. Finally having made her one good friend, Jordan finds that actually she has more.

SAM'S STORY

I'd be smarter than I am if I wasn't dyslexic

When nine-year-old Sam first started school he saw himself as a "good" student because everything was easy and he was not expected to do "hard things" but some things like spelling and handwriting were always a bit tricky. Sam found out last year that he has dyslexia and believes that if he did not have it, he would be "smarter". He does not, however, see himself as typically dyslexic because he is "kind of a mix of someone who's got strong points in them", like exceptional ability at maths. With a one-to-one tutor, Sam can do math problems at an accelerated Year 10 – 12 levels and produces his workbooks to prove it. However, he does not enjoy maths at school, finding it harder to do things when he is under time pressure and when the class is noisy. Sam would prefer to be home schooled because he feels that he works better in a setting where he does not feel under pressure. He also thinks his mother understands him, whereas his teacher gets impatient with him. Sam describes himself as sensitive and thinks this means sometimes he overreacts to certain things that happen. However, when he gets overwhelmed by feelings of frustration, Sam has learnt to take it out by punching a pillow instead of someone else. Although he is physically strong, he uses his self-control to stop himself having a physical fight with another kid because he has "a mind that doesn't want to hurt other people". Being bullied is not one of Sam's problems; he has good friends he enjoys doing different activities with including art and sport. Sam has a wide range of interests and things he knows that he is good at doing: soccer, drawing, singing, acting, cooking, reading and writing stories. He also enjoys biking and kayaking with his family. Based on a strong awareness of his abilities (he has been assessed as being in a gifted range with his cognitive skills), Sam has a positive sense of himself as multi-talented. He has been around the loop of thinking of lots of things he would like to do in the future. Now he has decided he would like to become either an engineer or a doctor, like either of his parents. He thinks that he would do these jobs, not because his parents do them, but because he would enjoy them.

Core Narrative: Direction and Style

Sam's story starts at a positive point when he starts school and finds that everything is easy to learn. His story line takes a regressive turn when he discovers that actually, some things are tricky. Learning difficulties act as a contamination sequence in Sam's ideal story line (McAdams et al., 2001). His birthright has been stolen from him because dyslexia affects his ability to be as smart as he could be. However, he is

not undermined by this discovery because knowing he has dyslexia helps explain his quirks, and Sam prefers to focus on his strengths and abilities. Sam constructs his life story as one of varied interests and purposeful occupations. Sam's story has an optimistic plot in which he confidently imagines a future for himself, based on his competencies (Polkinghorne, 1996). There is also a strong sense of his story moving in a progressive direction towards the future.

Sam's story also fits the definition of an occupational narrative; he integrates a positive understanding of his past and present self with his competencies in significant occupations and links this to an imagined future (Kielhofner, 2002). I will discuss this further in Chapter Eight.

Narrative Voice

Sam tells his story with the self-assured air of a practised storyteller, like Bowin, he needs little prompting. He presents himself as a strong character in his own story, talking primarily about his strengths and abilities. His statement that he would be smarter than he is if he did not have dyslexia, is not said with resentment but rather offered in a matter of fact way. He is also matter of fact about his exceptional abilities in mathematics, downplaying his ability to solve problems at a high school level by saying "not that I'm fantastic at Maths, I just have a brain for working out some things". His confidence in his own point of view is evident as he offers me bits of information "that might help you with your research". He has well developed theories on what dyslexia is and how it plays out in people's lives, including his opinion that "dyslexics are just like any ordinary old kid".

However, in presenting himself as confident and self-assured, he is not overly so. Sam is realistic and honest. He reveals a side of himself that he does not have under control, the self that tends to lose it and hit the pillow. On the other hand, he reveals an empathetic nature, in that he does not want to hurt other kids. Overall, he paints a picture of himself as being "like every other kid" rather than different, despite facing the dual challenges of learning difficulties and giftedness.

Other Voices

Sam evaluates his own abilities in relation to his classmates and friends and has therefore developed a sense of himself as having mixed abilities. One of the issues for Sam in relation to others is being understood. Although he is cognitively bright,

having dyslexia means he does not work well under pressure. His Mum understands this and his teacher's impatience is contrasted with his mother's understanding. Sam characterises people who have not experienced dyslexia as lacking the understanding of what it is like to be dyslexic. Sam has also taken to heart messages about not hurting others, particularly when he becomes frustrated. In relation to others, despite his own frustrations, he presents a developing sense of empathetic understanding, which will stand him in good stead in the future.

Core Message

One message that Sam chooses to make explicit is that he does not fit a typical pattern of dyslexia. He makes it evident that it is possible to be highly intelligent and talented, yet have trouble with learning some things. Dyslexia takes something away from Sam, but he feels assured enough of his own abilities to look towards professional careers, which will use his cognitive talents. His explicitly stated message "I'd be smarter than I am if I wasn't dyslexic" is not to tell me that he is not smart, he knows that he is smart. The subtext I read in Sam's story is the reverse: *I might have some learning difficulties, but I'm also smart and capable.*

REVIEWING CORE NARRATIVES

Generally, the participants in my study shared similar ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and, at the time of being interviewed, were all living in secure family settings.¹ However, they had different types and levels of learning difficulties, they were at different stages in their schooling, and their perspective on what experiences meant in their lives differed. Consequently, the kinds of stories these young participants told reflected these differences. While it was important for some participants to do well in school, others downplayed the importance of learning difficulties by focusing on other aspects of their lives.

One of the key insights for me in using a narrative approach to craft interview transcripts into core narratives was that, despite differences in how learning difficulties played out in their lives, young participants did share common experiences. One shared experience was that of learning difficulties as an interruption in the progressive direction of their life story. Some participants remembered happy or carefree life scenes as younger children and most participants

¹ I have identified Sam's mixed ethnicity, Pakeha – Cook Island Māori, in Chapter Four. Bowin's parents were separated but he had stable relationships with both of his parents.

remembered positive life scenarios prior to realising they were struggling to learn. For some participants, the effect of positive life plots being contaminated by the negative interruption of learning difficulties meant that their story developed a sad or cynical life tone (Polkinghorne, 1996). Two participants' stories as younger selves had very strong victimic plots in which they experienced being socially excluded and feeling different. When things "move from a good, affectively positive life scene to a bad, affectively negative life scene", some form of psychological adaptation is required to move the story line forward again (McAdams et al., 2001, p. 474). Contrasting Ella and Bowin's stories demonstrates the importance of understanding that this process is occurring at different ages and stages according to individual circumstances. Whereas, in the transition from primary to high school, things had turned from bad to good for Bowin, for Ella things had turned from "OK" to not so good.

I now understand more clearly that the issue of specific learning difficulties has a psychosocial dimension beyond neuro-maturational differences and performance difficulties in school. What I have come to understand is that to move their story in a progressive direction again, these participants needed to go through a process of psychological adaptation in which they reframed the meaning of learning difficulties in their lives. Whereas all stories hit a low point, at some stage in the plot most stories also had a positive turning point. As participants experienced negative life scenes becoming more positive, their stories became redemptive in nature with an optimistic tone. The transformative process of good things turning bad, and then turning good again indicates a positive psychological adaptation to negative past events, which is an important factor underpinning future psychological health and well-being (McAdams et al., 2001).

In characterising themselves as protagonists, most participants told stories that expressed elements of archetypal story forms. The boys' stories echoed with a sense of the archetypal monomyth in which the hero sets out on a quest to conquer a life challenge and returns, changed in some way, but stronger or wiser (Gergen, 2004). Amongst the boys' stories, Sam's story was less monomythical in structure and more occupational. Although not so easily defined as classic story types, archetypal elements and redemptive themes were evident in the girls' narratives. For example, Jordan's story of her quest to find a true friend. Amy's story echoed with the theme of the hero's journey in that she located herself in an adventure story, and characterised herself in the heroic role of an adventurer. In this way, she could also place herself beyond the limitation of her reading difficulties, and define challenges on her own

terms. In this regard, her story was similar to Bowin's; he also chose to frame challenges within the context of an heroic adventure story.

By positioning themselves as heroes in their own stories, most participants expressed a more positive and holistic sense of identity than that of a disabled learner. In fact, Amy directly rejected being cast in the role of a "learning disabled" student and presented herself socially as particularly confident and outgoing. Her high level of social competency and self-esteem challenged my assumption that learning difficulties result in low self-esteem. One of the surprises in listening to participants' stories was the degree of positive awareness, expressed by participants, of their own abilities. They were all able to link a positive sense of self with particular activities and situations, while feeling uncertain or not so good in others. This fits with Willoughby, King and Polatajko's (1996) caution that we should be careful not to make assumptions about children's self esteem and that we should "objectively listen to our young client's ... and believe their reports" (p. 131).

An examination of participants' narrative voices positioned Ella's story as a counter narrative to the other stories. She did not attempt to present herself as triumphing over learning difficulties. Rather than redemptive in tone, Ella's story remained angry and she chose to present herself as something of an anti-hero in a school setting. While she was angry, due to things she could not control Ella used humour to retain a sense of balance. All eight participants demonstrated a skilful use of humour. Through sardonic humour, Bob turned an undermining experience, particularly for a seven year old, into an attention-grabbing story. Through their humorous narratives, without being prompted to do so, most participants offered a glimpse not only of their heroic self, but of the self which sometimes gets into trouble, takes risks, is not thinking about the future, hates people who are mean, and steps outside the rules now and then.

Narrative voice also revealed each participant's unique outlook. Alex's voice was certain of the future and therefore purposeful. Amy had a very positive and upbeat approach to life. Bob was proud of his reading skill but remained self-deprecating of his other abilities. Bowin embodied his story telling as a strong speaking personality, but admitted to vulnerability. Jodie's voice was stoic but realistic. Jordan started off with a sad tone which lightened as she reflected on her changing social status. Sam voiced frustrations but also reflected a well-grounded sense of self and his own abilities.

Nevertheless, some participants faced significant issues around self-esteem. Even as they presented themselves as generally confident and self-assured they were still aware they had competency issues related to school. Bob was confident in his reading ability but still unsure of his social status and his ability in many other areas. Bowin and Jordan had experienced significant social challenges, which had undermined their sense of self. Some of this social disempowering was related to other voices who did not understand the issues with which they were struggling. Sometimes these voices were individual, as in the taunting of peers, or sometimes they were institutional as in one school that Alex attended that “did not believe in dyslexia”. On the other hand, voices that offered explanations and encouragement created opportunities for turning points to occur in most participants lives.

Participant’s unique perspectives were reflected in the individuality of the core messages expressed through their stories. In a sense, the core messages revealed whether participants absorbed messages they heard and integrated them into their own reality (as Alex did in reframing dyslexia as a benefit) or rejected messages that did not fit (as Ella did with the mantra to work hard to achieve success). One comparison of views that stood out for me was the difference in Ella and Jodie’s perspectives about school. Despite facing significant learning challenges, Jodie liked school. Conversely, Ella, whose difficulties were described as mild, said she hated school. The insight I take from these contrasting perspectives is that, as adults, we cannot assume to know, based on evidence of the degree of learning difficulty, how a young person is likely to be doing in a school context. Personal and environmental factors have worked together to form quite different perspectives for Jodie and Ella.

By studying eight narratives, individual variations provided a richer picture of the experience of learning difficulties in young people’s lives. Certain stories offered more information on particular themes than others such as social exclusion versus social competence; bullying and friendship; the value of perseverance; and the reality that hard work does not always bring rewards.

SUMMARY

This chapter has examined eight core narratives in terms of their narrative style, plot direction, unique narrative voice, relationship to others and the essential message inherent in each story. What was learned from studying the stories is that participants

commonly experienced learning difficulties as a negative interruption to the progressive course of their life story. However, most storylines included positive turning points, facilitated by wise or encouraging voices, and offered redemptive messages of hope. Personal narrative has therefore been seen as a useful way to contextualise the complexities of individual experience. Having introduced the storytellers and their tales the following chapters, Six to Eight, will look at what participants had to say in more detail.

CHAPTER SIX

STORIES OF SELF AND LEARNING EFFORTS

I like to be a normal person. 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.

Bob, 11

INTRODUCTION

Chapter Six represents the first of three chapters, which categorise themes drawn from participants' whole stories, constructed from interview transcripts. In this chapter, *Stories of Self and Learning Efforts*, the categorisation of narrative themes relates to participants' experiences and perspectives of their learning efforts. The second category, *Stories of Self in the Social World*, will be discussed in Chapter Seven. Finally, the third category of themes, *Stories of Being Occupational*, is presented in Chapter Eight. These three chapters categorise themes revealed by studying what participants' had to say in relation to their effort to learn, their relationship with their social world and the things they liked to do. While these three dimensions have been separated out in this thesis for the purposes of discussion, the relationship between them is in reality interwoven and interdependent (Rigby & Letts, 2003). The reader will no doubt notice that some of the narratives used in one category could have been used in another, to highlight aspects of the relationship between the young person, their environment and occupations in which they participated.

A collective narrative thread emerged when participants' narratives were gathered together in this chapter relating to participants' own awareness of their efforts to learn. These themes are collated in sub-categories named: *Becoming Aware: It's Just Too Hard*; *Being Labelled: What's in a Name?*; *Memory Difficulties: Stuff Goes Whoop*; *Literacy and Numeracy: Mastering the 3 Rs*; *Personal Strategies: Getting Things To Stick*; *Remedial Tutoring: Doing Something About It*; *Framing the Issue: Gift or Nuisance*. Although reported in a linear fashion, for participants, making sense of learning difficulties was not necessarily such an orderly process. However, the storyline begins with participants' memories of becoming aware of their learning difficulties.

BECOMING AWARE: “IT’S JUST TOO HARD”

Participants all spoke of a growing awareness that learning certain things was “hard”. Jodie remembered knowing early in her school years that other children in her class were “picking things up” more quickly than she was and she felt “left behind”. Amy also remembered having learning difficulties from her earliest years:

From when I was very young, I’ve always had a difficulty in spelling and reading – which just really didn’t happen. Spelling - I always just didn’t really pick up the words and reading pretty much didn’t really happen either. When I started thinking that it couldn’t be done – “I can’t do this!”, and all that jive, I would’ve been maybe Year 3 or 4.

Sam, Alex and Bowin on the other hand, remembered that when they first started school they had no difficulty with learning tasks. Sam reflected this was because he was “quite good then” and the work was “really easy” because he “didn’t get any big hard things put on” him. However, these three participants noted that their struggles with learning began to emerge as the work became harder and more was expected of them. Bowin saw a relationship between an increase in task challenge and his learning difficulties becoming more apparent, particularly in mathematics:

I first discovered that I had problems learning to spell – but I was up there with maths and maths [difficulties] didn’t come until quite a bit later... It was as I got older and as the work became harder, because basic maths I understand ... and [in] my first two years at [new school] ...I started to think “something’s a bit wrong here – I’m not really doing this well” ...and that was the first kind of little troublely bits [with learning]. And then I went back to [his original school] and, wow, it went from like just a bit of trouble to really [big trouble].

Bowin’s awareness was that his difficulties escalated over time. In comparison, Alex’s awareness of learning difficulties hit him suddenly, when he was nearing the end of his time at primary school:

I think once I hit Year 6 I stayed with the learning capabilities that I did have – but I didn’t learn any more, which is why I had the sudden shock of having a difficulty learning, as the rest of the class had moved on.

Amy, Alex and Bowin’s narratives emphasise their own thoughts and feelings about their learning difficulties, independent of adult concern. Amy was thinking, “I can’t do this!” while Bowin was thinking “something’s a bit wrong here – I’m not really doing this well”. Alex was feeling shocked about not doing so well. Most of the participants recalled realising they had learning problems during their primary school years, although they did not understand why this was so.

As children, participants did not think about there being any specific explanation for their difficulties. Ella was well aware that she had difficulty learning to spell, but she

did not think of this as a learning difficulty, saying “it was just hard with spelling”. Amy, who thought that reading and spelling were “too hard”, reflected: “I just thought it was just like that because I didn’t know any different”. Alex knew that a boy in his class had dyslexia but he did not connect this knowledge to his own learning difficulties: “even with him having the same problems as me in that class, it still didn’t really cross my mind that I was dyslexic.” In effect, participants suggested that they accepted things as they were, because they had no way of knowing anything different. Sam succinctly put it: “I didn’t even know I was dyslexic because I didn’t know what it was”.

While participants told of being aware of their own difficulties, they also observed that their parents worried about their struggles with learning. Amy remembered her mother trying unsuccessfully to get her teachers to take her learning difficulties seriously: “they just said ‘no, nothing’s wrong - it’s just hard learning all that’ ... Mum was [worried] she kind of knew there was something not quite going right”. Like Amy, other participants remembered that it was their parents concern that catalysed a search for answers.

BEING LABELLED: WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Most participants reported that their parents initiated the action to have their learning difficulties identified. In particular, participants mentioned their mothers as being the ones to seek help on their behalf. Jordan credited her mother with “figuring out what was wrong” by seeking help from an occupational therapist who identified Jordan’s difficulties as dyspraxia. Ella also emphasised her mother’s role in arranging for her difficulties to be identified:

Mum [found] out I had dyslexia - the end of last year [Year 9] when my end of year report came. Cos Mum was taking a tutoring course to become a tutor for dyslexic kids. And she saw my report and she was like “OK!” and she took it up to [the psychologist] at the tutoring thing and [she] said I’ve got a report like a dyslexic student and I should go and have – I should go and be tested. And I had like that big test that goes for 4 hours and I found out I was dyslexic.

Ella was aware that her mother had some background knowledge, which caused her to suspect Ella’s difficulties might be dyslexia. However, due to their parent’s concern, all of participants had been evaluated and given a name for their learning difficulty. They offered varying opinions as to whether they found being given a label useful or not. Ella did not feel the term dyslexia made any difference to her life, it did not for instance help her get out of stuff at school. Alex, however, felt it was useful:

Rather than just having the name 'difficulty' I think it's better to have a name for it 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.

Rather than dyslexia, which she had been identified as having, Amy linked her reading difficulties to an Irlen's diagnosis, because she felt this had been more helpful than remedial reading. She remembered feeling positive about receiving the Irlen's diagnosis and being prescribed special tinted glasses, thinking: "OK, here's something that's going to help me and this could be it - this could help me heaps".² She gave a detailed explanation of how Irlen's affected her visual perception and how the glasses helped her to look at text on a page.

Amy had made a choice about which label she used to describe her difficulties. Bob directly raised an important point about labelling. He accepted the term dyslexia but he did not like the more generalised term 'learning disabilities' being used:

I hate it when people say "oh, Bob here - he's just - he's a little bit challenged" or "Bob's just got some problems" or "he's unlucky" and things like that. I like to be a normal person. 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.

On the other hand, Bowin, who had seen the psychologist when he was younger did not remember being given a label for his learning difficulties. When asked if he knew what his learning difficulties were called he immediately responded:

That you're dumb... like when everyone says [dumb] - I joke about it - I don't care - I don't care about my learning difficulty. I'm just doing something about it - like people say "oh gee, you suck at math" and I'm like "oh yeah, I know I'm handicapped" and I just laugh about it.

In relation to his learning difficulties, Bowin mused: "I don't know. I might just be handicapped, but whatever, it doesn't matter". However, asked if "handicapped" was how he thought of himself, he said with humour, "I don't see myself as being handicapped in any way whatsoever!" Asked what dumb meant to him, Bowin replied, "Well the reason I say dumb is because I've been told I've been 'dumb' and that I'm 'stupid' millions and millions and millions of times in my life". Bowin could not remember much about the psychologist's assessment and without an "actual name" for his difficulties, Bowin had tended to internalise the negative labels thrown at him

² Amy explains her visual perceptual difficulties: "If I were to look at a blank page - say white with black font - if I look at that without my [Irlen's prescription] glasses on I will see the words jump, like shiver, not shiver but they do shiver - they move around and they're fluorescent - like white around them, a ghosting around them. And some of them pop up against the page, up above and down below, and some are on the page and I can see vivid rivers - like big gaps between the words. I have tinted glasses ... and the glasses fix or they correct what is happening by having the shade of colour in front of your eyes. It's something that optometrists can't train your eyes to be OK - that I know - because I did [that]."

by others. Without specific knowledge about why he was having such difficulty with aspects of his learning, he was less resilient to the taunts from peers about being dumb. Even though he knew he was not intellectually disabled, he had nevertheless internalised the taunts, with negative consequences for his self-esteem. His difficulties with mathematics had tended to overshadow the reality that in many areas he was in fact very talented.

It was evident that participants' views varied regarding the value of being given a name for their learning difficulties. Alex believed it was useful, Ella thought that it did not make a difference, Bob preferred the term dyslexia and disliked the term learning disabled, and Bowin, not having an "actual name", had internalised the taunts from others.

MEMORISATION: STUFF JUST GOES WHOOP

Beyond the labels, all participants understood exactly how they experienced their learning difficulties. Having difficulty memorising factual information was the most common characteristic referred to by participants. Ella was the only participant who did not mention memory difficulties and Sam was the only one to suggest that if he worked hard to remember something, like times tables, it stayed with him. Sam found that sudden distractions could interfere with his memory: "I've just about got it - then a noise comes up and then I forget it. I find that annoying and it's harder". Jodie felt that she had good days and bad days: "sometimes I can remember things and sometimes I can't". Alex commented that he had given up on remembering his times tables "because it's impossible to remember them - I can barely remember my 3 times table properly ... even if I really work at it hard". Bowin too found that learned information seemed to go "straight out the door":

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.

From Bowin's perspective, the amount of time and effort he put in to remember factual information did not equate with success. Jordan also talked about the effort required to try and remember things associated with her schoolwork, and this was a source of ongoing frustration to her. Jordan highlighted the importance of being given a good explanation because she had not resolved the puzzle of why she should have such difficulty with her memory processes, which was really annoying:

It's kind of hard when someone's talking to you - it sort of goes out of your mind sometimes. But I still don't understand why I'm so good in spelling tests. I seem to remember the words and things like that. I don't get that. [With other work] I have to spend a long time trying to [remember it]. It's very strange how I can remember things that have happened before but I can't remember [other] things - it's kind of strange - it's really annoying - it really bugs me actually! Sometimes I think I have short-term memory loss. I can remember the past - 'cos looking at a photo of me and [her dog] I can still remember the day and things and how I was holding her. So I think I might have short-term memory loss. Maybe I've got too much of the past already in my brain - the other stuff just goes whoop!

It did not make sense to Jordan that she was able to remember some things and not others, so she concluded not only that she had short-term memory loss but that her storage system was already full of long term memories. As in Jordan's narrative, participants generally articulated the frustration they felt at working hard to remember something, only to have the information "go whoop".

LITERACY AND NUMERACY: MASTERING THE THREE RS

As well as being aware of the characteristics of their particular learning difficulties participants were well aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses when it came to literacy and numeracy skills. Sam emphasised his many learning strengths:

Quite a lot of things I'm good at. I'm good at reading and I'm OK at the comprehension and I've got some other stuff - like I'm good at general knowledge and vocabulary but that's about it. I'm quite good with spelling, I'm good at [creative] writing, I'm good at drawing and I seem to be a lot different than most people with dyslexia. I kind of understand some of the things I do differently and the way I think up stuff and then definitely I have my brain for general knowledge and my understanding.

Sam, Bob, Bowin, and Ella all indicated they were competent readers. However, reading was not a pleasurable past time for Amy "unless I can find a really good book - and that is very, very rare!" At high school, Amy reported that she was still not enjoying reading books of any length and required accommodations to school assignments to match her reading level:

We're doing a reading thing at the moment. We have to read books but I've actually got just 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. Because I find that when I read big books - big books meaning say 100 pages or something - I don't either get grabbed into the book or just don't want to do it.

Like Amy, Alex found reading challenging and spoke of the difficulty of finding enjoyable books, saying he preferred to read picture books. He felt he was good at reading "so long as there isn't too many words with five letters or any more than five letters 'cos otherwise it's just like I'm stuttering all over the words in the text - and I

can't be bothered reading it". The *Goose Bumps* books were a series he had read but:

Some of the words in those are quite long. That's really annoying. That's kind of why I've given up on books. Sometimes they put too many long words to try and express themselves - like rather than writing out two sentences they put it all in one - they use long words which when I read the long words I just can't get it. And that's when I get that - I can't think - and I get brain freeze and that. That's really what gets me - that's what I hate about books.

Apart from reading, all of the participants except for Jordan, who felt she was good at spelling, mentioned some degree of difficulty with spelling. Although Bob had overcome one of his biggest challenges, learning to read, he identified spelling as one of his ongoing difficulties:

I was told that if I learnt how to read I'd be able to spell but actually, now that I've learnt how to read, I've found that it's the other way around - and now I can't spell. I'm not a very good speller. I'm [at] level 4, I'm spelling at an 8 year old's level or something.

As well as reading and spelling, many of the participants spoke of difficulties with numeracy skills. Ella, Amy and Sam were the only three participants who reported success in mathematics. While Amy had struggled with reading, she said she did not have any difficulty with maths. Ella saw herself as being "alright at maths", enjoying it in primary school, although she hated it at high school. Sam (in Year 5) described himself as working at an extended level in mathematics with a one-to-one tutor:

I don't really like maths at school much because I feel rushed and that. But I like when I do it when I go to my tutor. It's kind of - I enjoy it, you could say. I've basically just done Year 9, Year 10 and Year 11 [13-15 year age level] but I've done a tiny bit of Year 12. It's not that I'm brainy at maths, I've just got good understanding for that level of maths but I need someone to explain it and I'm better one-on-one, with that kind of tutoring.

Sam felt he had a natural understanding for maths. Bob, on the other hand, felt that he was "just naturally not good at maths ... I'm not in the lowest group but I'm not in the medium group either. Somewhere between medium and low". The other four participants Jodie, Jordan, Alex and Bowin all said they found maths difficult. Jordan stated emphatically "I've always hated maths, I'm bad at that". Alex felt his problem with maths was getting the right level of challenge so he did not get brain freeze:

I've either found it so easy it's impossible to concentrate - like it's so easy my mind daydreams off and gets distracted or it's so hard that I just get brain freeze and I can't think at all, which is really annoying.

Instead of writing off their ability in maths altogether, Bowin and Alex could see they had particular strengths relating to this subject. Bowin understood that he was able to do basic calculation and use maths concepts in practical ways in the real world, such as using a compass:

I suppose the real reason why I can't learn Maths is I don't understand maths - lots of the time I don't see the point of it and I think "gee, when am I ever going to use this?!" I understand like $1+1$ is 2 or whatever. I know that if you take that and that and you put them together they become something. I understand pluses, I understand minuses and long minuses. Division - I'm getting to multiplying - but division is out! Like I'm very good at symmetry and geometry. I'm good at that and compass bearing and stuff.

Alex found fractions hard: "those are the sort of things that really get me - like how hard and how easy they are" but he felt he had a pretty good grounding in calculation "as long as I can use a piece of paper". He also considered he was particularly good at using mathematical concepts to draw diagrams:

We have some exercises where you just use graph paper and have half an object, like the outline of a human, and you have to mathematically draw the other half of it. I also like using isometric paper to draw cubes etcetera, because it gives a 3-D perspective.

Sam felt he had good drawing skills but he explained that he had "pretty messy" writing: "I can make mistakes like d's all the wrong way round and stuff like that, when I'm writing fast but ... my writing I can do it pretty neat if I try to - but not as neat as some kids". Other participants, except for Ella, also referred to difficulty with handwriting. Jordan spoke of being disappointed that she had not achieved in an English assignment because of her messy handwriting. Amy nominated science as one of her favourite subjects because she did not have to do too much hand writing:

I've got a really good teacher and we do a lot of experiments and all that sort of stuff. I know of some science teachers - they do lots of writing and you've got to write all the experiments up in great detail - with our science teacher you just write up 'this is what we're doing, this is how you do it' - and go and do it - so that's what I really enjoy, it's all hands on.

In relation to literacy and numeracy skills participants had a good understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses. Related to this awareness, they also had some understanding of what learning strategies worked for them and what did not.

STRATEGIES: GETTING THINGS TO STICK

All eight participants talked about personal strategies they used to help deal with their learning difficulties. Sam's strategy, despite extreme frustration with learning to spell some words, was persistence. He found this paid off when he finally got it: "I have lots of problems with a word but eventually I'll crack it and I'll remember it". By really working hard on something Sam felt he was able to change a weakness into a strength:

Sometimes I find there's something that I have lots and lots of problems with and I learn it so hard that it will be one of my strongest points like 7×8 - now I can do it straight

away, I know it so good - it's 56 - I used to have real trouble with it and now it's one of my best tables.

To memorise information for exams, Jodie's strategy was to leave studying closer to the exams in the hope she would remember it, but she found this did not actually work:

And like before my exams I studied but I didn't study in the holidays - I studied after school so I could remember it – and then we did the exams. And then we got our final results on Friday ... and my mark was really low - when I studied.

One of Bowin's tricks was to try and make rote learning time tables more interesting by combining it with a physical activity:

So I've got to do 100 push ups for my black belt grading – so one push up and “five times five is twenty five” and every time you do a push up, you do [a multiplication] – and that's how I find it best to learn.

For most participants memorising spelling words did not seem to make them stick. Therefore, computers came into their own, providing a way to accommodate for spelling difficulties. Most participants spoke of using a computer spell check, to help with their school projects and homework. Ella offered: “if I have to write essays [for homework] I do all of that on the computer so I can spell them alright”. Alex found it useful to use a laptop in the classroom; this enabled him not only to address his spelling difficulties, but also to get more work done:

[It's good] using laptops - because at my old school we didn't have laptops and it was all writing and calligraphy and stuff like that - but now we're using laptops and it's got spell check so all you have to do is get the first three or four letters right and then spell check comes up which is really, really helpful. Which means I am getting a lot more work done. And now that I'm not using pens ... I don't have to go over it with twink and wait for the twink to dry - I get to carry on.

Finding ways to get things like spelling or times tables to stick was a common challenge for the participants and while they attempted to come up with their own strategies, they generally appreciated strategies offered by specialist tutors.

REMEDIAL TUTORING: DOING SOMETHING ABOUT IT

Most of the participants talked about support offered by remedial tutors, for reading or mathematics. Bob emphasised that rote learning was a strategy that definitely did not work for him, “going over and over” his spelling words did not seem to help. Therefore, his opinion was that remedial teaching offered a different approach to the one he was taught at school:

That's the thing - I never, never could get my spelling words like that [rote learning]. It just doesn't come to you. If you're someone with no spelling problems and you know how to

spell perfectly and then like a teacher says “hey, well an easy way to learn your spelling words is to go sound them out”. But if you've got problems, even if you do sound them out, it doesn't really help. So in schools I think, normal teachers can't actually help you with spelling problems. I just think that you have to have a proper teacher that has actually studied spelling problems to be able to learn better spelling. My teacher at school she - and all teachers are like this - they'll 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.

In Bob's opinion it was useful that his tutor had experienced dyslexia herself, and therefore understood what kind of learning approach was needed:

She found out ways to help herself learn how to spell by writing. By all these different tricks and things - this way she could learn. Because when you have dyslexia sometimes you'll just be reading something, or you might be spelling something, and then you'll like be 'l-d-y' for lady but you don't know that you've missed the 'a' and someone will say 'hey, you spelt that wrong' and you'll look and they'll go 'you spelt it wrong' and you'll still be thinking 'I haven't spelt this wrong "l-d-y" – lady' and then after three times you'll finally notice that 'lady' there's an 'a' there. So she found out ways - how to make it easier for people like that.

Ella, Sam, Bowin and Alex also reported finding remedial tutoring helpful. Sam's perspective supported Bob's, in that he too appreciated being taught in a special way:

I go to a spelling tutor for kids – it's meant to work - and I'm up to quite high words. We have levels and I'm up to level 4 - and there are 7 or 8 levels in the whole spelling thing. And then I'm not sure what I do then but I'm up to my test to get into level 4. But it's just done a special way - it helps quite a bit. Like quite a few words I did [OK] - but what it's kind of helped me with is endings.

Generally, participants were realistic in their expectations of special tutoring. Alex, who observed that while he had initially made noticeable progress with remedial tutoring, it had slowed down and he mentioned the possibility of progress reaching a plateau:

It's really helping because I do have quite a big spelling difficulty. And I think it's helping tremendously with my work. Like when I started [tutoring sessions] my spelling increased quite a lot, but now it's sort of slowed down a bit and stayed in the same place.

Bowin also observed that remedial tutoring helped develop his math skills but he found progress was slow “my maths was atrocious so I went to a maths tutorial down the road and once again it was working, but slowly – it was slowly”. He was nevertheless of the opinion if you did not get help the problem got worse:

It's kind of like getting a mosquito bite that if you scratch a bit more it becomes really bad – meaning, if you keep avoiding it, it becomes really bad. The only way [it will go away] - is if you do something about it and get treatment for it. So treatment's kind of like getting that maths tutorial thing.

Similarly, Amy felt that she did not make much progress with the remedial reading support she received in primary school. She asserted that the best support she had received was from a reading support volunteer who worked with her in intermediate school for about eighteen months:

One who has helped [me] a lot through reading in school time - was at my intermediate [school]. She really helped me a lot. I was just reading books, giving me more confidence to read bigger books - because I used to only read very little books with, not huge print, but like a fair sized print. And I started reading with her and by the end of it I was reading a much smaller font and bigger books and everything – she was really helpful. I probably had her for about a year and a half. I would have seen her - it started as twice a week and as I improved it came down to once a week.

Generally, participants suggested that certain mainstream strategies did not seem to work for them, and therefore they appreciated the expertise of remedial tutors who understood their learning difficulties and had developed specialised teaching techniques. While most participants appreciated the help from specialist tutors, none of them voiced an expectation that remedial tutoring would fix their difficulties. Alex and Bowin were aware that even with specialist input their difficulties were not resolved.

REFRAMING THE ISSUE: GIFT OR NUISANCE

Implicit in participants' narratives was a sense that their learning difficulties were being addressed but were not going away. Some of the participants were philosophical about the messages they heard from those around them. There was a sense that they did not always accept adults reframing their difficulties, particularly if it did not match their own reality. Bowin was very strong in his rejection of the idea that learning difficulties were *a challenge to be overcome*:

People say “oh, I view it as a challenge”. I see it as an annoyance and I'm not going to lie about that ... people, in *Learning to Learn*, see learning difficulties as a challenge. I don't, I'm not like that - I don't see it as a challenge, it's there for a reason – it's an annoyance ... I definitely don't see it as a challenge. I think that's too nice a way of putting it - because I'm annoyed with it. I don't want it - a challenge is something that you want and I don't want it! And if I had the choice I wouldn't say “oh, I'll have that” - just because it is a challenge.

Bowin felt strongly that having learning difficulties was something over which he had no choice because in his view “a challenge is something that you want and I don't want it”. Similarly, Bob firmly rejected the idea of dyslexia as a gift:

A gift - dyslexia being a gift is pretty absurd. You can ask anyone with dyslexia and I'm sure that they would say “no, I don't like it. I don't feel ‘oh, yeah I'm privileged I can't read properly. I feel great about that”.

Amy did not see dyslexia as an asset because “it does kind of bug me a little bit”, but neither did she see it as a hindrance because she said she “just got on with life - doing everything else”. However, Alex felt there were benefits associated with having dyslexia: “I wouldn’t be quite as good at art and creative things, in like 3D models, if I didn’t have dyslexia”.

While Sam felt he would smarter if he did not have dyslexia, he was philosophical about the fact that having learning difficulties did not necessarily make children very different from others:

A dyslexic person - I think the impact’s actually on their brain. I think they’re usually like any average old kid at sport and physical activities but I think what it is - is just the impact on their mental - what they do mentally. Like they might not be so good at particular subjects or doing some particular thing. Because like my friend [who has dyslexia] he’s good at sports and that - he’s really good. So I don’t think it has any impact on their physical, I think it’s just an impact on their mental - what they do mentally. That just kind of means they think in a different way.

Sam makes it clear that he sees dyslexia as a different way of thinking rather than a disability and therefore having dyslexia does not make him much different from the “average old kid”. Similarly, Ella, while she had dyslexia, did not see herself as being different from her friends.

REVIEWING STORIES ABOUT SELF AND LEARNING EFFORTS

This chapter has gathered together narrative themes which reveal participants’ understanding of how learning difficulties have played out in their lives. The storyline begins with the collective theme *Becoming Aware: It’s Just Too Hard* which captures participants’ thoughts about their experiences of finding it hard to learn to read, write, spell or do mathematics. One of the insights gained from this narrative thread is that participants all spoke of developing an inner consciousness of their own learning efforts, even as very young children. Paired with this realisation is the reflection that most participants did not understand why they were struggling to learn. There is some sense that not understanding their learning struggle creates inner stress for participants. For example, Alex linked his behaviour difficulties to the shock of realising he could not keep up with his peers.

In the continued storyline, *Being Labelled: What’s in a Name?* participants characterised their mothers as allies who, realising their children were struggling in certain areas of their learning, sought help. However, other adults, such as educational psychologists and specialist tutors, played an important role by offering

an explanation for the learning difficulties. Reaching a personal understanding of why they were having difficulty learning certain things was important to participants. For instance, once Alex understood why he was having difficulty, he was able to settle down behaviourally. This confirms the important part significant adults play in providing young people with the information and support they need, not only to make sense of their learning difficulties, but also to reframe them. While most participants found explanations offered by educational psychologists and tutors helpful, Bowin's story indicated that, as children grow older, it would be helpful to check whether explanations need to be updated or expanded. Those participants who had a good understanding of their difficulties, like Alex and Sam, had been able to move to a place of accepting both their learning strengths and their weaknesses. However, being offered an explanation also brought with it a label. While most participants accepted terms such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, Bob emphasised that he did not appreciate the use of the term learning disability.

While it is usually understood that any group of children with specific learning difficulties are more different than they are alike, most participants talked about memorisation as being a tricky aspect of learning. In *Stuff Goes Whoop* participants highlighted their efforts and strategies for trying to get information to stick. Some of them found that regardless of the strategies they used, hard work and perseverance does not always make a difference to overcoming difficulties with memorisation. Some suggested that people who have not experienced this kind of frustration can not understand what it is like.

While they commonly experienced memory difficulties, the phenomenon played out differently in their lives in that they had trouble in different areas of learning to different degrees. The collective theme *Literacy and Numeracy: Mastering the 3 Rs* showed that participants had a good understanding of both their learning weaknesses and strengths. Adults who understand that children hold useful information about their own learning difficulties and abilities are likely to be willing to respect children as credible informants of their own learning experiences.

Most participants looked for strategies they could use to "get things to stick". An interesting point emerging from the narrative thread *Personal Strategies: Getting Things To Stick* was that, as children of the 21st Century, most of the participants in this study spoke of using a computer to complete written projects, so they could use

the spell check to compensate for poor spelling. However, only one participant was regularly using a laptop in the classroom.

Most participants found one-to-one tutoring helpful because they suggested that tutors understood their learning difficulties and used specialised teaching methods. In the thread *Remedial Tutoring: Doing Something About It* most participants expressed an appreciation for the support that one-to-one tutoring offered. Some participants thought that it was important that those teaching them understood the kinds of difficulties they faced and were able to offer strategies that were different to the standard ones that consistently failed to work for them.

Related to the insight that children need to understand why they are experiencing difficulties is the realisation that children do not feel the same way about their learning difficulties. The story line in this chapter draws to a close in *Framing the Issue: Gift or Nuisance* with participants, having come to a place of understanding of their own learning strengths and challenges, developing a personal perspective on what learning difficulties mean in their lives. While some participants reframed learning difficulties as being a benefit or at least 'no big deal', others saw learning difficulties as a nuisance rather than a challenge. These insights can remind adults while offering a positive perspective on learning difficulties, it is nonetheless important to understand, respect and acknowledge a child's particular reality. As Bowin emphasised, a challenge is something that you choose for yourself; learning hindrances are a nuisance.

SUMMARY

This chapter brought together narrative themes relating to participants' process of coming to a place of understanding their own difficulties and efforts to learn. Part of this process included support offered by knowledgeable adults. Regardless of the level of adult support, participants had their own perspective on whether learning difficulties were a gift, a challenge or a nuisance. The key focus in this chapter has then been related to participants' understanding and knowledge of their own learning characteristics. As one of three key categories, which present the results of analysing the content of the stories participants told, Chapter Six links with the two following chapters, Seven and Eight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STORIES OF SELF IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

I think what we need – [for] dyslexic people - is an understanding, and people to understand what it's like being us.

Sam, 9

INTRODUCTION

Students bring their own natural capacities and characteristics to a learning situation, but their understanding or perception of those abilities is shaped within an interdependent relationship between self and their social world. The way in which others respond to a young person very much influences the development of their sense of self, in terms of abilities and identity. Environmental settings not only provide opportunities for participation in particular occupations but also influence how those activities are carried out and achieved. From an occupational perspective, young people's ability to achieve, or not achieve, in their role as students is seen as "an outcome of an interactive or transactional relationship between person, occupation and environment" (Law & Stewart, p. 5). In line with this perspective, I brought to the study an interest in what participants might have to say about how they felt supported or constrained by their social environment. In a school context, key aspects of being in relationship to the social world include participating in a wide range of classroom activities, performing in the role of student and interacting socially with teachers and classmates. Beyond the classroom, family relationships and friendships are important social influences. Chapter Seven represents a second main category of narratives, which relate to self in relationship to the social world. Narrative themes emerging from participants' stories are collated within three sub-categories: *Being in school*; *Friendship: A Bit of Help From My Friends and Family Support: Sticking By Me All the Time*.

BEING IN SCHOOL

Narratives gathered together in this sub-category, named *Being in School*, reflect participants' opinions and thoughts about their school experiences and relationships with classmates and teachers. Sub-themes include *Being in Class; Curriculum and Culture; The Learning Relationship: Understanding and Expectations; Being Teased or Bullied: A Low Punch*.

Being in Class

Bowin's strategy for coping in his mathematics class was to keep his head down. He did not blame his difficulties in performing in class on his mathematics teacher, who he said explained things well. However, because he found maths so difficult he survived by keeping a low profile and not drawing any attention to himself:

I'm kind of like back of the class, really keep quiet, head down, so he [teacher] doesn't really know me that well. I'm not actually sure what he thinks, I'm just trying to get a bit of a footing – but he recommended maths tutorials for me.

In contrast to Bowin, Sam had a good sense of his ability in mathematics but found his performance in class was affected by needing more time than might be expected of someone with his ability:

What I'm not good at is - I'm quite slow. If I do the work and I have no time limit I can do some really good work but I'm not a fast person who can do it real fast like. [it is tricky with maths] ... to write it down ... I'm OK at times tables but just kind of writing it down fast [is tricky].

Alex's difficulty with "brain freeze" in maths, when the level of challenge was not right, has already been mentioned. However, in relation to his difficulties with literacy skills, Alex raised another important point about performing in class. He found that his reading and writing difficulties tended to affect his competency in other subjects. He gave an example of how this happened in science when he was required to research information from books:

Every third science lesson we have experiments which are really fun because we don't have to do any writing except for a couple of numbers - but it's fairly easy. Although we have these science books, right? When the teacher says "describe three types of rocks" or "give me the names of three types of rocks and what they are" and all that "and how they are formed" - we have to go through the book and I actually find that quite hard. I think the reading part of it is quite hard.

Similarly, Ella found difficulties with spelling made it difficult to do other tasks: "like today we had a crossword. I knew the answers but I couldn't spell them – I couldn't do the crossword even though I knew the words". Ella had a good understanding of the way in which spelling difficulties affected her ability to perform in class:

It's hard to write like essays and stuff and write out questions especially like now at high school our 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 like 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.

For Ella, spelling was not an automatic skill. She needed to think consciously about how to spell the words, and this affected her ability to attend to all components of the task, such as listening to what the teacher was saying and simultaneously writing the information down. Therefore, what might appear as a standard classroom activity to the teacher, required considerable cognitive focus and effort for Ella. Even if she did make the extra effort, she was aware that she could not keep up and could not achieve the outcome required. Ella also knew that her work, with its quirky spelling, was unintelligible to others and, by implication, unacceptable even though she could understand it. Furthermore, the demands on her cognitive energy meant she got tired and the task got even harder.

Most other participants referred to classroom noise as a distraction that made learning in class harder. Jordan remembered finding classroom noise too much for her in her early years of school, and reacting badly to it. Jodie commented that she found it hard to learn in a noisy class and preferred it to be quiet, because then she could “get on with [her] work”. Alex suggested he was easily distracted by conversations: “I sort of can’t concentrate, especially if it’s like all quiet and then suddenly two people start talking”. He felt he was better able to focus his attention in classes with fewer students: “I think the smaller the class the better - so then I can listen and hear the teacher better”. Sam also found it “hard to concentrate with noise” and said that sudden noises interfered with his thought processes so that he would lose track of what he was working on, which made things “annoying and harder”.

While participants were aware they needed to block out unwanted distractions, to be able to focus their attention, this could be tricky. Sam and Ella were honest in suggesting they were contributors to classroom noise levels. Sam offered that he was often one of the talkers in class, even though he preferred it to be quieter. Ella allied herself with a group of other students who tended to be disruptive and get “kicked out” of class. She observed that: “there are probably even worse people in class than me, and once one of us gets going – we’re all like it”:

When I find out things I’m just like “oh, oh, oh” [*mimes excitement*]. I can’t wait to pass it on. And like we’ll be given a project in groups and I’m like “ahhh” [*takes deep intake of breath and acts out excitement*] and then I’ll go “so good, so good?!” [*acts out telling others*]. When I’m like jumping around and I’m all like hyperactive and I’m “huh, huh, huh” [*mimes*] then I just bash into something ‘cos I’m not watching where I’m going. ‘Cos I’m all “huh, huh, huh” [*mimes hyperactivity*]. I’ve got lots of bruises but most of them are from Tae Kwan Do – but that’s one from bashing into the teacher’s chair from jumping up when I was running around the class – I bashed into the teacher’s chair.

Getting excited about something triggered Ella's hyperactivity and she was well aware that this high energy did not serve her well in class. Ella aligned herself with a group of disruptive students, and she did not believe that her academic ability matched the standard in her class: "I'm not smart - compared to the rest of the kids in my class – they're like all super brainy". Similarly, Jodie was aware of the "top kids that get high marks". However, while Jodie did not align herself with the high achievers group, she did ally herself with the behaviourally "good kids". "There are several different kids in my class. There's like naughty kids and good kids - and the naughty kids ... they don't really want to do their work and they, some of them, find their work hard". Jodie had noticed that the tendency of her classmates to "be naughty" was also an avoidance strategy for finding the work hard.

Interestingly, Jodie commented that she found the high achieving students were more supportive towards her than students who found their work hard. The support of classmates was an important way of getting by in class. Ella's strategy when she got behind with dictated notes was to borrow "someone's work after class". In class, she constantly asked her friends how to spell words and felt they did not mind helping her. Amy also told of getting by in spelling with the help of her best friend:

I know one of my best friends I used to always ask her, she was just top of the class in spelling. I used to constantly ask her "how do you spell this, how do you spell that dah da dah, dah da dah" just like constantly - when we were doing work.

Amy also provides a picture of being quite demanding of her friend's time and attention while they are trying to get their work done. Therefore, learning amongst peers provided the challenge of distraction and trying to keep up, and the possibility of support. Some participants, like Amy and Ella, looked to their friends for assistance while Bowin's strategy was to hide at the back of the class to avoid attention being drawn to his maths difficulties.

Curriculum and Culture

Performing in class held some challenges for Ella but another difficulty she faced was the requirements of the school curriculum itself. At her school, it was compulsory to study a second language, and she found this very difficult, especially with no accommodation made for her spelling difficulties. While she had escaped the ignominy of spelling tests at primary school, she spoke of facing similar experiences studying German at high school:

At high school instead of having spelling tests every week we have German tests and that's even worse. I suck even more at German than I do at spelling. I can't spell in

English. I can't spell in German either. Oh, I hate German more than anything. I could kill it. The teacher's so stupid and I hate her so much. I suck at German.

The strong language Ella uses is an indication of her depth of feeling about being compelled to do an task for which she perceives she has no aptitude. Exams were another challenging aspect of the curriculum faced by both Ella and Jodie. They were aware of the expectations on them to succeed in exams to gain qualifications, this added to the pressure they both felt under to achieve academically. Ella commented that:

We're getting more lectures this year – like putting on more pressure and getting ready for NCEA – like “buckle down and work” and things like that. Like in NCEA they fail you if you can't spell right in like English.

Part of Ella's sense of discouragement is the difficulty she faces in gaining qualifications, especially when she perceives she is likely to fail for not being able to spell. Jodie's perception was that hard work did not help: “we got our final results on Friday ... my mark was really low [in the 20's] - when I studied”. She felt that her marks did not reflect her effort because she “worked really hard to achieve a higher mark and my mark was very low”. Ella and Jodie's narratives indicate the importance of curriculum flexibility and accommodation for students with specific learning difficulties.

While some participants drew attention to the need for curriculum flexibility, others highlighted the importance of a supportive social culture. Participants were often aware of a class culture where they allied themselves with different groups. However, Alex offered the insight that his school's culture made a difference as to whether he felt safe to be open about his dyslexia or not. He said that his “previous school did not believe in dyslexia” and he felt teachers treated a dyslexic classmate unfairly by: “ignoring him in subjects he was having trouble in. They didn't treat him like other students even with the things he was good at – like sport”. He spoke, however, of a sense of belonging within his new school:

Actually 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.

In his latest school, Alex had found a culture where other students openly identified themselves as having dyslexia. He suggested that people did not really “worry about it too much” and reflected, “like half the people - students there are dyslexic anyway.

So it's not a big deal". In this setting, an older student was willing to stand up for him when he was teased by one of his classmates:

I actually found that the other day with a boy - he wasn't too friendly to me, he didn't even know I was dyslexic, and then someone told him I was dyslexic and he shouldn't tease - because he was teasing me because I couldn't finish all my work. And he was like "oh, why aren't you finishing?" and he didn't know I was dyslexic. And then someone told him I was dyslexic and he goes "oh, no, you're not you don't look it!" and then a big Form 5 boy came over and goes "oh, do I look dyslexic", and he goes "no", and he goes "oh, well I am". And so there are a few dyslexic people in my school - sort of stand up for me and things like that who have sort of gone through the same thing.

In contrast to Alex, Bob did not feel it was safe to be noticed to have learning difficulties in his school culture. He knew that it was not obvious to his peer group that he had a learning difficulty, but for him there were benefits in this lack of visibility:

I found out that [on a school trip] – I never really noticed this – but kids with learning problems – that it's obvious that they have them – that don't try and hide it – get picked on quite a lot behind their backs. Like a girl in my school – we were on the bus and I found out that everybody was sort of talking about her and going "oh, she's so ugly and she's not very good – have you heard [about] her spelling problems and grrr grrr gr". I never really noticed [before] – unless you're cool – if you've got problems people are going to notice it.

Bob had observed the risks of learning difficulties being noticed by his peers. He feels it is wise to keep a low profile about his dyslexia to avoid the negative attitudes of his peers. However, in a school culture, where being dyslexic was no big deal, Alex was able to be open about being dyslexic and found support from other students who were going through the same thing. The older boy who stood up for Alex skilfully defuses a negative situation and teaches Alex's classmate that dyslexia is not a visible entity.

The Learning Relationship: Understanding and Expectations

Participants commonly nominated supportive and understanding teachers as being helpful. Bowin credited his turn around, from failure at primary school to accomplishment at intermediate school, to a particularly supportive intermediate teacher:

So 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 high school, Bowin perceived that "all of my teachers are really good". He liked two teachers in particular saying "I've got this wicked as English teacher – who's probably one of my favourite teachers – and he's [getting] me up [to] scratch on my

English". He saw his science teacher as instrumental in helping him discover his talent for science, creating the opportunity for him to gain "excellence" for science projects. Unsurprisingly, most participants' linked their enjoyment of a particular subject with a supportive teacher. Like Bowin, Amy credited her liking for science to her teacher: "I enjoy science because I've got a really good teacher and we do a lot of experiments and all that sort of stuff".

Just as the participants felt they did well with supportive and understanding teachers, they found it difficult when they perceived that teachers did not recognise or understand their learning difficulties. Sam thought that his teacher did not understand why he was so slow at getting things done in class "sometimes my teacher gets a bit annoyed that I'm really slow ... like sometimes I end up a bit disorganised and he's like 'oh, yeah'. I'm usually quite behind at stuff". Jordan tells of the embarrassment she felt having to explain to her teacher why she was struggling, in front of her classmates:

I had to tell him and that was hard because I had to tell him in front of other girls - but 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".

Ella and Bob, who did not feel their teachers understood their learning difficulties, described their teachers as being "mean". Bob felt well supported by two previous teachers, "they understood me clearly and fine and they were really a great help", but he did not feel supported by his current teacher and therefore complained: "she is just really mean and she doesn't understand me".

Being understood was something that participants felt strongly about and this linked to another concern they raised about meeting teachers' expectations. Ella recalled that her primary school teachers did not understand that her poor spelling results were not due to a lack of effort. Consequently, she could not meet their expectations for better results:

We used to always have spelling tests and I'd always do real bad and I'd get left in at lunch and I'd write the word out 10 times but it still wouldn't help because I still couldn't spell it ... I was good at Maths and then when it came to spelling I'd be like really bad.

Alex felt he needed explicit instructions in sequencing tasks. Without clear instructions and routines, he was unsure of what was required of him in terms of how he approached tasks and he found this stressful:

At my last school the teacher would say "do this, this and this, then do this and this" and that's how our day was set out. Like she'd just give us a bunch of sheets and I wouldn't

know what order to put them in and she'd go "oh, you've done them in the wrong order" and all this - I found that really hard and distressing.

Other participants spoke of not being sure what performance standards were expected of them by the teacher. Bob told of an experience he had where he worked hard on something to find he still had not reached the level of performance expected of him:

Once, I did this thing called future development at school, and I wrote down all these ways and things. I'd had my friends check through it and see if I'd done any spelling mistakes and I'd redone it. And I read [the feedback] - and it said "Bob, this isn't good enough. I should expect more from you" and "you should be able to do better" and "this is *pathetic*" - that was one of the words!

Bob is scornful of the unfair feedback he received on the standard of his project. Even though he might not have met the teacher's expectations, he knows he did make an effort to present it correctly. Jordan told of a similar experience in English, a subject that she particularly enjoyed and felt she was "alright at doing":

Once with my English teacher - we had an English [project] - he gave me "not achieved" for all of it. And I thought I did a very good job - but it must not have been. My mum was angry about that, I was definitely disappointed. I mean I wouldn't have minded if I'd got "achieved" - I wouldn't have been any more happy [than] if I'd got "excellent" - I would be ecstatic if I got "merit" ... I suppose my writing is a bit messy - and he said "I don't mind if you make it kind of messy" - but then it's like "no, this is [too] messy!".

Jordan is unsure what the difference is between her idea of what is kind of messy handwriting, but still acceptable, and the teacher's idea of what is "too messy". Incidences such as these can seem insignificant from an adult perspective, but when seen through children's eyes such incidences are discouraging. As Jordan articulates, she can only dream of ever reaching an *excellent* or a *merit* standard, so to understand specifically what is required of her and get an *achieved* would mean everything.

Being Teased or Bullied: A Low Punch

Apart from wanting their learning struggles understood by their teachers, participants also found it difficult when classmates did not understand their difficulties. Most participants, except for Amy, mentioned specific incidents of being called names. Jodie, Bowin and Ella confirmed that being called "dumb" was a regular experience for them. Jodie's strategy was to "just ignore it - and get on with what I am doing". By using this approach, Jodie found the teasing stopped. Ella's opinion was 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". She thought, however, that mainly her friends teased her about being dumb and therefore she did 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.

Bob, said he was not usually teased about his learning difficulties, but he was still cautious around the bullies:

I don't get called names but I do get picked on - but that's not because of my [learning difficulties] - that's just because of my social status. It's not very high. I've got friends but then I've got heaps of people that hate me as well. And there are the bullies - and if you think the bullies are cool then you get to hang with the bullies and they won't beat you up.

Like Bob, Bowin was very conscious of the bullies. Bullying was a significant issue for Bowin, almost one of the first he raised, and a prominent threading running throughout his story. He believed being bullied had had a significant effect on his learning:

I was a new person just come in and I didn't know anyone and I used to get picked on and bullied quite a bit and that, I think, really quite affected my learning ability ... I think the main reason I had such a learning difficulty would have to be bullying.

Bowin offered a powerful analogy, which showed the impact that regular insults had on his psychological wellbeing:

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.

Inherent in Bowin's analogy is the understanding that he needed to build resilience to the insults. While Jodie ignored taunts, Bowin chose to use sarcastic humour as a way of defusing the power of the insults:

I'd just come to a new class and one of the guys insulted me and I said: "gees, is that the best you can do" because I've been called every name in the book and really, once you've heard it fifty or sixty times, it really does - it gets boring and it goes from hurting to just being boring and just being stupid.

Bowin takes back control by reframing the insults as boring and stupid. He observes that the bullying finally stopped when his classmates saw him differently, as talented and successful rather than a "kind of dope":

The bullying stopped ... because I came back - and [before] I was seen as this guy who had been a kind of a dope and who didn't really know what to do - and then I came back and I was a brown belt in martial arts, I was really talented in soccer and was really organised. I came back and met some of the old people that used to bully me but they didn't bother me for long.

A further reflection offered by Bowin was that if someone had not experienced bullying it was hard for them to understand what it was like:

Last week it was anti-bullying week and I was sitting in class and someone said "oh, it's anti-bullying next week", [I thought] "wow, anti-bullying, gee, I wonder what they're going to say in that?!" You know, the class teacher and they had no idea, no idea, none of them had even experienced what it was like to be bullied.

Other participants also referred to anti-bullying programmes in their schools. Alex believed anti-bullying programmes made a difference:

The teaching on how to treat bullying and things like that and what you should do about bullying at the school that I'm going to now - and my previous school has actually been pretty good - so there's not too much teasing and things like that...more of the kids are not so immature - sort of more grown up, so they don't sort of treat people like that.

An important observation that Alex makes is that, in his view, as classmates get older, their understanding increases and the teasing lessens.

FRIENDSHIP: A BIT OF HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

As much as their peer group was often a source of misunderstanding and taunts, it was also a source of support. Friendship was very important to Amy and she had found that having learning difficulties had not interfered with her ability to make friends at all. She told of enjoying having a wide circle of friends of all ages because she felt "you've got to have them there to support you":

Friends have just been fine. I've got many people I keep in contact with and see at school - and see [outside school] and just do stuff with. At high school I've got all my friends in my class but then there's people who're in the other classes that I do know. Like friends from primary school that I'm still really close with and that I know, see them around, and talk to them.

Sam spoke of various friends with whom he participated in a variety of activities, including sport and art. He felt his friends helped him understand things differently and also provided him with opportunities to develop his skills:

Some of my friends have helped me understand stuff and other people - like they show me how to look at it a different way. One of my friends, I think what kind of happened is - when I was in that year with him I just kind of looked at the way he drew and I adapted his style and then suddenly I became a lot better at drawing. Until I was about seven, I was an average drawer.

Jodie had a sense of social stability because she had progressed through different school levels, from preschool to high school, with the same peer group. She had therefore been able to maintain some friendships throughout her life course:

When I was at play centre I made friends, and we were like in the same year [class] when I started school, and we kept on going till high school - and I'm still their friend

since I started back in primary school ... we made friends and we've just kept on going. In high school I've made more friends coming in from different areas.

For Bob having a group of like-minded friends who shared similar interests was important, particularly as he was not into highly intellectual activities or sport:

There are the kids that I don't like to hang out with that are real 'oh, yeah, lets spend our lunchtime reading – woo hoo, hey have you seen the new science fiction movie - with that mathematical term' and all that sort of stuff. I don't like that but I also don't like really big sporty rugby type kids. I sort of like average kids that don't mind. My friends are - they just sort of hang out and never really play sport or do reading either - they don't bully, we just sort of hang out and chat.

While other participants did not find making friends a problem, Bowin and Jordan had experienced social difficulties. Bowin said he felt different from his peers defining himself as the “rejected loner”. However, he owned up that in some sense he now quite enjoyed the role of being different and used it for his own amusement:

I don't have many kid friends because I found out, oh, probably about when I first came to [*his current school*] it was quite nice to pretend that I was 'not normal' - people were getting money and buying chocolate and video games. I was getting money and the first thing I wanted to buy was [*bush gear*]. And on the holidays people wanted to go off to the speedway and I wanted to go hiking in the [*bush*] - you meet the exception that wants to do this but generally - I'm not that normal.

In reflecting that he had not had many “kid friends”, Bowin nevertheless suggested that adults in his life had been an important source of friendship: “I've never actually been insulted by an adult. I've got heaps and heaps of adult friends”. He felt that moving schools a few times in primary school, combined with bullying, affected his ability to develop friendships. However, he could see his social standing was changing:

I think I'm getting a bit more popular to tell you the truth. Last year I became a bit more popular because they discovered my talent for making speeches and being funny and so I became really popular - so that was good. But friends didn't go well with me in my last school and the thing is I think I'm not sure I really want heaps and heaps of friends - I think I'm pretty happy by myself.

Adults tend to view not getting on with peers as an indication of social maladjustment. However, Levine (2002) has framed getting on better with adults as actually a great social skill, likely to serve children well in the future. Nevertheless, for many children with learning difficulties fitting in socially with peers is really important. As Jordan's core narrative in Chapter Five reflects, one of the biggest challenges she felt she faced was establishing friendships. Jordan said she had felt different from her classmates and found this hard:

They're different to me and I don't think I do belong there. But I have to stay there. Sometimes I just feel as if I want to get out. It's good to come home afterwards ... sometimes I don't think about that – sometimes I do.

From Jordan's perspective, social rejection was worse than overt bullying. She tried to understand why she was given the brush off when she tried to make friends: "I don't understand that. I've been trying to figure that out my whole life basically. I hope one day I do." The friends that Jordan considered her best friends were a few she knew before she started school: "because they've been friends ever since I was a baby". However, Jordan had recently made friends with a girl in her class who had been helpful to her:

She was basically the first person that sort of asked me to do something - so that was really nice - that was really good. It started when she asked me to go skating even though I don't like roller skating. But she's still my friend and she's a good friend.

Following on from this event, an insight gained from her mother's conversation with another mother helped Jordan feel better about herself. She realised that she was not so different socially:

'Cos [a girl I know] – I always thought she had lots of friends 'cos she always said that "everyone likes me" and things like that. And then Mum was talking to her mum, and her mum said she's only got two friends at school. And, gosh, a bit of me sort of thought "I feel kind of lucky". I've got a few more – I've got about four friends at school. So it seems like I'm changing in the social world.

Like Jordan, Alex and Bowin commented that they felt the friends they had made before beginning school were their best friends. Alex found the two friendships he had made before he knew about dyslexia, were good friends: "I think the thing with my two main friends was that I knew them before I had dyslexia". Bowin also felt the friends he knew "when I was young - like really young" were good friends, although he did not see them very often because he was now living in a different area.

FAMILY SUPPORT: STICKING BY ME ALL THE TIME

Parents came in for accolades. Jordan volunteered her parents as people who had helped her: "my mum she has really helped me some times. Just sticking by me all the time basically" and her dad had "always made [her] laugh". Amy said her parents had been "really supportive ...trying to get me to read and that sort of stuff". Sam nominated his parents as people who had helped him "because they keep me kind of going through and keep me trying at the work and not giving up". Alex told of his parents' efforts to find a school that would meet his specific learning needs, even shifting house to get him into a better school. Bob was probably the most vocal about

his parents' level of support. His story conveys a real sense of his success in reading being related to the high value put on reading as an activity, which was part of his family culture. Although he now works with a remedial tutor, he remembered his mother helping him early on and her ongoing encouragement that he would learn to read:

My mum was basically being my home tutor because she used to teach at a school - at a high school. Mum used to do this thing when I was younger - one of her friends gave her a book and she used to - it was like a spelling book because one of her friends is a spelling teacher - and mum used to help me through this book when I was having problems. A long time ago Mum used to read that book to me and then I'd go through all the tests and things like that. Mum used to always say that one day I would be able to read these massive books in my bedroom that I always wanted to read.

As well as his mother's support, Bob portrayed his dad as being instrumental in encouraging him to keep going with his efforts to read. His dad acted as his reading buddy, every night. A hint of this special relationship is conveyed in Bob's humorous story of finding he could read and deciding to play a trick on his dad:

Dad used to read me *Harry Potter* every night and one day I just sort of picked up a book and it was like "hey, I know what this says. Hey look, this says this word and that says that word". And then I was just sort of thinking "oh, yea, I can read *Harry Potter*" and I read a couple of pages and then I just started reading the rest. Once we were onto the fourth book, Dad would read me a chapter, then I would stay quiet with the book then sneakily take the book and read five chapters ahead and say that I hadn't heard the chapter and somehow mysteriously know what was coming up! And then after that I just started reading my own books.

Siblings sometimes got a mention. Although his older brother had no learning difficulties, Bob felt understood and supported by his brother. He seemed quite proud, rather than envious of his brother's ability in spelling: "my big brother is a better speller than my dad. My brother - he's sort of a 'spelling bee' type person, he's really into spelling". Ella expressed empathy for her younger brother who had a more significant level of dyslexia than she did: "I just notice that he can't write and some of his letters are back the front". She felt also that she was able to be patient with her brother because she understood his difficulties: "if I do help him with like his homework I just help him more - I don't get so frustrated with him. I think Mum and Dad get frustrated with him easier. They like try and help him read books and stuff - but he can't pick up the words that easy".

Some participants mentioned their pets as being important to them. Bob was very attached to his family dog and enjoyed the way his dog managed to sneak by the family rules. Jordan made a point of emphasising that her cat had really helped her:

If you go back to that bit - you know people that have helped me - she has - cats are always very soft and nice to touch - and you cuddle up to them all the time. I definitely

like Mellie [*her cat*] who just wants to kiss you. Who thinks she's a human - and sometimes I think she is!

There is a sense that Bob and Jordan both enjoyed the quiriness of their pets' personalities. Whereas human friendships have often been a puzzle to Jordan, her cat was always a consistent source of warm interaction.

REVIEWING STORIES OF SELF IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

One of the key messages that emerged from this category of narratives, about participants' relationship to their social world, is the importance of being understood by others. This was made explicit in Sam's statement that what he needed was for "people to understand what it's like being us". Being understood in school, at home and by friends made all the difference as to whether or not participants felt supported to do their best.

In relation to being understood, it is not surprising that participants' relationships with teachers emerged as a key narrative theme. As Weinstein (2002) succinctly put it "our capacity to learn is nourished in the context of human relationships" (p. 1). Most participants indicated that teachers who understood their difficulties also supported their learning efforts, and they valued these positive learning relationships. Conversely, participants felt discouraged by teachers who did not seem to understand their struggles, and they found themselves unable to meet their teachers' expectations.

In the sub-category *Being in School*, narratives revealed that most participants were aware of their performance issues in class. Some participants aptly described the way in which difficulties with literacy and numeracy skills adversely affected their performance in other subjects. For example, for Ella even a seemingly ordinary task like dictation had more than one dimension and was difficult. From the participants' perspective, being understood meant that teachers knew their learning difficulties affected their ability to perform in class and offered them encouragement. For example, Bowin's perception was that his English teacher was getting him "up to scratch". Participants also indicated that it was helpful when teachers understood they were working hard and doing their best, even when they failed to achieve expected standards. Teachers who recognised participants' struggles, as well as their talents, were highly valued by most participants. Some participants credited

these teachers with providing the opportunity to create positive turning points in their lives.

As well as their teachers' support, many participants found that understanding and support offered by classmates was helpful. Bowin found it was best to keep his head down and not allow his difficulties to be noticed, but other participants sought assistance from their classmates. When peers did not understand their learning difficulties, being teased, taunted or bullied was a common experience for most participants. A school culture of acceptance and understanding made a difference as to whether participants felt it was safe to be seen to have learning difficulties.

In terms of positioning themselves socially in the class, some participants allied themselves with either a well behaved or a disruptive peer group. Even if they contributed to it, classroom noise was a challenge for most participants, as they found it hard to concentrate in a noisy environment. Some participants indicated that flexibility in class routines would be beneficial, for example, Sam felt that with more time and less pressure, he could do his best work. Curriculum flexibility was indicated as being needed, particularly for high school age participants. For instance, a compulsory second language requirement made things extra difficult for Ella. An accommodation allowing her to do an alternative subject to German, or learn it a different way, might have been helpful.

In the sub-category, *Friendship: A Bit of Help from my Friends* narratives indicated that most participants felt that having friends in their lives was important. Amy emphasised the importance of friendship and stood out as having a high level of social competence and confidence, with a wide circle of friends. Overall, participants spoke of appreciating the acceptance offered by their friends; sharing common interests with them; opportunities friends provided to learn new things; being befriended by new friends and valuing old friends who had always been there. Because I had expected social issues to be a predominant theme, it was a surprise to find that social exclusion by peers was a primary issue for only two participants. Both of these participants, Bowin and Jordan, reflected that they had experienced their most difficult social years during primary school. As they developed confidence in their abilities, they could see that things were changing in their social world as others responded to them differently. Being alone was becoming a choice for Bowin, not something he felt was outside his control. Jordan found that there were girls who did want to be her friend.

In contrast to the great deal participants had to say about their relationships with teachers and friends, participants spoke almost sparingly about their parents. Weinstein (2002) also found that children said “remarkably little” in their interviews “about their parents and the educational process” (p. 109). She suggested, “what is expressed is that parental support is critical for their achievement and is present for some students and lacking for others” (p. 109). Sometimes what is *not said* can be just as revealing as what *is said*. Through their narratives, participants in this study indicated they were in supportive family environments. They also credited their parents with being an ongoing source of support. Therefore, I propose that, for this group of participants, family context was not the primary issue in relation to their learning difficulties.

In the final sub-category, *Family Support: Sticking by Me All the Time*, Bob’s narrative highlighted the role his parents played in developing a home culture in which reading was highly valued as an activity and which actively encouraged him to persevere with learning to read. Most other participants spoke of their parents always being there for them, offering encouragement to never give up, and getting alongside them to support their learning. Overall there was a sense that the young participants’ lives were still very much intertwined with their parents and families, pets included they were at a stage in life where home life was largely taken for granted. Therefore, they tended to be less reflective about their parents’ role in their lives compared to adults looking back on their experiences of learning difficulties in childhood.

SUMMARY

This chapter has focused on the narratives that participants told about their relationship with the social world including school, friends and family. The core message, which came through, was the importance of being understood and supported by others. With understanding and support, participants’ were enabled not only to face their difficulties but also to focus on developing their strengths. Following on from this notion of developing capacities, Chapter Eight will discuss the important link between participation in significant occupations, identity and competency.

STORIES OF BEING OCCUPATIONAL

If people give you the opportunity - take it. Jack said "oh, they need a jumper to jump off. What are we going to do?" and I said "I'll jump for you". So they got a harness rigged up for me and I said "yeah, alright, this is going to be wicked as" and Jack is like "have you got any last words?" I said "yeah, if I die I'm not going to be very impressed with you". And they let me go and it was absolutely amazing and I've never had a fear of heights - heights have always been wicked - but I don't like that feeling of butterflies in your stomach. And the thing is, it was such a thrill, and I could see it coming ... because once you get to a certain speed you don't go any faster. It's the same speed going all the way down - it was just so wicked.

Bowin 13

INTRODUCTION

One of the aspects of the story telling process, as discussed earlier, is the way in which the audience helps to shape the narrator's story. In the case of the narratives told in this study, the participants were told prior to being interviewed that I was interested in their experiences of learning difficulties. However, by opening the interview with a general question about what they loved to do, I helped set the scene for a bias towards an occupational focus. I was particularly interested in children's view of their occupational competencies.

Although I did not set out to focus on children's emotional status, there is an emotional element inherent in *being occupational* because of the interdependent relationship between occupational competence and self-worth (Bohr & Matheson, 1997). Bohr and Matheson suggest that competence has three essential components: a perceptual component in which "the individual must apprehend his or her adequacy"; "an emotional component in that the individual must appreciate his or her adequacy" and an "evaluative component in that the individual must judge the response to be adequate" (p. 449). In effect, being skilled at doing something closely links with understanding and believing that one is good at doing it. I was interested, therefore, to hear what participants might have to say about their competency in particular occupations, and how this linked with a sense of self-worth. I did not directly ask participants for their opinion on specific occupations, rather I invited them to tell me about those things they did or did not enjoy doing. The intent of this chapter is then to look at what the participants revealed, through their narratives, about the nature of being occupational.

OCCUPATIONAL BEINGS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

As discussed in Chapter Two, it has been suggested that humans are instinctively occupational by nature. This means that we have an innate drive to participate in a wide variety of purposeful activities. Such activities may range from taking care of ourselves to occupations identified as 'work', or things we do for leisure or companionship. In terms of being occupational, all of the participants in this study spoke of participating in a wide variety of occupations. With only a general question to prompt them, they readily volunteered information about significant things they enjoyed doing, encapsulated within the routines of their daily lives. The variety of occupations participants talked about included martial arts; sport; outdoor pursuits; horse riding; adventure activities; skating; music; art; drama; dance; cooking; model making; speech making; in vogue card games (yu-gi-oh); play station and computer games; text messaging (cell phones); reading for pleasure; writing stories for pleasure; school work; caring for pets; self-care; and paid work, such as lawn mowing. Interestingly, for children of the 21st Century, television was only mentioned once, by Bowin, to say he did not watch it. Certain school subjects featured prominently as things the participants felt they were not good at doing, but they all identified at least one curricular or co-curricular subject at which they felt they excelled. However, varieties of extracurricular activities were most often identified as the things they loved to do.

Sam told of an extensive range of things that he loved doing. He spoke of enjoying two key outdoor activities important to his family, biking and kayaking. He also liked playing soccer because "I like sport, it's good. I'm not extremely good, I'm just about an average player. I probably might be one of the best five in my team." Swimming was another activity he enjoyed because "I'm quite good at – swimming. I can swim in a length pool without any rest ... without standing up". Besides physical activities, Sam enjoyed a variety of creative activities, reporting:

I'm quite good at just singing. I'm not so good at playing instruments but like I've got a game called Sing Star and for most kids 5000 is a pretty good score and I can score 9,400 on some songs without much trouble.

Although he felt he was not so good at playing an instrument, he said he liked to compose music: "I can compose stuff - not like a Mozart or something but I can just go dah dah da dah and make up things into tunes ... using a computer programme". Sam nominated acting as another thing he was good at. "Someone who goes to the same church as my mum and dad, they do movies for a hobby and I'm in one of

them". Sam was proud of his ability in art, showing me his and his sister's framed artwork hung on the wall. Drawing cartoons was another favourite and he showed me some of his comic strips, while voicing the POW, POW actions of the characters. He was busy writing a science fiction chapter book in his spare time; he hand writes a bit and then gets it typed up by his mum. He mentioned he loved listening to his Pacific Island grandmother's stories of growing up in the islands and told me his favourite story called "Flying Fish", which also showed his ability as a narrator. Cooking was another of Sam's favourite activities:

I enjoy cooking... just kind of most stuff - like I even invented my own recipes. I invented one I called the pancake cake, that was when I was about three. I thought 'I know you can make pancakes, and I know you can make chocolate cake. Why not make them together?'

As an occupational being, Sam painted a picture of himself as a multi-talented boy with a rich array of interests. There was a sense that his enjoyment of all these activities enriched his life, not only because he enjoyed doing them but also because he felt he was good at doing them.

Like Sam, Bowin presented himself as someone who had a wide range of interests and particular things he enjoyed doing. Occupations important to Bowin included martial arts, going bush, soccer, learning to play three musical instruments especially the drums, song writing, making speeches, being funny, and learning to drive. Getting outdoors to go tramping in the bush or any outdoor and adventurous activity, like bungee jumping or abseiling, were most important to Bowin. Being physically active was really important to him because he identified that he found physical activities more satisfying than intellectual ones: "physical things are easier to overcome ...whereas mental... it's harder for me". Bowin nominated martial arts as a significant activity, because his life revolved around martial arts and it provided a means of psychological support.

I took up martial arts which really helped me – got me a bit more motivated to fix up my spelling and stuff. I see my life revolves around martial arts. It's kind of like martial arts is always going to be there for me ... martial arts helps my school work ...no one in my class has got anywhere near the discipline that I've got ... because you have to motivate yourself to go out and practise one move for an hour – and [usually] people can't. When I went for my green belt – I'd get up at 6 every morning and I'd go for a run and that taught me – suddenly something went 'click' – 'if you can do that with martial arts why can't you get up at 6 every morning and practise your times table for half an hour?'

As can be seen from Bowin's narrative, he is conscious of different capacities he has developed through martial arts, such as motivation, self-discipline and persistence, and how he transfers these skills to other areas of his life.

Another important aspect of being occupational for Bowin was having a full weekly schedule. He said he enjoyed having a busy life and “wouldn't have it any other way”. He reported getting up at 6.00 am to do his homework not because he liked doing it at that time but because:

That's the only time I've got. I've just signed up for soccer and now I've got two lessons a week – so just for example: Thursday up at six, do homework, go to school, soccer practice for an hour and a half after school, then I go to the gym for an hour, and then I come back [home] and crash. And like on Wednesdays I've got three jobs – I mow lawns for three people, and so I do lots of lawns.

Bowin was pleased that television is not a big part of his life: “I don't watch a lot of TV - and I think that's been a big influence, I take pride in that”. He was also proud of his ability to take responsibility in areas of daily living skills and felt he was more responsible than the average teenager was in this regard:

Like my shoes - I clean my shoes, I spit polish my shoes every morning and I fold my clothes, I don't iron them yet. And I think I take on more responsibility than most teenagers my age and I would say nearly than most adults - or nearly than some adults.

When his mum went away for work, sometimes for two weeks at a time, Bowin stayed with someone else and took responsibility for his own schedule:

I've got to organise my entire schedule. I wake up, I go to school, I come home. I've got to go to soccer and then I get myself from soccer to the gym and then from the gym to martial arts and then from martial arts all the way back home ... and everyday I carry around \$1200 worth of equipment in that case there and I've only forgotten it once.

Like Sam, Bowin presented a picture of himself as multi-talented, however, he had developed more of a sense of the way in which his occupations structured his life. He had also developed a strong sense of self-responsibility and feeling in charge of his own programme. From his narratives it is possible to gain a sense of a boy who is not only competent in a range of areas but is highly self evaluative.

Like Bowin, outdoor activities were really important to Amy. She remembered the environment being important for giving her opportunities to do the things she enjoys: “we had a big backyard and we had bush surroundings and we had like a tree-house - so I was always outside riding bikes, running around, climbing trees. I loved playing outside and in the bush and riding bikes and all that sort of stuff, which I still do”. Although Amy's first love was outdoor, adventurous pursuits, she reflected: “I still do enjoy doing indoors things [like drawing and painting] and everything”. While Amy had previously participated competitively in swimming, she was most interested in adventurous and challenging non-competitive activities which for her were more fun: “just on the weekend I went bungy jumping ... off the Harbour Bridge, it was really good, just getting out there and doing adventure things”. While enjoying adventurous

activities, Amy also had a strong drive towards people-focused activities. Belonging to the Scouting movement provided her with opportunities for both adventure and leadership:

At the moment I'm Senior Patrol Leader in Scouts, which is the highest ranking that you can get, and I've been there for four or so years. We do heaps of stuff. We go on camps, we go on say five or six camps a year, maybe for a couple of weeks. Like camps this year - we've been on an Air Camp where we went out and we were flying small 2-seaters planes. That's because we are air scouts, so we do that sort of stuff. And what else - we've been on like a camp and we went up to [*local bush, sea area*] and did lots of bush craft and just played around and got wet and had fun out there - pioneering building bridges. We've got another big camp at the end of the year which is Jamboree which is a 10 day camp over New Year's [holiday] and there we'll do everything - everything from say crafts to say Challenge Valley - like obstacles, getting dirty, having fun and everything in between.

Amy presented an occupational self geared to the outdoors and doing, but she enjoyed participating in these activities within an organisational structure, the Scouts, which provided a sense of social responsibility through leadership of others.

Ella was another participant who expressed enjoyment of adventurous activities: "like rock climbing, I love doing stuff like that. I like kayaking and skydiving and stuff like that, and bungee jumping. Well I'm going bungee jumping in about two weeks off the Harbour Bridge". Favourite activities for Ella were generally physical ones such as gymnastics, martial arts, dance, and sport. Besides physical pursuits, Ella commented that she enjoyed drama. She enjoyed reading but found more of her time being taken up using her cell phone: "I've been going off reading now because I like to spend quite a bit of time texting. Like I've got a cell phone now so I spend time text messaging – like when I didn't have a phone I read, but now I've got a phone I can just text". Ella's enjoyment of physical activities is a positive thread in her story, and she conveyed an image of herself as very competent in these kinds of activities.

Jodie also preferred "doing stuff outside", identifying netball as something she was good at doing. She spoke of enjoying the social benefits of belonging to a successful team. Cross country running and swimming were other sports Jodie also particularly enjoyed. She highlighted her ability by mentioning that she and her brother had previously won awards for swimming. Riding her horse in competitions was another activity for which Jodie had won awards, although she no longer rode competitively. Like many other participants, Jodie's enjoyment of sporting activities was linked to her success in doing them. Growing up on a farm had provided her with opportunities different to the city children, such as winning awards for raising lambs and calves. Farm life also offered Jodie opportunities to develop practical work skills. I arrived for the second interview to find Jodie had already been feeding calves, alongside her

mother, for two hours on a Saturday morning. Cooking was another thing Jodie enjoyed doing and proved she could make a great chocolate cake (I sampled the product). Jodie produced typing exercises she had done at school, in which there were no mistakes. She acknowledged that she felt really good when she was able to produce work like this, with no mistakes in it. While Jodie spoke of significant struggles with her academic work, it seemed to me that she had well-developed practical skills. Through the information she offered about her interests and her skills, I gained a picture of Jodie as an adolescent girl with very pragmatic abilities. However, unlike Bowin, she did not seem to have a good understanding of the value of these skills in the adult world. While Jodie identified things that she was good at doing, she felt that these areas of competency did not compensate for not doing well in schoolwork.

Like Jodie and Ella, Jordan enjoyed playing netball but suggested this was more for its social benefits. "The thing I did enjoy was the team work ... seeing other people". She had experienced funny reactions, such as feeling sick while running around after the ball. While she enjoyed sports like netball and hockey, funny reactions and being a bit accident-prone put Jordan off some physical activities. Therefore, she did not see physical activities as her forte, and she really disliked things like gymnastics where she was expected to leap over the wooden horse. Jordan had participated in drama classes in the past, but she was most drawn to creative writing. There was a sense that sport provided Jordan with an opportunity to connect with others socially, but one of the things she felt she was all right at doing was creative writing. She also felt enthusiastic about an anticipated opportunity to learn photography at school: "I can't wait. We have to go into the darkroom. I think it would be interesting 'cos it's a lot to do with observing and things".

While there was no doubt that Alex was most enthusiastic about art, like many of the other participants he enjoyed outdoor physical activities. Alex really enjoyed "going out with my Dad's cousin and walking around the bush and through rivers and everything like that. I think that's also where I get some of the ideas for my art as well". His most adventurous activity was when his dad encouraged him to try sky diving: "that was scary ... Dad goes 'oh, do you want to go skydiving?' I'm like 'oh, yeah' and I didn't really get any time to back out - which I think was actually kind of good because [otherwise] I wouldn't have done it". Something Alex identified as particularly enjoyable was car games: "especially car games on the Play Station which is why I've just bought the steering wheel for it. Even if I've never played it

before - because I like driving and I like cars - I'm pretty good at it as well". He mentioned that he already had the skill to drive a real car and talked about when he had driven his dad's Range Rover. Other activities that he felt he was good at included computer activities, play station games, model making and basketball.

Two things Bob identified that he really enjoyed doing were reading and painting his Warrior Hammer models: "I enjoy painting War Hammers but I'm not exactly like really big on the game. It's just too confusing for me. My mum says ... I'll get the hang of [it] but [it's] just way too complicated, so I just sort of paint them and try and make them match and things". He liked painting the figurines because "I just enjoy it - takes up time and .. you've got to really concentrate". Bob enjoyed playing his keyboard and used to enjoy singing: "at one point I wanted to be a singer but then when I found out that 1 in 4 million people become famous I sort of gave up on that hope". In contrast to the other participants, Bob identified a range of things he *enjoyed* doing but felt he was *not good* at doing. "I love swimming - I'm not good at swimming though. That's another example, I just started swimming like a year ago. I didn't know how to swim until then. Like I went boogie boarding and surfing and all that sort of stuff - I'm not that good though. I've never actually learnt how to swim". Although Bob said he did not particularly enjoy sport, because he was not a 'sports person', he enjoyed some physical activities such as games of his own invention:

I like to play rugby-cricket which is a game I made up with my friends. It's a game where it's like cricket except you tackle the batter while he's trying to get the runs. You're allowed to tackle the batter and I really love that game because it doesn't matter if you win [or not] and your friends don't go 'oh, loser, oh, you're a loser'.

Bob was the only participant to claim to enjoy some things he felt that he was not good at doing. He had evaluated himself as being no good at sport but he had found a way to compensate, by inventing his own physical games with his own rules.

OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY, COMPETENCY AND SELF ESTEEM

Generally, the participants connected their love of doing things with an understanding of whether they were good at doing the activity. Bohr and Matheson (1997) suggested "the development of self-worth also appears to be linked to success in developing competencies in areas which are important to the person" (p. 444). As can be seen from the previous section in this chapter, all of the participants described activities, which they were competent at doing. Kielhofner (2002) has suggested that the thoughts and feelings someone has about using their ability is as important as gaining the actual skills. All of the participants readily presented themselves as

competent in at least one occupation and, in most cases, what they enjoyed doing was also the thing they believed they were most competent at doing. While having the skill to do something builds competency, believing that you can do it well promotes a sense of competency and subsequently builds feelings of self-worth (Bohr & Matheson, 1997). However, being good at one thing is not always enough for a holistic sense of self. Bohr and Matheson (1997) suggest that “occupational competence is pertinent to each role the individual undertakes” (p. 454).

The following narrative from Bowin about being encouraged by his Karate master shows the link between his self-esteem and what he perceives as his inability to do well in anything else. Although he was confident of his ability in Karate, he was feeling discouraged about some of his academic struggles:

I was feeling a bit down and I went [to Karate] ...and a guy [who's] the highest ranking master of New Zealand, and I have quite a few private sessions with him, he said 'are you a bit kind of – you just don't seem on form today' and I said 'nah, I don't really think I'm good at anything apart from martial arts. I don't really think I'm good at anything'. And he said 'well that's nonsense' and he took me outside and he went to his [car] boot and he got out a bag of apples and he said 'I'm going to throw this apple at you and I want you to knock it out of the air with a front kick' and he threw it and I knocked it out of the air with a front kick and I said 'gee, well that's easy, I mean anyone can do that', and he said 'no, they can't. That is like so [skilled]'. And I'm thinking 'gees'. And he said 'the reason you're not good at everything is because you are so good at what you do do'. [I said] 'like I'm so good at teaching martial arts [to younger children], I'm so good at martial arts, I am really good at soccer and like science. Like I am really good at science?'. And he said 'yeah'.

Bowin's Karate instructor reminds him of his advanced martial arts skills and, by reconnecting with his other abilities, Bowin reframes his sense of himself as being good at other things besides Karate. As discussed in Chapter Two, reframing one's sense of self from *unable* (or disabled) to *able* is a really important process in building self esteem and resilience. Bowin is able to do this with his Karate teacher's encouragement, although he reflects honestly how much he would love to be that superhero for just one day: “Actually, I still do judge myself and I'm still guilty of looking at someone and saying 'oh gees, just for one day I wish I could be like that'. I just wish I could be this guy who was good at everything”.

Typically, when participants did not feel competent in an activity they tended not to enjoy it. Most participants enjoyed art. Bob liked art but felt he was not good at it, but Ella definitely did not enjoy art. She thought also that it was something that she was expected to be good at because “dyslexics are good at art”. Her narrative illustrates how her perceived lack of competency in drawing directly linked to how she felt about art as an activity:

I hate Art! More than anything. Oh, so bad. I hate drawing. Like most dyslexics - they're better at art. I hate it. I hate drawing. I like painting like doing painting like – ahhh ahhh [*demonstrates free, wide brush strokes*]. Like at the moment we're doing still life. We've got to look at a pot and draw it and I draw it like so [*draws shape in air*] - so it's like a round thing with handles and it's all coloured the same colour - and it doesn't look anything like the pot. I can't draw the shape of the handle and the teacher's like yelling and screaming at you.

Conversely, Alex's passion for art linked strongly with his sense of competency in doing it and he held the view that art enabled him to express his unique perspective:

I find it easy and fun and I enjoy it. It's something that I'm pretty good at because I don't really do maths like [all that well]. I'm not so good at reading especially ...but with art I can sort of create something that's different and the way that I see it - rather than copying something.

The drive towards competency is illustrated in another of Bowin's narratives, about dealing with his spelling difficulties in English, a subject he achieved well in. Figuring out that working under pressure in class caused his spelling to deteriorate, he told of his determined efforts to finish class work at home where he could use the computer to achieve accuracy and get an excellent result:

All my spelling tests are really high in English – why can't I spell when I write essays? - because I'm too fast, I go too fast ... English teacher comes in and says 'right you're doing an assessment, you've got one hour to write a 200 word essay'. Not me – I start writing and I have to write fast and it's like I can't really remember. I go too fast and then I can't spell the words properly and so I really don't have enough time. So what [the teacher] says is 'ok, do this and if you haven't finished take it home for homework'. So I'll do it, and I'll write really slowly – finish at home and then I type it out on the computer because the computer's got the spell check. And I can look through the dictionary but it's too time consuming - if I'm trying to write out 500 words, one word out of every five is a spelling mistake, which is heaps. And I have to look up in the dictionary every single time. It's just too slow – so I type it out on the computer and use the spell check. And if I have to do it in class – for instance I had to write a letter in class – and I writ it out in pencil and I went through and I rubbed out the pencil word and wrote the word in, in pen, and so I was 100 per cent sure I knew how to spell that – and I went through the whole thing and rubbed out every single one and that worked really good.

Bowin's narrative about working hard to present his written work correctly highlights the determination, persistence and effort he was willing to put in to do something to a good standard, and to be judged as competent by his English teacher. Yet there is also a sense that Bowin's efforts are geared towards the personal satisfaction of presenting work of which he can feel proud. His story indicates how he is able to self evaluate, and then get on with using strategies to improve his work. He takes this process one step further by reflecting on whether his strategy was useful, and reaches the conclusion: it "worked really good".

Diligence and persistence are also characteristic of Bob's narrative about learning to read, highlighting the concept of occupational perseverance. Bob established competency in reading because it was a skill that had high value for him and one he was motivated to acquire. It was his continued engagement in reading, over a period of time, despite his difficulties, that helped him gain the necessary skill. Once he could read, the satisfaction in doing the activity kept him reading:

Then once I read one of the books I'd always - since I was younger - thought was like a terrible, terrible book. I was like 'I do not understand this' - it starts off in a meeting - and I was like 'that's terrible it starts off and it's not telling you what to do arrgh'. And then I decided to read it and just carried on and I was like 'my god, I have to read this book'. Then I got really into the book and then I got the third and the fourth and started just buying all the series and they're pretty big books.

Reading for Bob went through an occupational transition, from being an occupation that was initially very difficult, to one which seemed to give him a 'flow' experience. Flow is the notion presented by Csikszentmihalyi (2002) in relation to things people do. It refers to a state of being in which someone uses their ability to engage thoroughly in an activity so that they lose awareness of time. By staying focused on the activity, any extraneous thoughts or anxieties, unrelated to the task, are surpassed and this provides a form of psychological relaxation and well-being. Furthermore, when a goal-directed activity is experienced in an optimal way, the flow effect is so pleasurable that the person is a strongly motivated to keep engaging in the occupation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). A flow experience for Bob is reading his book all day:

Today I found this was my favourite day of the year in terms of school wise because I finished all my maths sheets and then [the teacher] said 'OK, you can read a book for me and then do a book review' and right now the *Scatterlings* is 1000 pages long. So it's a really big book. I just read the book for the actual whole entire day. I didn't stop - non-stop I was reading that book.

It is apparent that Bob aligned his sense of self with being a competent reader and has continued to develop this skill so that he has progressed beyond the expected reading level for his age to an advanced level. This fits with Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) notion that happiness and positive self-worth are linked to developing ability in preferred occupations.

Identifying self with an occupational role is a way of demonstrating competency. By placing themselves in occupational roles other than that of student, most participants provided me with an image of themselves as competent occupational beings. Through love of outdoor, adventurous activities Alex, Amy, Bowin and Ella constructed images of themselves as adventurers. While Alex also enjoyed the outdoors his primary occupational role was that of artist. Ella and Jodie evoked

pictures of competent young sportswomen. Inherent in Amy's story was a sense of competency linked to leadership and advocacy roles. Sam saw himself as good at many things across a broad spectrum of academic, physical, artistic and creative activities.

OCCUPATIONAL NARRATIVES

Most of the participants in the study demonstrated they had developed a sense of self in relation to particular forms of occupation. In analysing the kinds of stories participants told, as discussed in Chapter Five, three stories stood out in terms of what Kielhofner (2002) calls "crafting an occupational life". Alex, Bowin and Sam told stories in which they constructed meaning and purpose in their lives by placing themselves in an "unfolding" occupational narrative (Kielhofner, p. 143). These three storytellers, within the story telling process, developed a sense of identity around the things they loved doing and integrated their experiences of past and present while confidently linking themselves to an imagined future.

As has been previously discussed, Alex presented himself as someone who was competent and talented in art. Whereas he remembered his past learning and behavioural difficulties (at his previous school), he also remembered: "at my old school I used to be like the best in the school at art. I really, really enjoy art". Although he was still having difficulties in many areas of his learning with reading, spelling, and mathematics, and art was "kind of compulsory", he found art lessons provided a creative outlet because he found them easy and enjoyable. For Alex, his ability in art was quite clearly a way to create meaning based on his innate ability:

I think with things, like art and technology, I sort of can create something of my own but still within the boundaries - like not as in 'you are allowed to do this and this' - but actual physical boundaries which is what I find fun. Like you're either really good at it or you're really not - and when you're good your style is different.

Alex quite definitely linked his sense of confidence in his artistic ability, and imagined in the future he would be a building apprentice, art teacher or "an architect - especially because I'm pretty good at geometry". Not being good at maths seemed strange to him, due to his ability in geometry, but he was confident he could rely on his artistic ability in the future: "I'm good at art and angles and things like that and I like making things. Making something big would be nice".

Bowin and Sam had also developed a strong sense of occupational identities beyond the roles of students. They both had a strong sense of their abilities in many different

areas. In imagining his future, Sam was confident that he could aim towards a professional career. He made the point that he would choose something based on what he thought he would enjoy doing, even if the careers he chose were the same as his parents:

It's funny. When I was little I thought I want to be a doctor or an engineer because that's what my mum and dad are. As I grew older I'd think about different options, and now I think exactly the same thing! But it's a different answer [now] because I enjoy that and that's why my parents did it, because they enjoyed it.

As well as linking to the future, an occupational narrative can show how the narrator makes occupational transitions in key life roles over time (Kielhofner, 2004). Bowin describes making a transition from a failing student to a successful student, based on realising his skills and talents. The transition for Bowin from a sense of failure to competency, occurred as he “found things I was really good at” such as getting high marks in science and social studies, and an award for debating. However, he suggested that martial arts have provided the focal point in his life: “I see my life revolves around martial arts. It's kind of like martial arts is always going to be there for me”. In envisioning his future, Bowin skilfully combined three occupational elements. He combined skills in which he had developed competency (martial arts); with his love of doing, especially being physically active; in an occupational setting that appealed to him, the great outdoors. This created an image of a future action man:

My goal is to go into the Army and become a SAS. That's my “come on James Bond” - but that's my goal - to get into the Army.... because my life is full of action ... I've just got so much in my life that any other job I think I'd get pretty bored.

Although he skilfully crafted an imagined future for himself, Bowin was honest enough to admit to being “really nervous about [his] future”. Getting to the future does not necessarily look like plain sailing. Bowin knows he has a definite goal but he wonders if his maths difficulties might affect his goal of getting into the SAS:

I am really scared about my future. I don't want my future to come. I want to stay how it is - because life is good now but I know there's only a few jobs that really appeal to me and if I can't get them I don't really see the point in being out there. So I don't think I'm going to have enough time at school. I'm sure I'm going to think that at the end of the day.

Neither Sam nor Alex expressed any anxiety about their future. However, Bowin is a little older and at high school, so that may have given him a different perspective in which having a career was a closer reality.

Overall, all three participants told stories that met with Kielhofner's definition of an occupational narrative. They had “internalised a positive sense of self-understanding”,

they described themselves “in a variety of occupational roles”, they had “interests, values and confidence” and they also had some idea of the “kind of life” they wanted (Goldstein, Kielhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004, p. 122).

REVIEWING THE NARRATIVES

My own family context is a non-sporting one in which the most valued activity is reading. I can therefore empathise with Bob’s view that a good day is being able to read one’s book all day. I was not therefore looking for the emphasis on the importance of sporting and other physical activities that came through in the narratives of this particular group of young people. I certainly did not anticipate the strong theme that emerged referring to adventurous activities and it was a surprise to have four participants, unknown to each other, independently talk about bungy jumping. It would not have occurred to me, as someone who views bungy jumping as an activity least likely to be fun, that children in this age group would even be participating in such activities. Not only this, some participants were also learning to fly, trying sky diving and abseiling. This may reflect a New Zealand culture in which sporting and outdoor activities are highly valued and an environment in which, if families are interested in them, sporting and outdoor activities are readily accessible. A New Zealander of course, invented bungy jumping.

Physical activities were important to all the participants. In some cases it gave them the opportunity to channel their high levels of energy and most importantly it gave them the opportunity to participate in occupations they were good at doing. Although Bob did not feel he was good at sport (because he thought he was likely to humiliate himself) he did enjoy some physical activities. He was also smart enough to invent a physical game he could not lose. Jordan enjoyed team sports for the social opportunities they offered when she was struggling to fit in. Participants indicated that non-competitive physical activities, which offered challenges such as tramping in the bush and fording rivers, or obstacle courses and mud, were just as important as sporting activities and in some cases preferred. Not only were extracurricular outdoor activities important to participants, but such activities were important to many of them within the school programme. Ella, who was not enjoying her academic subjects at all, was enjoying physical education, which she nominated as her favourite school subject. Physical education also gave Jodie, who was struggling to achieve in her academic subjects, a chance to be successful in one domain at school. The sample in this study is too small to draw any conclusions about children with learning

difficulties and physical activities. However, it does remind me of the need, as an adult, to be conscious of how my own preferential orientation towards activity might limit my appreciation of activities that are important to children. Listening to the children's stories has been a useful way to gain a good understanding of their occupational preferences, particular to them as individuals.

Apart from physical activities, participants spoke of enjoying a wide range of extracurricular activities and it was evident from their stories that these activities were significant in their lives. Other important extracurricular activities such as music, art, model making, and cooking provided opportunities to develop their skills and abilities in a way that gave them a more positive sense of themselves in the face of school failures. As Veronica Crawford (2002) remembered about her opportunities to develop her musical talent, knowing that you are good at something other than schoolwork makes a difference. Likewise, the narratives of participants in this study indicated how important it was to them to know they were good at something. As I previously pointed out, all of the participants chose to present themselves as competent in at least one significant activity, and usually more than one. It became evident to me that not only was it important to them to be good at doing something, but it was important to be seen to be competent.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, as well as presenting an opportunity to develop skills and competency, participation in meaningful activities provides a means for self expression and development of identity. Alex, Amy, Bowin and Sam's stories show that children do frame their self-understanding in terms of an occupational identity. These participants' sense of identity was undoubtedly linked to particular activities. Bowin brought together more than one of his interests to create an occupational identity as an action man. Although Amy was not yet envisioning her future, she had a strong sense of her occupational identity based around leadership and adventure activities. As we have seen, Alex already had himself pegged as an artist and Sam had a very strong occupational identity as someone who is very capable in a variety of skill areas. Ella and Jordan both had a idea of themselves as competent young sportswomen but this sense of self was almost buried in their narratives, under the demands of the occupational role of being students. There was a sense of an emerging occupational identity in Jordan's narrative, as she began to move past her social difficulties to catch a glimpse of a possible future.

In terms of occupational competency participants showed they did have a good understanding of their abilities and there was a strong positive emotional element in that they really enjoyed activities they felt they were good at doing. From their narratives, it is clear that the participants had a good sense of self-worth relating to the things they did well. As Bohr and Matheson (1997) suggested, sense of self-worth is linked to particular occupational roles. While participants had struggles in their roles as students, in other roles in their life they experienced competency and positive sense of self. It was evident from their narratives they did not experience low self-esteem in a global sense and some participants, in particular, appeared to present with a high level of self-esteem.

The way in which young people express their sense of occupational identity, within the context of an ongoing life story was illustrated by Alex, Bowin's and Sam's stories. Although Bowin had some realistic anxieties about how his maths difficulties might affect his future, he, along with Sam and Alex, was able to focus on his strengths and talents in crafting an occupational life. What I take from their stories is that being able to frame one's life as an occupational narrative is important. It puts the experience of learning difficulties into a context where it does not dominate as the determining factor on where one's life is going or its meaning. This suggests to me that, as adults, we can gain great insight by listening to the occupational stories that children are developing for themselves, and by considering how their social context supports them to use their talents and abilities.

SUMMARY

This chapter has discussed the occupational stories that participants told which revealed their unique natures as occupational beings. Discussion has focused on examining the specific occupations important to participants. It has also explored the way in which a sense of competency in personally significant occupations has influenced the development of an occupational identity. The way in which young people craft an occupational life, through participation in a wide range of occupations and a sense of occupational identity, has been illustrated through the narratives of three participants. This chapter has been the last of four, which have presented results from the analysis of the form and content of the participants' stories. Chapter Nine, which follows, will draw the threads of the study together in a concluding chapter.

CHAPTER NINE

FINISHING THE STORY

At my first school - this is probably the only time that I've ever written a story - I started writing a story and it had the same name as a boy in my class and the teacher didn't like that and I wrote six pages when I had virtually never - and this is like when I was seven - and I had virtually never written anything and the teacher stopped me writing the story because she didn't like [it] having the same name as [that] boy. [I feel] pretty sad [about that] because I'd never written a story before. I used my break time and lunchtime and everything to write this story and the teacher stopped me from doing it. Actually when I think about it, it makes me really sad.

Alex, 12

INTRODUCTION

I began this inquiry with a broad question about what I could learn from the narratives told by a small group of New Zealand children, in relation to their experiences of specific learning difficulties. I came to the study prepared to be open to the issues they raised. However, I also had a pre-existing interest in what the young participants might have to say about the things that had both helped and constrained their learning. I was as much interested in what they had to say about the things they felt they were good at doing, as I was in their perception of their performance issues in relation to schoolwork. As I indicated in Chapter One, a primary assumption I brought to the inquiry was that I would find that the participants' experiences of failing to learn at school would strongly link with a sense of low self-esteem. Chapter Nine reviews how the study's findings address these pre-existing questions and assumptions.

The core narratives told by eight young participants were presented in Chapter Five, and participants were presented as characters in their own life stories. Thematic categories emerging from what participants had to say were presented in three chapters, beginning with Chapter Six through to Chapter Eight. The findings from these combined chapters are reviewed in the following discussion, along with insights emerging from the inquiry as a whole. Also discussed is how the study is positioned in terms of the existing literature, as reviewed in Chapter Two. In finishing the story, this concluding chapter analyses the study in relation to its trustworthiness and limitations. It also considers implications of the study's findings and indications for future research.

EIGHT CORE NARRATIVES

Although the eight core narratives presented in Chapter Five were constructed by me, as the ninth storyteller, they were based entirely on the rich information offered by participants in their interviews. They expressed a wide range of views, positive and negative, on their efforts to learn. This confirmed my pre-existing assumption that children and young adolescents would make good informants on their own experiences. As I expected, young people very ably articulated their thoughts, perceptions and reflections often with humour and sometimes tinged with sadness.

I also expected that young participants would make able narrators. This was reflected in participants' narratives, which revealed archetypal themes associated with the traditional art of story telling. Prior to beginning school, most participants had no consciousness of themselves as being different from other children. In a sense, the stories they told were framed as a quest to understand this change of status or identity, and to reclaim their sense of self.

In terms of plot direction, core narratives indicated that most participants experienced learning difficulties as an interruption to the progressive course of their life story (McAdams et al., 2001). This interruption, or contamination sequence, was followed by a regressive trend in which they experienced learning struggles, failure, criticism, social exclusion and a loss of their sense of self as an ordinary student. This highlighted the way in which learning difficulties act as a compromising factor in children's lives in relation to their well-being. Most core narratives also incorporated a positive turning point, assisted by adults acting as allies. Participants gained an understanding of their difficulties, recognition of their talents and in many cases triumphed over difficulty. This confirms what is known about the important role that supportive and understanding adults play in young people's lives.

By examining how participants characterised themselves as protagonists in their own stories, it was possible to see that they all expressed a more positive and holistic sense of identity than that of being "learning disabled". In fact, some of them explicitly rejected the role of being learning disabled. Acting in the role of hero in their own life story, meant being seen to have specific talents and abilities. It also meant using these abilities to face and overcome the shadow that learning difficulties cast in their lives. In line with the concept of 'hero as over comer', most of the participants offered stories that were redemptive in their basic style, with an optimistic message that things had turned from bad to good, or were getting better (McAdams et al., 2001).

Attending to the unique narrative voice characterised in each story revealed that not all stories offered an optimistic message. I found that Ella's story could be positioned as a counter narrative in relation to the other narratives. She did not offer an optimistic message of coming to terms with dyslexia, nor of making the best of things. Furthermore, she chose to present herself as something of an anti-hero in a school setting. Ella's story afforded me the insight that, as adults, we need to be aware of a young person's perception of how things are going for them in an educational setting. Their reality may not relate to our observations of their level of learning difficulty or assumptions of likely potential. Knowing before I met Ella that she had a mild degree of dyslexia did not enable me to predict that she would be the participant who was least happy at school. Nor did it prepare me for how strongly she felt about her inability to meet the performance standards required of her in a school setting. Did I just catch Ella on a bad day? When Ella read her story, six weeks after the initial interview, she confirmed that the story I had constructed from her interview transcript was an accurate picture of how she felt and that her school situation had not changed.

Ella's story also illustrates the way personal narrative provides useful research information because of its inherent capacity to contextualise human experience, within the course of time. Each of the eight core narratives presented in this report represent life stories still in progress. The narratives themselves are like snap shots, capturing an image of present time while connecting it with past and future time. The different age and stages that the participants were at in their lives, including their schooling, played a part in forming the stories they told. Ella's change in identity from that of an ordinary student, albeit with spelling problems, was still fairly recent (within six months of the interview). By way of contrast, nine-year-old Sam, although also struggling in class, was optimistically looking towards a future career that would require ongoing academic study. If I had interviewed Ella at Sam's age I would no doubt have obtained an entirely different story. Likewise, if I were to interview Sam at fourteen I might find him more concerned about some of the academic barriers faced by Ella, such as exams. What I learned from comparing participants' narratives is that as adults we need to be sensitive to the way context changes for children over time. Good things will not necessarily stay good nor, as in Bowin's case, will bad things necessarily stay bad. It is important to remember that for young people the story is by no means finished. Therefore, formation of identity, even when interrupted by negative experience, is always open to revision. This is also made possible when adults care enough to act as allies and mentors along the way.

Some of the participants offered stories with such rich information that they could have made a case study in their own right. However, I found by looking at the eight narratives in combination, that individual variations provided a richer picture of the experience of learning difficulties in young people's lives. Certain stories offered more information on particular themes than others, such as social exclusion versus social competence; bullying and friendship; performance issues in class; being talented; the value of perseverance; and the reality that hard work does not always bring rewards. There were some narrative themes, however, such as becoming aware of learning difficulties, on which all participants offered a viewpoint.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

It was evident that when participants' spoke of being aware of their learning difficulties they were referring to an inner consciousness, developed independently of adults' observations of their learning efforts. This important insight suggests that as adults we need to be aware of and value children's self-knowledge. Adults, who are mindful of children's subjective knowledge of their own learning struggles, are likely to hear them when they voice that things are "too hard" or "I can't remember". Adults with an empathetic understanding are likely to be helpful to children, by considering such responses as something more than an excuse to avoid certain tasks. While participants were generally aware they had difficulties with certain tasks, they did not understand why this was so. They needed help from supportive and knowledgeable adults to make sense of their difficulties. For all eight participants the need for an explanation was, in the first instance, responded to by their parents who took action on their behalf.

A consequence of receiving help from expert adults, for this particular group of young people, was being labelled. In most cases, the label was dyslexia. Participants raised a number of issues around the positive and negative aspects of being labelled. A positive aspect of being given a label, as Alex pointed out, was that it identified there really was difficulty; he was not just behaviourally disruptive. Alex's point of view provided me with the insight that being given an actual name had a purpose in that it provided children with an explanation. Participants also offered the name of their learning difficulty to others, both teachers and peers, as an explanation for their learning differences. However, for some participants, being given a label did not necessarily make a difference when the environmental barriers to learning remained the same.

Bob raised an important point about the difference in acceptability of certain labels. He found the term *dyslexia* acceptable but not the more global term *learning disabled*. Bob's perspective provides a compelling reminder to adults that certain labels, such as learning disability, come loaded with powerful connotations. Such a label, conferred on children by adults, does not fit with nor respect a child's sense of being competent, and often talented, in other areas of learning. In Bob's case, he had continued difficulties with spelling, affecting the standard of his written work. On the other hand, he had moved on from failing to learn to read to being an advanced reader. This achievement does not depict a disabled learner.

Related to the idea of labelling, I found that it made a difference to most participants to understand why, in comparison to their peers, they experienced difficulties with learning. In developing self-understanding, they were more able to refute the inner belief that they were dumb or stupid, and therefore became more resilient to the taunts of others. In combining their own awareness with explanations offered by adults, most participants had developed a philosophical perspective on their learning difficulties, framing them as either a gift or a hindrance. Reframing was also an important part of affirming a sense of identity. In Sam's case, he articulated that his ideal self had been undermined by being dyslexic, but nevertheless he was aware he was still smart and very talented; his sense was that he was all right, an "average old kid".

As part of reframing their learning difficulties, most participants turned their attention to strategies that might help them compensate. While there was no sense in any of the stories that they expected tutoring to fix their learning difficulties, they appreciated the opportunity to develop learning strategies with one-to-one tutors who had the specialist knowledge to understand their difficulties. An interesting difference in strategies mentioned by children of the 21st Century, as compared to my siblings' generation, and children I worked with in the 1980's and early 1990's, is that participants spoke of using computers to compensate for their spelling difficulties.

BEING UNDERSTOOD

I found that it was evident there was an interdependent relationship between children's own awareness of their learning difficulties, and that of their parents, teachers and specialist tutors. Children became aware of their difficulties but needed support from understanding adults to make sense of their struggles. Their parents,

while acting as allies in looking for an explanation, did not themselves have the answers. A specialist's explanation and understanding from teachers helped to support children's learning in the classroom. Information and understanding offered by others was part of the process that enabled children to develop their understanding of their difficulties and abilities in learning.

It was apparent from most participants' reflections that they first became aware of their learning difficulties while in primary school. This is obviously a stage when children learn basic literacy and numeracy skills. It would be helpful to children, and their parents, if all primary school teachers understood the characteristics of specific learning difficulties and the struggle intelligent children can experience in learning certain skills. The importance of recognising children's difficulties with literacy and numeracy as early as possible was made evident in Amy's story. Her teachers dismissed her ongoing reading difficulties for the first years of her primary schooling and consequently she began to believe it was too hard to learn to read. Later, with the encouragement of an understanding and supportive reading mentor, Amy was able to develop her literacy skills to become a functional reader.

As Sam and Alex's stories indicate, this understanding needs to extend to children who are in the gifted range for intelligence. Specific learning difficulties do not correlate with level of cognitive ability and therefore it is possible for highly intelligent children to struggle with developing basic literacy or numeracy skills. In fact, learning difficulties may mask a child's true level of intelligence and this is likely to be true for other participants in this study (Abeel, 2003; Crawford, 2002; Sturges, 2004).

Most participants' stories indicated that teachers who recognised their learning struggles for what they were, something other than exasperating behaviour, were able to establish a positive learning relationship. Furthermore, positive support offered by such teachers was highly valued by the participants and they remembered with appreciation those teachers who had supported them in their learning. It was not surprising to find that participants perceived supportive and understanding teachers to be helpful. A positive learning relationship enabled participants to move forward with their learning. Where teachers did not understand their learning struggles, participants suggested this added to their stress and made things more difficult. They were unsure how to meet these particular teachers' expectations. Unfair, and sometimes unkind, comments and interactions were perceived by the participants as

the teacher “being mean”, which is hardly conducive to establishing a positive learning relationship.

Being understood or accepted by peers was a prominent theme in most stories. Some participants spoke of feeling different from their peers and their sense of difference was reflected back to them in relationships with their peers. They perceived that their peers did not understand their struggles with learning, or with social skills, which for some led to bullying and social exclusion. On the other hand, Amy, who enjoyed uncompromised social status amongst her peer group, was neither teased nor bullied, and did not perceive herself as being different. These stories highlight the dialectical relationship between participants’ sense of self and peer acceptance. Amy’s social competence was linked to her high level of self-esteem. Other participants suggested that as their own concept of themselves began changing for the better, so did the social responses of their peers.

Also raised was the importance of a culture of understanding within a school setting. Where there was a culture of acceptance and understanding, Alex found that teasing did not go unchallenged and that it was “no big deal” to have dyslexia. Whereas, for other participants, being teased was a regular experience and they had learned to deliberately keep a low profile.

It was not surprising to find that participants experienced supportive and encouraging family relationships as helpful. Bob’s story confirmed what is already known about supportive home environments playing a significant role in children’s development of literacy skills. Even though learning to read was very difficult for Bob, his story illustrated how his parents created a context in which reading was not only a highly valued activity, but seen to be desirable and enjoyable to do. His dad’s continued participation as a reading buddy kept the fun of reading alive, and his mother’s optimistic encouragement kept his hope alive that he could learn to read. In a sense, Bob’s family made learning to read a co-occupation, which encouraged Bob to become an independent and highly competent reader.

Beyond school and family settings, there is a need for wider, societal understanding. While conducting the study, I found a general lack of understanding that specific learning difficulties do not result from intellectual impairment. This seemed a difficult concept for adults, who had no direct experience of such difficulties, to grasp. I experienced personal frustration in conversations with both lay people and

professionals, outside the field of learning difficulties, who assumed that participants in my study had intellectual disabilities and who were surprised and a bit confounded when I pointed out this was not the case. I therefore came to experience a little of the disbelief and dismissal that those with the specific learning difficulties face on a daily basis. It is important then that there is wider understanding of the fact that it is possible to be intelligent, and even highly intelligent, and experience difficulty reading, writing, spelling or doing mathematics. Therefore it was encouraging, throughout the study, to see articles on learning difficulties published in local magazines and newspapers, such as the *Listener* article reviewed in Chapter Two, and to hear interviews with guest speakers on national radio (Radio New Zealand).

While I was working on this thesis, support came through unexpected sources in the community. An example of this is that a coordinator of a work skills training programme for young adults, whom I never met, sent me a video to watch courtesy of my husband. I was also pleased to have a number of telephone conversations with Janina Nearn, a young TV director who has herself experienced dyslexia. She is in the process of making a New Zealand documentary on dyslexia “that could change New Zealand’s opinion on dyslexia for the better”. Ultimately, this is the ideal way to increase community awareness. Those who have lived the experience produce the story, and give others a voice in the everyday world in which they live.

BEING SEEN TO BE COMPETENT

Increasing community awareness means developing a wider understanding that there are two sides to the coin with regard to specific learning difficulties (Fanchiang, 1996). Literacy and numeracy skills may be tricky to learn and, over the course of a lifetime, these difficulties may not be entirely resolved. On the other side of this coin are an individual’s inherent strengths, abilities and talents. It was therefore not surprising to find that participants in this study talked about enjoying the things they felt they were most competent at doing.

The insight that emerged from participants taking the opportunity to tell me about activities in which they excelled, both scholastic and extracurricular, was that in doing so they were able to present me with an image of themselves as capable human beings. While participants had learned to recognise they were not as competent in certain areas of learning, compared with their classmates, they chose to present themselves in occupational roles other than that of failing student. These included

artist, adventurer, reader, action hero, actor, cook, storyteller, sports person, or hard worker.

It was evident then that participants did not experience low self-esteem as a global characteristic of identity. While they experienced difficulties as students, which did not make them feel good, in other roles in their life they experienced competency and a positive sense of self. This fits with the view that a sense of self worth is linked to competence in particular occupational roles (Bohr & Matheson, 1997). It also fits with Passmore's (2003) finding that 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.

In particular, Amy's high level of self-esteem directly challenged my pre-existing assumption that low self-esteem was a natural consequence of experiencing learning difficulties. In a sense, Amy's perspective helped rebalance the view I had gained in my work primarily with children who experienced low self-esteem and a poor self-image.

In terms of their occupational preferences, I found that all eight participants talked about a wide range of physical, artistic and creative activities. As I have already indicated, I was surprised that four participants were participating in adventure type activities such as bungy jumping. These activities no doubt provided participants, who described themselves as having a high degree of physical energy, with an acceptable way to channel their need for high intensity physical action. The sample in this study is much too small to make any inferences in relation to the need for activities of this kind. However, it suggests to me that, as adults, we need to be conscious of how our own preferential orientation towards certain activities may limit our awareness of the kind of activities that are important to the young people we aim to support. Participants' narratives, about the things they loved to do, have enabled me to develop an understanding of their occupational preferences. This has included an understanding of how occupational preferences helped them develop a more positive sense of identity.

At least four participants were clearly engaged in the process of crafting an occupational life. As Kielhofner (2002) suggests, they had internalised a positive understanding of themselves related to particular occupations and roles, and had developed a strong sense of an occupational identity. Therefore, they were able to

project an image of themselves, associated with these roles and occupations, beyond the classroom and into the future. In a sense, they were already looking beyond their learning struggles, to vision something more in life. This is not to say this identity will remain fixed. They are likely to revise their occupational identity and goals as they continue to move forward in life.

What I take from the occupational themes that emerged in participants' stories is that being able to frame one's life from an occupational perspective is important. It puts the experience of learning difficulties into a context where it does not dominate as the determining factor on where one's life is going or as a factor that detracts from life's true meaning and purpose. This suggests to me that, as adults, we would do well to pay more attention to the occupational stories young people tell. They may indicate how well their social environment either supports or constrains the development of their abilities and talents.

THIS STUDY IN A LITERARY CONTEXT

In terms of its philosophical focus this study fits within a small but growing body of international and local studies, which have emphasised the importance of investigating research issues from young people's perspectives (Reid & Button 1995; Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Gollop, Greig & Taylor, 1999; Grover, 2004; Kortessluoma, Hentinen & Nikkonen, 2003; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Scratchley, 2004; Smith & Taylor 2000; Weinstein, 2002). In line with existing studies, although the research issue differs, this inquiry has provided young participants with a speaking platform. The study's results support the findings of other studies that children and young adolescents make good informants on their own experience (Aviezer, 2003; Curtin, 2000; Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Whiting & Lee, 2003; Weinstein, 2002). Therefore, I concur with authors who have previously advocated for young people to be given more opportunities to take part in research as active participants (Reid & Button, 1999; Carr, 2000; Gollop, 2000; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Smith & Taylor, 2000; Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Weinstein, 2002).

As I have previously acknowledged, specific learning difficulties have been extensively researched from many disciplinary perspectives. Research on this phenomenon continues to be updated, both from neurobiological and ecological perspectives (Dudely-Marling, 2004; Stiles et al., 2003). It was not intended that this study would fit within the extensive body of technical studies, which examine the

causes, effects and intervention approaches associated with specific learning difficulties. However, in listening to participants' stories I see an important link between quantitative and qualitative research approaches in research. Knowledge provided by technical studies is exactly what young people and their families need to answer the puzzles that specific learning difficulties present in their lives. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, draw attention to the psychosocial implications of learning difficulties and indicate what those living with the experience actually need (McNulty, 2003, Zambo, 2004).

In terms of its methodology, this study is part of a small international group of research studies, which investigate the experiences of children and adults with learning difficulties from a narrative perspective (Reid & Button, 1995; Fanchiang, 1996; McNulty, 2003; Zambo, 2004). I agree with other narrative researchers that there is a gap in the literature with regard to studies using narrative methodologies to investigate learning difficulties, and even more so in relation to young people as participants (Reid & Button, 1995; McNulty, 2003). Narrative studies have an important contribution to make in contextualising young people's experiences within their everyday lives and their life course. Therefore, this study supports the view that narrative inquiry is a useful methodology to use in investigating the perspectives of young people (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This study also aligns with other qualitative and mixed methodologies used to capture adults' lived experience of learning difficulties (Goldberg et al., 2004; Riddick et al., 1999, Patton, Palloway, & Schewel, 1992). A theme emerging in this study, consistent with other qualitative studies, was that participants became aware of their learning difficulties early in childhood (McNulty, 2003). Similarly, some participants reported feeling different and were aware that their peers saw them as different (McNulty, 2003). My study was consistent with adult studies in finding that participants feeling supported by understanding adults, family, teachers, professionals and friends, was essential in helping them develop a more positive sense of themselves and their abilities (McNulty; McWhirter, 1985; Patton, Polloway, & Schewel, 1992).

Studies with adult participants reported that finding a niche in adulthood helped people compensate for their early educational difficulties (McNulty, 2003; Fanchiang, 1996). As the participants in my study were still young, it was not possible to see their transition from school to the adult world. However, narrative threads in the life

stories of these young people revealed that some of them were already laying a foundation for finding an occupational niche in adulthood. The development of skills and talents in childhood and early adolescence, as a benefit in adult life, was made evident in Fanchiang's study (1996).

The importance of being understood was a primary theme, which I think came through more strongly in my study with young participants than in studies with adults. I think the difference may have been that this had lessened in importance for adults who had reached a stage in life where they had more control over their own situations, whereas young participants were at a stage of life where every day social situations were still largely directed by adults.

As a result of carrying out this study with participants who had good family support, I no longer hold my pre-existing assumption that low self-esteem should be an expected outcome of experiencing learning difficulties. I agree with those authors who see self-esteem as related to social roles and context, rather than as a phenomenon permanently fixed within an individual (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Goldstein, Keilhofner & Paul-Ward, 2004; Maulenhaupt, 2003; Weinstein, 2002). This study proposes that children are able to develop a positive sense of self-esteem, in relation to the things they do well (Matheson & Bohr, 1997; Passmore, 2003; Primeau & Ferguson, 1999). Nevertheless, it does not take a contrary position to those studies which find a link between learning difficulties and low self-esteem (Reid & Button, 1995; Golgerg et al., 2004; McNulty, 2003; Riddick et al., 1999).

One of the features of this study is the New Zealand context. There is an extensive body of international literature on specific learning difficulties. However, differences in political, educational and social context illustrate and underpin the importance of hearing the voices of young New Zealanders (Bird, 2003; Chapman, Tunmer, & Allen, 2003; Mitchell, 1999; Prochnow, Kearney & Carroll-Lind, 2000). Some studies highlighted the difference in political mandate towards learning difficulties between New Zealand and other English speaking countries (Chapman, Tunmer & Allen, 2003; Vogel & Holt, 2003). New Zealand children in this study indicated that having their learning difficulties recognised and understood, in an educational context, was an issue for them.

Are learning difficulties primarily an educational issue? Alternatively, are they a health issue? In essence, I see that this study is a kind of crossover study sitting

between the education versus health debate (Chapman & Tunmer, 2000). From an educational perspective, whether the participants in this study have any degree of biological impairment or not, they are not ill and their stories are not illness narratives. However, in line with a more holistic understanding of health as something other than the mere absence of illness, this study supports the view that school failure causes psychological distress, particularly when denied or misunderstood (Brooks, 2004; Law & Stewart, 2003; Wilcock & Whiteford, 2003). Feeling bad about oneself or one's abilities on a daily basis does have implications in terms of psychological health and well-being. Studies carried out with adult participants indicated that compromised psychological well-being in childhood can have long-term implications (McNulty, 2003; Goldberg et al. 2004; Riddick et al., 1999). While there is a large body of New Zealand educational research, conducted by internationally recognised researchers, I did not find any other studies relating to this issue conducted by New Zealanders with a health background.

This study fits within a growing body of international research literature, which examines human experience from a holistic health perspective through an occupational lens. The study's findings are consistent with occupational theorists and researchers who emphasise the link between competency in key life tasks and roles, and a sense of self worth and life purpose (Bohr & Matheson, 1997, Christiansen & Baum, 1997; Kielhofner, 2002; Liaberte-Rudman, 2002; Passmore, 2003). It also aligns with those theorists who propose that people reveal their sense of self and life purpose within the context of an occupational narrative (Clark, Ennevor, & Richardson, 1996; Goldberg, Kielhofner and Paul-Ward, 2004; Kielhofner, 2002).

WHAT DOES THIS STUDY OFFER THAT IS DIFFERENT?

Overall, this study's uniqueness is encapsulated in the combination of its focus on young people's perspectives, narrative methodology, and New Zealand context. There are still few studies using narrative methodology to obtain the perspectives of young participants with specific learning difficulties, locally or internationally. Therefore this study contributes, albeit in small way, to a turn in research focus to examine issues from young people's perspective.

Working within the context of the medical model, much occupational therapy research with children has previously tended to focus on developing models of practice, or proving and disproving the efficacy of various therapy evaluation and

intervention procedures. This study has taken a different approach, by directly asking children for their views on learning difficulties as a life issue. Using a narrative approach to study young participants' stories has revealed the psychosocial implications of learning difficulties as a contaminating experience, which interrupts the progressive course of young people's lives. The study further proposes that to regain a sense of equilibrium young people need access to information and support to make sense of the experience and to reframe their understanding of self.

A key difference within the extensive body of research on learning difficulties is that this study has included an occupational perspective. This is a new scientific paradigm, which discusses the relationship between human nature, environment and occupation. While specific learning difficulties are real phenomena in young people's lives, they do not represent all of who they are as human beings. Applying an occupational lens in this study showed that when children's experiences were captured within the framework of an occupational narrative, learning difficulties did not necessarily dominate as the determining factor in how life was for them or where their lives might go.

As I have previously stated, when participants chose to characterise themselves in occupational roles in which they felt successful, they were able to express a more positive and holistic sense of identity. An extension of this insight was that participants did not just want to experience competency in key occupational roles, it was important to them to be seen to be competent. This is because there are negative psychosocial implications in being seen to fail, on a daily basis, in the key occupational role of student. No one enjoys being seen or defined as a loser.

Within the occupational therapy profession, New Zealand therapists regularly access a rich resource of international literature to inform their practice. By presenting the perspectives of a small group of young New Zealanders this study offers a local context. I trust this will have relevance for interested adults who work to support young people with learning and co-ordination difficulties in New Zealand settings.

IMPLICATION OF FINDINGS

Some participants were particularly gifted in their use of language and story telling. However, in all cases, regardless of expressive language ability, the young people who took part in this study were capable of representing their own point of view. The

implication of this finding suggests that as adults we do need to take the time to understand learning difficulties from young people's perspective. By seeking to understand what young people know and experience, we can build supportive partnerships in which their concerns and issues are made visible and are addressed.

I found that a narrative methodology was a particularly good approach to use with young participants. It provided a context in which the multiplicity of factors in young people's lives could be interwoven into a holistic story, making sense of their experiences and who they understood themselves to be. This confirmed for me the power of personal narrative. I see implications for the use of narrative beyond that of a research tool. By providing young people with opportunities to explore their understanding of self and life experiences, as characters in their own stories, we may enable them to take back control over the shadowy presence of learning difficulties, and to develop resiliency and hope.

In this study I found it that it was not possible to predict, based on evidence of the degree of learning difficulty alone, how a young person felt they were doing or were likely to do in the future. Without talking with young people directly, in an informal and non-judgemental manner, it is difficult to judge how learning difficulties impact on their ability to perform in important occupational settings, such as school. It is therefore important, that as adults we include young people's self-knowledge in the processes designed to evaluate or address their learning needs. Knowing that children are experts on their own experiences, we can trust that the information they have to offer will help make sense of performance issues in the context in which they occur.

Most participants in this study provided information illustrating that accommodation made to classroom tasks and routines would have enabled them to perform more competently at school. However, I found that a primary issue for most participants was the need to have their learning difficulties understood. Participants highlighted the importance of supportive learning relationships with their teachers. Therefore, teachers who take the time to support their students' individual learning needs can be assured that their efforts are highly valued.

It is vital that all teachers understand the particular issues that relate to students with specific learning difficulties, including the factors which differentiate them from slow learners. It is the responsibility of educational institutions training teachers to ensure

that they develop this understanding. Being empathetic to the performance issues children face does not require an in-depth knowledge of any particular paradigm. It does require an understanding that the phenomena of specific learning difficulties actually exist, whatever labels are used.

This study found there is a need to build greater understanding of specific learning difficulties at a wider societal level in New Zealand. We need to consider what kind of society we wish to build. Do we wish to continue with a culture of denial, and allow young people to feel different and alienated when their experiences of having learning difficulties are in fact shared by a significant percentage of the population? Alternatively, do we wish to build a society in which having dyslexia is “no big deal”, in which we support some of our brightest and most talented young people in their endeavours to build a personal future? Talented adults, who have themselves experienced learning difficulties as children, have a vital role to play as mentors and role models for the next generation.

Participants in this study revealed that while their parents understood they were struggling with their learning, they too did not know why this was so. As it is not the role of class teachers to offer remediation, specialist tutors and psychologists play a crucial role in helping young people and their families. It is vital that young people and their families have access to high quality information, particularly from specialists with the expertise to offer relevant explanations. Information is part of the process of empowering children to reframe their understanding of their difficulties. However, as one of the narratives suggested, we do need to take care with the labels we use.

On a positive note, I found that participants in this study who had internalised a positive understanding of themselves related to particular occupations and occupational roles, did not see learning difficulties as an overriding factor in their lives and were able to imagine a future for themselves. This means that parents can be assured that the support and opportunities they provide to help their children develop their abilities and talents makes a difference in their children’s lives. Not only do children feel better about themselves through developing their occupational preferences and competencies, but they are able to build a sense of identity, beyond the limitations of learning difficulties.

Finally, this study answered my own silent question as to whether occupational therapists have a role to play with young people with specific learning difficulties. For

myself, I have answered, “yes”. Through processes such as occupational story telling and story making, occupational therapists can play a supportive role in helping young people to identify and develop their competencies. If we unhinge the focus on remediating underlying neurological dysfunction from the young people’s learning and co-ordination difficulties, we can empower young people to manage the environmental factors that act as constraints on their learning capacity. We will also recognise that different children have different needs at different stages of their lives. Some may need help to develop literacy and numeracy skills, while others might need to build social skills, develop particular talents such as art or Karate, or may need mentoring to achieve a personal life goal.

CRITIQUING THE STUDY

I set out in this study with the goal of listening to the perspectives of young people who had experienced specific learning difficulties. Therefore, I held in mind at all times the importance of their voices being heard within the context of this report. In shaping the text I have had considerable input into the way in which participants’ core narratives have been presented. I have brought this to the readers’ attention in the chapters reporting the results of analysis, as a way of ensuring transparency in documentation. However, I have at all times worked with the information participants offered me, to provide a faithful account of what they said and to ensure their views were not obscured by my own perspective. Verbatim quotes in the body of the report are reported as offered, except for minimal editing as asked for by participants, such as removing the word “like” where not required or removal of identifying details such as real names or place names. Readers can therefore trust that I have made a rigorous effort to faithfully convey the views of this particular group of participants, to the audience of adults who may read this thesis.

As to whether the study is worthwhile, I note there are still few research studies inviting children to express their point of view. Young participants in this study appreciated the opportunity to offer their perspective, which is evident in their degree of responsiveness, characterised by a significant level of honesty, humour and philosophical reflection. Therefore, I believe that this study makes an important contribution to filling the gap created by the absent voices of young people.

One of the limits of the study, however, is that the views expressed relate to a small sample of young people from similar social-cultural backgrounds. The views

expressed are not therefore representative of young persons' views from other cultural groups or social contexts. Participants in this study were well supported, and in many cases their parents were paying for private tutoring for their children. On the other hand, this possible limitation can also be seen as a strength. Despite the fact that participants were in secure family environments, and were receiving specialist support, it was evident that their learning difficulties still presented them with significant challenges. This leads to the question: what then are the experiences of children and adolescents with specific learning difficulties who do not receive this level of support?

Looking back, the main criticism I would make of my own study is that perhaps I opened my research lens out too wide and that for this level of study perhaps I should have focused it in more. For instance, I could have focused the whole study on an analysis of participants' core narratives, or I could have explored occupational narratives in more depth or exclusively looked at narrative themes emerging from the stories' content. Any one of these three forms of analysis could make a study in its own right. However, they do provide signposts for further research.

Another way that my focus has been quite broad is seen in my mixed sample group. One way I could have focused my study more, through sampling, is to have concentrated the age range more around a particular developmental stage to look at preadolescent children 9-12, or children in early adolescence 12-15. Young people face different issues at different stages of their schooling due to the transition from primary to secondary school curriculum, structures and routines. However, the diversity in types and levels of learning difficulty within this sample group does highlight the difficulties inherent in attempting to categorise children with specific learning difficulties.

Voices of Māori children are missing from this report; as a result, the perspectives of Māori children remain unknown. Narratives have power, especially when they come from a different perspective, to catalyse our thinking about where our experiences meet and how they differ. Māori actor Grant Roa's story of learning to read within a six month period as an adult, motivated by a specific purpose, and finding that he in fact enjoyed reading, is similar in its essence to Bob's story. Roa's story provides some sense of where experiences might meet across cultural groups. In my discussion with Toby Curtis, it was evident that Māori educational values are different and have something to offer mainstream school settings in terms of the need to

develop supportive school cultures in which children can feel safe, flourish with their learning and feel good about themselves (McFarlane, 2000).

The views that participants shared in this study have something to say to other young people who have experienced difficulties with learning. However, a limitation of this thesis is that it is addressed to an adult audience. Its format does not make it readily accessible to other young people. It may be possible to share some of the stories with other young people in some other way, such as child-centred discussion forums.

Although I have criticised the broad focus of this study, a positive aspect of keeping it broad is that I was not anxious for children to stick to one particular topic in their interviews. I hope that others will pick up some of the many balls thrown forward by this group of participants and continue the process of deepening our understanding of how specific learning difficulties play out in young people's lives.

FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a precedent for carrying out further research through the lens of young people who have trouble with learning. This is a small study with a broad focus and follow up studies might look more specifically at some of the issues raised by participants. These might include the need for their issues to be understood, such as the need for relevant information that helps reframe experiences, and the importance of being seen to be ordinary or capable (identity).

There is a need for further narrative research because there are still many stories to be told, from other perspectives, and because personal narrative is a useful method for contextualising the complex dimensions of the experience of learning difficulties. A narrative case study approach could provide a greater depth of understanding by conducting more than one interview, and including narratives from parents, teachers, therapists and tutors. Such studies may help increase understanding of how to achieve a balance between addressing learning issues while ensuring children have the opportunity to develop their occupational preferences and competencies.

I also see a place for studies, such as literature reviews, which bring the results of technical and subjective studies together to explore how information from one perspective might inform the other. Bringing the two bodies of knowledge together could be helpful to create more multifaceted evaluation processes and explanations.

International literature is of immense value in shining light on issues related to specific learning difficulties, but New Zealand's social context is different to other countries. It is clear to me that further studies are needed to understand experiences of children, as they relate to a New Zealand context. This study indicates that having one's difficulties understood in a school context is an ongoing issue for New Zealand children. Children continue to have their specific learning difficulties denied or obscured because of lack of general or official understanding. Instead of downplaying this issue, as a nation we need to face it. A start would be to know in reality the percentage of the school population this issue concerns.

Finally, future studies could focus on the link between competency in occupational roles, self-identity, and development of psychological health and well-being. This could be achieved by studying the occupational narratives that young people tell in a more in depth way. It is a basic human need to be seen to be able in our daily social roles, as opposed to disabled. School failure is more than an inability to achieve competency in literacy and numeracy skills in that it carries with it implications for long-term health and well-being. Longitudinal studies could follow the way in which young people develop occupational roles and identities in childhood, through the transition of adolescence and into adulthood. This is an area where occupational scientists can make a specific contribution to an extensive field of research concerning the experience of specific learning difficulties.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has drawn together the findings of this inquiry, which set out to explore the perspectives of eight young New Zealanders who have experienced specific learning difficulties. The study has successfully met its primary goal of gathering the views of young participants, listening to what they had to say, and considering whether their perspective could add fresh insight to what adults already know about specific learning difficulties. Young people's views highlight the importance of learning partnerships with understanding adults. Perceptive adults aid young people to reach an understanding of their difficulties, and assist them not only to compensate for difficulties but also to fully develop their skills and abilities. In this way, intelligent children and adolescents who have experienced learning difficulties in school are enabled to take their rightful place in society as competent human beings.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B – continued (pg. 2)

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX D

NARRATIVES OF NEW ZEALAND CHILDREN

Recruitment Data

Date:

Parent (name)

Child (name)

Inclusion Criteria:

- Age (within 9-14 year age range)
 - Learning disability
 - Identified by specialist
 - New Zealand mainstream school
 - Parent likely to give consent
 - Child willing and confident about being interviewed
-

Exclusion Criteria:

- Sensory disability e.g. hearing or vision
- Neurological disability – cerebral palsy or head injury
- Neurological disability following illness e.g. meningitis
- Congenital syndrome e.g. Down's syndrome
- Pervasive developmental disorders e.g. Autism
- Psychosocial disorders
- Recovery from recent significant psychosocial events
- Attending a Special School or Special Education Unit

If excluded – thanked for interest and would caller still be interested in a summary of findings? YES/NO

Child Demographics:

Gender

Ethnicity.....

Contact Details:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Contact Record:

Date of initial phone call

Date of follow up phone call.....

Information for Parents and Caregivers

Date Information Handout Produced: 17th February 2004

Project Title: *Narratives of New Zealand children with specific difficulties in academic learning.*
 (N.B. This is a working title only and will be changed in final report).

Invitation:

If you are the parent or caregiver of a child with specific learning difficulties I would like to invite you to read or discuss this information sheet with your child to see if they would like to take part in my research project. (A children's information sheet is also provided).

What is the purpose of the project?

The aim of the project is to find out about children's experiences of having difficulty in learning academic skills, such as reading, writing or mathematics from their point of view. In particular I am interested in what things children have found that have helped them to achieve and feel good about themselves and what things have not helped.

How are children chosen to be part of the project?

Children will be chosen to take part in the study if they are between 9 -14 years of age, attend a mainstream school in New Zealand and are willing to talk about their experiences. Children also need to have normal intelligence and to have been assessed by an educational psychologist (or other suitably qualified professional) as having specific learning difficulties.

Learning difficulties must not be the result of a childhood illness or injury; intellectual or physical disability. Children who have been assessed as having a learning disability such as dyslexia, developmental dyspraxia, or attention deficit will be included.

What happens in the project?

I will interview your child by him or herself. This will involve one interview of up to an hour (90 minutes maximum) or possibly two interviews of one hour each. The interview will be relaxed and informal so that your child can talk about his/her experiences exactly as he/she wishes to. There will not be a lot of formal questions to answer and I will only ask a question as a prompt to encourage the child to talk about their experiences.

Your child is invited to bring certificates he/she has earned or poems, drawings, photos or stories to the interview if he or she would like to. This will provide an opportunity to talk about the child's talents or strengths or things they feel good about.

With the permission of both you and your child I will audio-tape the interview and have it typed up (transcribed). Once the interview has been typed up I will give your child the opportunity to check it for accuracy. They may also ask for any material to be removed at that point.

As part of the process of analysis I will write up the narrative of the child's experience and compare this with other children's narratives and look for experiences which are similar and those which are different. I will not be reporting to parents what children say in their interviews but you and your child have the right to access and read the final report.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Talking about experiences such as having trouble learning at school may trigger some unhappy feelings and there is a degree of risk that children may still feel unhappy after the interview.

In the unlikely event that your child is distressed by the interview (which I aim to make extremely child friendly) I have access to back up counselling services which can be offered to your child as part of the project.

On the other hand research participants find it can be quite an 'empowering' experience to have the interviewer's full attention and to have their point of view valued. I trust the children will have this kind of positive experience.

How will discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Your child will be reminded at the beginning of the interview that because it is his or her own choice to participate he/she needs only to talk about things they choose to. Just because I am an adult, does not mean he/she has to answer all questions. Your child can choose not to answer any questions by saying "I don't think I'll answer that" or something similar. He/she is also free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Other researchers have found that children are able to talk more freely when they are interviewed on their own. If children are willing to be interviewed on their own they may like to know their parent or caregiver is close by. Children are welcome to have someone in the interview with them for support but it would be good if this is their own choice. The support person must not speak for the child.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Children will be able to talk about experiences from their own point of view. Researchers do not always take the time to find out what children think about things which affect them. This will be an opportunity for children to make their views known and to take part in a research study which helps us learn a bit more about the experience of having difficulty with learning.

How will your child's privacy be protected?

Interviews will be done at home or I can provide somewhere else if you prefer – they will not be done at school, to protect children's anonymity. Your child can choose another name (pseudonym) which will be used in writing up his/her story and any detail that identifies your child such as the name of a school or place names will not be used.

The only people who will have access to your child's information will be myself and my supervisor and we will ensure it is kept in a secure place which other people cannot get into – a locked cabinet in a locked office. If your child chooses to withdraw (which is their right up until analysis of interview data commences) data will be deleted from computer storage discs and written material will be shredded.

How do children join the study?

You can choose to join the study contacting me at phone 0800 080675 or P.O. Box 15-316, New Lynn. If you would like to know more you can contact me by phone or e-mail (samarshall@ihug.co.nz) and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

I will contact you to arrange an interview time for your child and will be flexible in making a time that is suitable both for you and your child to ensure that the interview does not cut across family activities or your child's special interests or activities.

What are the costs of participating in the project?

The main cost will be your time. I will try to get all the information I need in one interview but if I need to I will ask for a follow-up interview. I am happy to interview your child at home but if you prefer another venue I can reimburse you for travel costs.

I will also need you to make a suitable room available for the interview, one that is not being used by other family members at that time. I will not carry out the interview in the child's bedroom which is a personal space.

Opportunity to receive feedback on results of research:

I will write the study up as a report after all the interviews have been completed and have been typed up and I have analysed them. Once the study is written up (it will be in an academic style) you are welcome to read the final result and I will make a copy of the report available to you. It will take about a year before the report is ready to be read.

Opportunity to consider invitation:

If your child would like to take part in this project which provides children with an opportunity to have their say I would be very pleased to hear from you as soon as possible. I will take up to 12 children who are making a free choice to participate and meet the study's requirements.

Participant Concerns:

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Madeline Banda, madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz, 09 917 9999 ext 8044.

Researcher Contact Details: Sheryn Marshall Ph. 0800 080675 email: samarshall@ihug.co.nz
P.O. Box 15-316, New Lynn.

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Clare Hocking, Senior Lecturer, School of Occupational Therapy
Ph. 09 917 9999 x7120.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 26/3/04
AUTEK Reference number 04/39



Information for Children

Research Project: Stories of New Zealand children who find that some things at school are not easy to learn.

Invitation:

Are you between 9 - 14 years of age?

Have you found that it is not easy to learn certain subjects at school, such as reading, writing or mathematics?

If the answer is yes - I would like to invite you to take part my study.

.

What is this project about?

If you have found that it is not easy to learn certain things then I am interested to hear what you (and other children) have to say about your experiences.

I am also interested in things that you enjoy learning and doing and are really good at.

How are children chosen to be part of the project?

Children are chosen if they are:

- between 9 -14 years of age
- attend school in New Zealand
- know that they have a specific learning difficulty
- are confident about being interviewed
- know that it is must be their own choice if they decide to take part

Children will also be chosen because they have normal intelligence and no physical disabilities but still have trouble learning certain things.

What happens in the project?

You will take part in an interview for up to an hour to an hour and a half on one day and maybe another one in a week or so (but only if needed).

An interview means that you will talk with me about your experiences.

Mostly I hope the interview will be friendly and relaxed and you can talk about your experiences in your own way.

Just because I am an adult you don't need to talk to me about things you don't want to. Usually I will only ask a question if you run out of things to talk about.

You are very welcome to bring something to the interview like certificates or awards you have earned for particular things you enjoy doing; or photos, drawings, or poems about things you like to do.

With the permission of yourself and your parents I will audio-tape the interview and then it will be typed up. After it has been typed up you may check it to see if you feel it is correct.

You can also choose to remove any bits of the information if you wish to at this time. Once all that has been done I will write up information from your interview into a 'story'.

Then I will compare your story with other children's stories to see what experiences are similar and which are different.

Is anything in the interview going to be hard?

Talking about experiences such as having trouble learning at school may not be easy and may feel uncomfortable.

You may not want to talk about some of your experiences - that is fine - you only need to talk about things you want to.

You can choose not to answer any question by saying "I don't think I'll answer that" or something like that. You can also finish the interview at any time.

Other researchers have found that children are able to talk more freely when they are interviewed on their own. However, you may have someone in the interview with you if you would like to but it would be good if this is your own choice.

What are the benefits?

You will be able to talk about your experiences from your own point of view.

Researchers do not always take the time to find out what children think about the things which concern them.

This will be an opportunity for you and other children to make your views known and to take part in a project which teaches adults a bit more about the experience of having difficulty with learning.

How will privacy be protected?

I will use a made-up name when I write up your story. You can choose this name for me to use if you wish. Any facts like the name of your school or where you live will not be used.

Interviews will be done at home or somewhere else that suits you and your parents - they will not be done at school.

If we have the interview in your home we will use a family room (such as lounge or dining area or office) that is not being used by the rest of the family at the time. The interview will not be in your bedroom because that is your own private space.

Finding out the results of the project:

After I have finished interviewing about 12 children and I have considered the different stories then I will write a report. Once the report is written you are welcome to look at it and I will make a copy of the report available to you and your parents. It will take about a year before the report is ready to be read.

How do children join the study?

If you would like to take part in this project I would be very pleased to hear from you and your parent or caregiver. Your parent needs to consent for you to take part. You can ask your parent or caregiver to ring 0800 080675.

If you would like to know more you can contact me either by phone or e-mail (with your parents' permission) and I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Once you have agreed to take part I will arrange an interview time that fits in with your family routine and with your own special interests or activities.

Whatever you decide, thank you for taking an interest in this project.

Participant Concerns

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEK, Madeline Banda, madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz, 09 917 9999 ext 8044.

Researcher Contact Details: Sheryn Marshall Ph. 0800 080675 email: samarshall@ihug.co.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Clare Hocking, Senior Lecturer, School of Occupational Therapy Ph. 09 917 9999 x7120.

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Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 26/3/04 AUTEK Reference number 04/39.



APPENDIX G

Parental or Caregiver Consent to Child's Participation in Research

Title of Project: **Narratives of New Zealand children with specific difficulties in academic learning**

Project Supervisor: **Clare Hocking**

Researcher: **Sheryn Marshall**

-
- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project (Information Sheet dated 9th of February 2004).
 - I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
 - I understand that the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.
 - I understand that (my child) may withdraw him/herself or any information that he/she has provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
 - If my child withdraws, I understand that all relevant tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
 - I agree to my child taking part in this research.
 - I understand that the researcher will not give me direct feedback about the interview with my child.
 - Knowing I am entitled to access the final research report, I wish to receive a copy. Yes/No.

Parent/Caregiver signature:.....

Parent/Caregiver name:

Contact Details:

Address:

.....

Telephone:

E-mail:

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on

26/3/04

AUTEC Reference number 04/39

Note: Parent/Caregiver should retain a copy of this form

APPENDIX H

Child's Consent to Participate in Research

Project: **Stories of New Zealand children who find that some subjects at school are not easy to learn.**

Project Supervisor: **Clare Hocking**

Researcher: **Sheryn Marshall**

-
- I have been given information and understand what this research project is about.
 - I have had my questions answered.
 - I understand what it means to be 'interviewed'.
 - I agree that my interview can be audio-taped.
 - I am choosing to take part because I want to - it is my own choice.
 - I understand that I can pull out of the project if I want to up until the time I have checked my story and agreed it can be used in the final report.
 - I agree to take part in this research.
 - I wish to receive a copy of my interview. Yes/No.



Participant signature (child):

Participant's name (child) :

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 26/3/04

AUTEC Reference number 04/39

Note: Parent/Caregiver should retain a copy of this form.



APPENDIX I

Typist Confidentiality Agreement

Title of Project: Narratives of New Zealand children with specific difficulties in academic learning

Project Supervisor: Clare Hocking

Researcher: Sheryn Marshall

I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential. I understand that the contents of the tapes can only be discussed with the researchers. I will not keep any paper or electronic copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties to access to them while the work is in progress.

Typist's signature:

Typist's name:

Typist's Contact Details:

.....

.....

Date:

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Clare Hocking, Senior Lecturer, School of Occupational Therapy, AUT.
Ph. 09 917 1999 Ext. 7120.

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on
29/03/04**

AUTEC Reference number 04/39

APPENDIX J

Narratives of New Zealand children with specific difficulties in academic learning

Interviewing Participants – Indicative Questions

Lead in statement to interview:

..... (child's name) thank you for agreeing to talk with me today, I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview.

As you probably know I am interested in learning more about children's experiences of having difficulty learning certain things. That's why I am talking with you. I am not a teacher ... I am an occupational therapist and I have worked with a lot of children with learning difficulties helping them to learn new skills. When I was a child my brother and sister both had learning difficulties so I understand a bit about what it is like to find it hard to learn certain things, like reading, but I would like to learn more about it from children's point of view.

Adults can sometimes forget to ask children for their point of view so what you have to tell me will be very valuable - it will help me, and hopefully, other adults understand more about children's experiences - maybe we will have some new ideas about what kind of things to do to support children's learning.

Because talking to me today is your own choice you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to – say for example, you broke a school rule or a family rule I don't need to know about any of those sorts of things.

Even though I'm an adult you don't have to answer my questions if you don't want to. If I ask you a question that you don't want to answer you can just say "I don't think I'll answer that one" or something like that. If you change your mind later on in the interview and decide to answer the question then, that's fine too. I'll try not to ask you too many questions, anyway, because I would rather you had time to talk about your experiences from your own point of view.

Anything you tell me in this interview will be 'confidential' which means I won't be discussing it with your parents. Two other adults will see information from the interview though – that is the person who types it up (transcriber) and my supervisor who checks my work. Once the interview is typed up I will let you see it if you want to so you can check what you said.

As you probably know I am going to tape our discussion using this tape recorder because I won't be able to remember everything you say. The interview will be typed up from this tape that we're making today.

Do you have any more questions or things you'd like to know before we start?

Well because I am really interested in the things that you enjoy doing and feel you are good at - maybe we could start there

Indicative questions (prompts only may or may not be used):

I see you brought with you, how about telling me something about that?

or

So, I'm wondering what things do you really love to do?

I am also wondering if the things you love to do are the same things you feel you are good at doing?

What about other things you feel good about doing?

or

Some children find that they really enjoy learning something when they are good at it (even if it takes a lot of practice and effort, say like learning to play an instrument) how about you?

I'm wondering if you can tell me about a time when you've done really well at something and it felt really good?

Some children I talk to feel that certain friends or adults (like their parents) have been really helped them, how about you?

We've talked about some really good things in life – but I guess things aren't always good. Sometimes not so good things happen like bullying or teasing. Can we talk about those sorts of things?

Some children have been known to be teased or bullied just because they find certain things hard to learn. Has that ever happened to you? How did it feel? Why do you think that happens?

Has anyone given you a name for your learning difficulties?

Because having difficulty learning certain things isn't noticeable - like a broken arm or leg - sometimes children feel other people do not understand. How about you?

Some parents have told researchers that they worry about their children fitting in and making friends at school. Is this something that you have worried about too?

Closing Statement:

Is there anything else you would like to tell me (that I haven't thought of asking)?

Well we've talked about a lot of different things and its time to bring the interview to an end now and let you get on with other things. A very big thanks for taking part today. You've done a really good job of being interviewed and I really appreciate it. When the interview is typed up I will let you know - it might take a week or two. Thanks

I'll turn the tape off now.

APPENDIX K



P.O. Box 15-316
New Lynn
20/8/04

Dear

Children's Research Project

I am sending you these vouchers as a thank you for taking part in the Children's Research Project. You did a great job of being interviewed and I really appreciate that you were willing to take part. Thank you also for taking the time to check your story.

Very best wishes for your future and once again a very big thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Sheryn Marshall.



APPENDIX L

P.O. Box 15-316
New Lynn.

20 August 2004.

Dear

Children's Research Project

This is just a note to thank you for allowing me to interview your child about their experiences with specific learning difficulties. All the children were excellent participants and have been a great help to me through sharing their perspective on living with specific learning difficulties.

I have sent this small token of appreciation to all the children. It was planned into the study from the start and has been approved by the ethics committee but I was not allowed to offer it to the children until they had completed the interview process. Now that the children have had the chance to check their stories I feel this is an appropriate point at which to thank them because if they wait until I finish the report it may not seem so relevant.

Also many thanks for allowing me to come and interview in your home and for making space for me within busy family schedules. I will contact you again when the report is ready so can you read it if you wish to.

Again a big thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Sheryn Marshall.

APPENDIX A

MEMORANDUM



Student Services Group - Academic Services

To: Clare Hocking
From: Madeline Banda
Date: 26 March 2004
Subject: 04/39 Narratives of New Zealand children with specific difficulties in academic learning

Dear Clare

Thank you for providing amendment and clarification of your ethics application as requested by AUTEK.

Your application was approved for a period of two years until 26 March 2006.

You are required to submit the following to AUTEK:

- § A brief annual progress report indicating compliance with the ethical approval given.
- § A brief statement on the status of the project at the end of the period of approval or on completion of the project, whichever comes sooner.
- § A request for renewal of approval if the project has not been completed by the end of the period of approval.

Please note that the Committee grants ethical approval only. If management approval from an institution/organisation is required, it is your responsibility to obtain this.

The Committee wishes you well with your research.

Please include the application number and study title in all correspondence and telephone queries.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Madeline Banda', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Madeline Banda
Executive Secretary
AUTEK
CC: 9906934 Sheryn Marshall

From the desk of ...
Madeline Banda
Academic Services
Student Services Group

Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1020
New Zealand
E-mail: madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz

Tel: 64 9 917 9999
ext 8044
Fax: 64 9 917 9812

Invitation to participate

If you are the parent or caregiver of a child who may be interested in taking part in this project please contact the researcher for further information.

If you are a professional working in health or education services and know of children who may be interested in participating you can help by drawing parents' and children's attention to the project.

Children will need to have the project explained to them by an adult but it is vital they are not coerced into participating – they must be free to choose for themselves about taking part.



How do we volunteer to take part?

To take part in this project please contact the researcher who will forward further information including:

- Parent/Caregiver Information
- Children's Information
- Parent/Caregiver Consent Form
- Child's Consent Form

Researcher Contact Details
 Sheryn Marshall
 P.O. Box 15-316
 New Lynn
 Auckland
 Phone: 0800 080675
 Email: samarshall@ihug.co.nz

RESEARCH PROJECT



AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
 TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Narratives of New Zealand Children with Specific Difficulties in Academic Learning



PH. 0800 080675

Why do this project?

In a recent international survey (2003) 7.7% of New Zealand adults reported having a specific reading disability.

It is generally accepted that up to 10% of the population has a 'learning disability'

Therefore there is likely to be at least one or two children with learning difficulties in most school classes.

Such difficulties are often called a 'hidden disability' because children's difficulties are not physically apparent and therefore are often not well understood.

Parents and many different professionals work to support children with learning difficulties and have developed a great deal of knowledge and understanding about the challenges associated with learning difficulties.

This study aims to discover more about children's experiences of the challenges in relation to living with specific learning difficulties, from their unique point of view.

There is also an opportunity for children to create a fresh perspective about specific learning difficulties which may influence adults' understanding and thinking.



Who can participate?

Children are invited to take part if they :

- are between 9 -14 years of age
- attend mainstream schools in New Zealand
- know that they have specific learning difficulties
- are confident about being interviewed
- are articulate
- and freely choose to take part

What is a specific learning difficulty?

Types of recognised specific learning difficulties include:

- difficulty reading and writing text (dyslexia)
- difficulty with mathematical reasoning (dyscalculia)
- difficulty with sequencing and organising self and tasks (dyspraxia)
- difficulty focusing attention on tasks combined with distractibility and emotional volatility (attention deficits)



How will the research project be carried out?

The research project is designed as a narrative inquiry which is a suitable approach to use with children because it can be flexible in responding to the individual cultural needs of the children taking part.

A narrative inquiry is basically about collecting oral stories.

Telling a story (narrative) is innate to all human beings and children are no less able story tellers than adults.

Children's narratives will be 'collected' in face-to-face, informal and friendly interviews.

Interviews will be audio-taped with the parent's and child's consent. Children's right to privacy and confidentiality will be respected.

As part of the process of analysis children's individual narratives will be compared with other children's narratives to look for themes which are similar and those which are different.

The final report will be available to be read by interested individuals and groups with a concern for children with specific learning difficulties.



CHILDREN'S RESEARCH

Narratives of New Zealand children with specific difficulties in academic learning



AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKĀU RĀU



During 2004 I will be conducting a research study which focuses on children with specific learning difficulties.

I am an occupational therapist with 20 years experience whose specialty area is working with children - and this research project is part of a Master of Health Science qualification I am undertaking at AUT.

The purpose of the study is to better understand the experience of specific learning difficulties from children's point of view.

The study will be conducted as a narrative inquiry and children's narratives (stories) will be 'collected' by informal face-to-face interviews using a conversational style.

Interviews will be audio-taped with the parent's and child's consent. Children's right to privacy and confidentiality will be respected. The project has been approved by the AUT ethics committee.

The final report will be made available to groups and individuals who provide services or have a concern for children with specific learning difficulties.

I am looking to recruit children to participate who are:

- between 9 -14 years of age
- attending mainstream schools in New Zealand
- aware that they have specific learning difficulties
- confident about being interviewed and are articulate
- freely choosing to take part

For more information please contact me on 0800 080675

Researcher Contact Details

Sheryn Marshall
P.O. Box 15-316
New Lynn
Auckland

Phone: 0800-080675

Email: samarshall@ihug.co.nz