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Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Difficulties

Nola Firth and Everarda G. Cunningham, Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale

Abstract

Sense of personal control and connectedness have been cited as key components of effective coping by successful adults who have Learning Difficulties (LD). Despite this, students who have Learning Difficulties are known to be at risk of learned helplessness, passive learning style, low self-regulation, and social exclusion. This paper describes the development and implementation of a 12-hour professional development program to assist Middle Years teachers and schools to address these issues. The program is entitled Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Difficulties. Unique features of the program are inclusion of views of adults and students who have learning difficulties as well as referral to research-based teaching strategies to develop the key resources of perceived control and sense of connection. While preliminary anecdotal feedback about the program from teachers and regional network personnel has been very positive, future longitudinal studies involving qualitative and quantitative methods are now required to determine the efficacy of the program in the longer term.

Introduction

School retention rates and related post-school career pathways remain a concern both internationally (Ianni & Orr, 1996) and within Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003; Business Council of Australia, 2003; Marks and McMillan, 2003; Teese, 2003). A number of studies have examined the relative contributions of socio-demographic, educational and psychological influences in predicting student outcomes. The national Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY), Marks, McMillan and Hillman (2001) reported that 40 percent of the variation in students' Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (or ENTER scores) could be explained by prior academic achievement (Year 9 literacy and numeracy), social background, school sector, individual school effectiveness and the psychological factors of self-concept of ability and self and parental aspirations towards post-school study. While the LSAY study yielded worthwhile information, it had a number of limitations. The report acknowledged that over 60% of the variance in students' ENTER scores remained unexplained. Additionally, while the recently released LSAY report (McMillan and Marks, 2003) indicated that literacy and numeracy levels were major factors in non-completion of school and that completion of school without tertiary entrance was a risk factor, there was no information on the effect of the presence of learning difficulties.

Many students leave school early because they become increasingly disconnected from the school environment (Ianni & Orr, 1996; DEET, 2000b). It is
likely that many of these early leavers have a learning difficulty1 (Prior, 1996). Many students who have learning difficulties do however successfully complete their secondary education and pursue higher education (Reiff, Ginsberg & Gerber, 1995).

While estimates of the number of students who have learning difficulties range from 6% to 30% of students (Louden at al, 2000), it is clear that a significant minority of the population is involved. According to Prior (1996), the number is approximately, one in ten individuals. It is also becoming clear, that while specific learning difficulties may be compensated for, they rarely disappear (Prior, 1996, 2001; Shessel and Reiff, 1999; Skinner, 1998) and are therefore a lifelong phenomenon. Likely consequences include earlier school leaving, fewer career opportunities with lower remuneration, and more unemployment and mental health problems than would otherwise be expected (Prior, 1996). A specific example of this situation is the fact that the number of individuals with learning difficulties in prison is above the norm for the general population. The Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner (2000) indicated that in June 1999, 85% of prisoners had not completed secondary school. Newman, Lewis and Beverstock, (1993) also state:

In recent years research has ..indicated that many prisoners have low educational levels because of learning difficulties...Studies in many countries demonstrate that the link between insufficient literacy and criminal behaviour is clear for adults and even more pronounced with juveniles.

Another weakness of the LSAY study and many other studies predicting academic and/or psychological outcomes in young people (e.g., Resnick et al., 1997) is that the relationships and interrelationships between the selected constructs were analysed in the absence of any theoretical model that might provide insight into the processes through which adolescents are more likely to arrive at positive academic and psychological outcomes. From a theoretical perspective, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) is a model that integrates key external (e.g., family and school connectedness, academic achievement) and internal (e.g., mastery, coping self efficacy) coping resources in the prediction of psychological and academic outcomes. The underlying premise of COR theory is that individuals strive to protect and build their coping resources, and it is the loss of net resources or insufficient gain and onset of loss spirals that leads to undesirable outcomes, both psychologically and academically (Hobfoll, 1989). Given the known risk outcomes in regard to students who have learning difficulties the loss spiral aspect of Hobfoll’s theory, where lack of resources leads to further loss, is particularly pertinent. Additionally, Hobfoll’s model (2001) posits that particular internal resources such as self-efficacy and perceived control are central to the mobilisation of the other internal and external resources.

The psychological literature acknowledges the importance of key external and internal resources in promoting adaptive functioning in young people. Large

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1 For the purposes of this research study the term ‘learning difficulties’ refers to those students who have average or above IQ and a difficulty in one or more academic areas such as reading or mathematics (Prior, 1996).
studies both in The United States of America and within Australia have shown that connectedness (ie. school, family, peer) in particular is an important external resource in this regard (Cunningham, 2002b; Resnick et al., 1997). A solid body of research (e.g., Skinner & Wellborn, 1997) also indicates both connectedness and perceived control as important resources for successful coping in the academic domain. Additionally, in one of the few longitudinal studies of students with learning difficulties, Svetaz, Ireland and Blum (2000) found school and family connectedness to be protective against emotional distress and suicide attempts for this group of students.

These results are replicated in a seminal study focussing on analysis of components of success for people who have learning difficulties was conducted by Rieff, Ginsberg and Gerber (1995). Reiff et al. interviewed 71 adults with learning difficulties who felt their lives were successful. Analysis of interview results from the study presented various factors which these people believed had contributes to their success. One significant factor that accounted for their success was connection to and emotional support from families and work place communities. Importantly, the common underlying factor as a prerequisite to success for these adults was "sense of control". Control was defined as " making conscious decisions to take charge of one's life". In the words of one interviewee) You've got to have that inner sense that you're going to do it. (Reiff, Ginsberg & Gerber, 1995, p. 32). This is in spite of the fact that students who have learning difficulties are also known to be at risk of low mastery and coping self efficacy (Cheshire & Cambell, 1997; Prior, 1996; Seligman, 1995), and low social connectedness (Wong & Donahue, 2002).

A conceptual model reflecting these results and placing them within a framework of Conservation of Resources theory is presented in Figure 1. This model, which is congruent with Conservation of Resources theory, depicts how internal and external coping resources combine in their influence on school leaving. In turn positive behaviours are likely to increase school connectedness and perceived control and the model thus operates with a feedback loop. Additionally, this model hypothesises that a professional development program intervention to support the key external resource of school connectedness and the key internal resource of perceived control will increase productive coping responses, including school retention decisions.
Despite the strong evidence of the protective nature of connectedness and perceived control, and the particular relevance of these factors in successful outcomes for students who have learning difficulties few, if any, programs or research studies address these issues. A program entitled *Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Difficulties* has been developed to enable schools and mainstream class teachers to address these issues.

**The professional development program** *Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Difficulties*

The professional development program *Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Difficulties* has been developed initially for Middle Years, (ie. Years
The 12-hour program aims to empower Middle years teachers and school leaders with belief systems and skill levels that enable creation of class environments and curriculum to support the development of the resources of personal control and social inclusion for students who have learning difficulties. A region of the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DE&T) has implemented a Train the Trainer version of the program in preparation for its disseminated to schools within the region. The program is also being implemented within single school environments.

Program content

The program content includes clarification of the definition and nature of learning difficulties, inclusion of the views of adults and students who have learning difficulties, research-based teaching strategies and structures and programs to develop the key resources of perceived control and sense of connection. Program process includes development of partnerships with participant schools and structures to ensure thorough integration into schools of the action plans participants develop during the program.

The program content begins with understanding of the phenomenon of learning difficulties. Many teachers in Australia remain confused about learning difficulties (Louden et al.). Unlike in the United states of America and the United Kingdom where LD is a basis for funding, there is confusion surrounding the term and its meaning. In particular the life-long nature of the phenomenon is often not understood. The exploration of the issues of definition, prevalence and permanence of the phenomenon of learning difficulties in the program is drawn from recent research, and in particular from Prior (1996) and the recent Australian Commonwealth Government commissioned inquiry into learning difficulties (Louden et al, 2000).

Listening to, and thereby empowering, adults and students who have learning difficulties is an integral part of the program. The authors (Reiff, Ginsberg and Gerber, 1995) noted in the conclusion of their research report that in future within educational environments listening to students will be at least as significant as speaking to them (p.37). The program includes a study of the Reiff et al. (1995) research regarding successful adults with Learning Difficulties, readings of life stories of people with LD, a presentation by two adult guest speakers who have LD, and activities that involve teachers in listening to the students in their classrooms.

The focus of the course on the development of coping resources is informed by Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theoretical model of successful coping (1989) and Skinner and Wellborn's (1997) identification of sense of control and belonging as key resources for adolescent well-being. Demonstration of the special relevance of this model to the situation of students who have learning difficulties is informed by Reiff, Ginsberg and Gerber's (1995) findings; Seligman's (1995) learned helplessness theory; and Dweck's (2000) identification of the passive belief systems of achievers. Teaching strategies recommended are drawn from those shown to be effective by research, especially those identified by recent meta-analysis of the learning difficulties research literature (Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). All the approaches can be implemented in the general classroom and are beneficial for all students as well as students who have learning difficulties (Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000).
Topics, subtopics and sequence and of the program as presented in the program manual are outlined below. Additionally the program manual include an extensive bibliography and a web page guide to available resources.

1. Audit of current school structures and policies
   - Strengths and weaknesses of current school and class structures
   - Ideas for positive change

2. Learning difficulties – definitions and individual differences
   - Definition
   - Individual differences
   - Prevalence and outcomes
   - Diagnosis – formal and informal

3. Listening to people who have learning difficulties
   - Learning difficulties and positive self concept
   - Self advocacy
   - Gifts of the learning difficulties experience

4. Creating inclusive class environments
   - Building caring classroom relationships
   - Valuing intellectual diversity
   - Fostering appropriate student control, choice and responsibility
   - Management of challenging behaviours

5. Developing coping skills
   - Key coping resources of perceived control and sense of belonging for people who have learning difficulties
   - Self advocacy
   - Coping skills programs- assertion and positive thinking
   - Teacher feedback

6. Instructional strategies and curriculum modification
   - Effective teaching styles
   - Designing accessible print material
   - Use of alternative presentation methodologies
   - Use of computer assisted technology
   - Individualisation and opportunity for student choice
   - Mentoring and monitoring
   - Resources

7. Creating change
   - Action plans for teachers, leaders and school-wide systems
   - Structures to maintain and develop class-based and whole school changes

Program process

Integral to program process is development of school-based partnerships, and thorough integration of new initiatives into current practices and environments.
Additionally, program delivery includes modelling of the strategies and opportunity for trial of strategies within teachers' own classrooms. Involvement of key people from within each school/cluster is an important component of the implementation of the program. Furthermore, the approach is a collaborative rather than a prescriptive. The facilitator draws on teacher expertise and is aware of and responds to individual needs within the group. The program involves a minimum of 12 hours contact time comprised of an initial intensive session of 4-6 hours followed by 3 fortnightly sessions of 2 hours. Recommended group size is about 20 participants. This structure allows for development of relationships, participant reflection, and trial and integration of activities.

The program implementation process is also informed by change theory. Inclusion in the program of the Johnson (2003) and the Hill and Crevola (1997) models of change in schools ensures that initiatives resulting from the course are methodically planned, implemented and evaluated and that they are embedded within and owned by the participant schools. Teams of participants undertake initial assessments of their school systems in relation to students who have learning difficulties. At the end of the program, these teams develop school-based action plans to implement systems and structures that empower and connect students who have learning difficulties. Action plans include timetables, team member responsibilities, program evaluation, relationship and links to current programs and policies.

Program process includes modeling of recommended strategies, and between-session activities. Modelling allows participants to experience many of the recommended interventions. Examples of modelling within the program include: access to complicated print material by pre-structuring material and response format (modelling increasing participation and sense of belonging of students); peer teaching in pairs (modelling increasing student control and participation and belonging); and group trust building activities (modelling increasing sense of belonging). Follow-up activities allow important between-session reflection and trial of strategies.

Feedback

Initial feedback comments by teachers who have experienced the program are positive. One school is planning to expand the use of the strategies beyond the Middle Years to include the Senior years. Examples of positive feedback comments include the following:

The PD felt like a developmental journey and that’s the way it should be if it is going to be meaningful and life changing.

With an understanding that learning difficulties are permanent my whole outlook has changed. I will use my class time more to build classroom relationships.

(The program has given me a) higher level of awareness of what to look for, more effective strategies.

(The program) evolved for me into things that were directly useful to LD and really (to) ALL my students.
(The program has given me a) different strategies to use, appreciation of difficulties of people with learning difficulties and their feelings and methods of coping or avoiding.

The guest speakers very powerful.

(The guest speakers’) experiences were eye opening—made me really think about the way I and others in my school teach.

(The program was) valuable, excellent, all I had hoped for, enjoyed it, inclusiveness of group is excellent, everyone comfortable quickly.

Conclusion

This paper has described the development and implementation of the professional development program Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Difficulties. There are few, if any programs that assist students to cope with the emotional aspects of having LD. Rather, use of drugs has been the main method used to help students in this regard (Chan, 2000). This program is unique in that it focuses on development of key coping resources indicated by successful adults with learning difficulties. Additionally implementation and evaluation of the program involves development of a carefully built partnership with regions, schools and teachers. The program provides specialist knowledge to teachers but involves collaboration with teachers as to what is likely to be most effective within particular schools. It thus builds on the considerable expertise that teachers already have. In this it models its own emphasis on perceived control and sense of belonging.

Qualitative and quantitative research is needed to evaluate the efficacy of the program in regard to the development of the key resources of perceived control and sense of belonging and of the effect of this on coping responses such as school retention intentions. The theoretical model of Hobfoll’s Conservation of resources may be a sound basis for these studies. The outcomes of such research projects will provide insight into the effectiveness of these approaches to assist students with LD to live successful lives.

References


