



“Keeping your Head down”: Dyslectic Students’ Coping Strategies in Secondary School

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Abstract

This paper explores what strategies young people develop to cope with their dyslexia in secondary school. The experiences of the students are studied in a Norwegian context. The research question is as follows: What strategies related to schoolwork do students in Norwegian secondary school adopt to cope with their dyslexia? A phenomenological approach was adopted to explore the dyslectic students’ experiences. Purposive sampling was used to identify four young people who met the chosen criteria. The data-gathering tool was individual semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed through a thematic step-by-step analysis process. A main finding was how the students in different ways developed personal coping strategies to handle their learning difficulty related to schoolwork. The overall strategy was what we have named “keeping your head down”. This main category included four subcategories: “family helping with homework”, “listening carefully to the teachers”, “pretending in the classroom”, and “not using the teaching aids much”.

Keywords: *dyslexia, coping strategies, phenomenology.*

1. Introduction

Proficiency in reading and writing is a fundamental skill in today’s society. However, reading difficulties is widespread. There are different causes for reading difficulties such as, for example, a lack of schooling, poor teacher competence, mental or hearing impairment, and a series of other factors. One specific reading difficulty is dyslexia. This paper reports on a qualitative study of young people with dyslexia in Norwegian secondary school and how they cope with their learning difficulty. The research question explored is the following: *What strategies related to schoolwork do students in Norwegian secondary school adopt to cope with their dyslexia?*

1.2 Dyslexia

The World Health Organization (2018) considers dyslexia a developmental learning disorder with impairment in reading characterised by significant and persistent difficulties in learning academic skills related to reading, such as word reading accuracy, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. The WHO points out that dyslectic individuals’ performance in reading is markedly below expectations for their chronological age and level of intellectual functioning. Moreover, this is not due to an intellectual development disorder, sensory impairment (vision or hearing), neurological disorder, lack of available education, lack of proficiency in the language of academic instruction, or psychosocial adversity. The term dyslexia thus describe a learning difficulty that is characterized by difficulties in accurate word recognition, spelling and decoding abilities (Reid, 2011). Common observable symptoms of dyslexia are poor reading fluency and spelling. Since there is no universally accepted definition of dyslexia that is precisely formulated and operationalised, the prevalence of dyslexia is difficult to establish (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014).

1.3. The Norwegian context

Approximately 97% of Norwegian pupils attend municipal public schools. The compulsory education consists of the primary level including grades 1-7, where the pupils are aged from 6 to 12 years. The secondary level includes grades 8-10 and the age group 13-16. The Norwegian national curriculum emphasizes two central principles. One of them is about inclusion building on the Salamanca Statement, which expresses that all pupils regardless of disabilities or learning difficulties are to have inclusive education to secure equal educational rights (UNESCO, 1994). This implies that all children shall attend their local school and be a member of an ordinary class. The other significant principle is about adaptive teaching. Teaching shall be individually adapted, which includes, if necessary, special education. For dyslectic students with no further learning difficulties adaptive teaching generally implies being equipped with supplementary teaching aids like computers with relevant software,



audiobooks, and that teachers facilitate learning situations by for example giving the students hand-outs and expect them from reading aloud.

2. Method

To explore young people's coping strategies related to dyslexia, a phenomenological approach was adopted. The aim of a phenomenological study is to explore the world as experienced by the individuals studied (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This involves describing the common meaning of lived experiences for several individuals and through this understand phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them. Studies like this do not aim for generalisability but to shed light upon the world as experienced by the individuals studied and describe the shared meaning of the experience from their perspectives in order to present commonalities. Generally, data is gathered through interviews, and the sample in an in-depth phenomenological study is limited and homogeneous (Dukes, 1984).

In our study purposive sampling was used to identify four young people who met the following criteria: students in secondary school diagnosed with dyslexia and because of that, due to the principle of adapted teaching, given access to support and provided with extra teaching aids. Other criteria were that they should have insight into their learning difficulty and no further problems in school subjects. The students were recruited from two Norwegian secondary schools, and the final sample consisted of three girls and one boy aged between 14 and 16.

Data was collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews where the students were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences and invited to reflect on topics and situations related to their schoolwork.

Thematic analysis (Van Manen, 2014) was used. The first step was to listen to the recordings and read the transcripts of each interview carefully to become familiar with the words of the student in order to develop a holistic impression. Thereafter a line-by-line analysis was used to find units of meaning from each interview. Then these units of meaning were grouped together into clusters of themes. Finally, data were categorised into themes and subthemes describing the nature of the students' experience.

3. Findings

All the students had developed personal coping strategies related to schoolwork. Throughout the analysis the main category "keeping your head down" evolved. These words were said by one of the students, and this statement contains the meaning in their coping strategies.

The main category "keeping your head down" includes four subcategories:

The first one is "family helping with homework" described like this by one of the students:

«When it comes to homework, daddy reads and explains for me how the tasks are to be done. And when we are going to have tests in geography or history, he reads the text pages for me».

The second subcategory is "listening carefully to the teachers". One student said it like this:

«I understand and remember things I hear. When I concentrate and listen to what the teachers say, I do not have to read so many texts myself. I learn by listening».

The third subcategory we identified is: "pretending in the classroom".

«At school I pretend to listen to the teachers, and sometimes I pretend to do the task we are given even if I do not understand them. By keeping my head down like this, the teachers leave me alone».

The fourth category is "not using the teaching aids much".

«I do not use my computer. I prefer to write by hand because then no red lines emerge under the misspelled words. It is so discouraging to see all the mistakes I do, and no one else use computers and audiobook!»

The quotes under each subcategory underline how they in different ways cope with their dyslexia. For example, had all the students had received additional teaching aids, like audiobooks, computers, and software programs to assist their reading and writing. However, only one of them used it actively. The others did not of different reasons. All the students pointed to the fact that their teachers had little knowledge when it comes to the supplemental teaching aids: "They are not good at dyslexia in my school" and "I think the teachers need to go to a course or something".



4. Discussion

Our study shows that being dyslectic was challenging in many ways for the students. They all had access to supplemental teaching aids, but they did not use them much for different reasons. Several of their statements underlined the fact that using audiobooks, software programs and other teaching aids made them stand out as different from the others. To feel insecure, wanting to fit in and be like the others is part of being a teenager. For young people with dyslexia, however, their diagnosis can make these feelings even stronger. The findings indicate that the participants developed various coping strategies to avoid that their dyslexia were seen as a defining aspect of them among their fellow pupils in school.

Another reason for not using the teaching aids was that the teachers had little insight into how to put them to use. This fact combined with the students “keeping their head down” did not contribute to adapted teaching for the dyslectic students. At school they often missed both adequate support and that the teachers facilitated their learning processes in different ways.

Our study shows the importance of teacher competence. To secure adaptive teaching, teachers need to have knowledge about dyslexia, what interventions that are helpful, and how to use supplementary teaching aids. This can be obtained through good quality pre-service and in-service teacher training. Adapted and supportive learning environments will reduce the young people’s need to develop compensatory strategies to “keep their head down” because of their dyslexia.

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