

# DIFFERENT MEANS ME – I JUST LEARN DIFFERENTLY

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# Methodology



- Methodological paradigm: *Qualitative*
- Methodological position: *Interpretivist*
- Methodological approach: *Case study*
- Methods: *Interviews, autobiographical narrative*
- Ethics: *Rights of vulnerable children, avoiding coercion. Contribution to society and the common good, advocacy.*

Auto-ethnographic approaches also have validity through value of participant experience; the process is reflexive and can be **therapeutic, transformative and emancipatory** (Delamont, 2009; Dyson, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

# Autobiographical Narrative

- Introducing Sean (age 9) & Dave (age 14)
- Strengths & competencies
- Diagnoses (ADHD, ASD spectrum, dyspraxia)
- Participants' student lives
- Relationships
- Mothers as advocates
- Student voice
- Mentoring: Co-learners



# Policy Context

- The NDIS will mean peace of mind for every Australian - for anyone who has, or might acquire, a disability. (ADHS, 2016)
- Commitment to effective pedagogy for all learners, view of student competence and capability (ACARA, 2015; AG-DEEWR, 2009; Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2007)
- Family-centred and strength-based practice (McLachlan, Edwards, Margrain & McLean, 2013).
- Lived experiences of individuals indicate persistent misunderstanding and marginalising discourse (Macartney, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2012)



# Organisational Challenges for Sean & Dave



- Difficulty with management of resources: endless array of lost bags, clothes, stationery, books, etc.
- Challenges with communication: notices and messages were almost never passed on.
- Homework - information not remembered, correct books not brought home, due dates misunderstood.
- Inconsistency of individual education plans (IEP).
- Absence of differentiation, even when agreed to.
- Punitive responses, for example applying an after school detention for failing a spelling test
- Transport, assessment, timetabling issues compounded when transitioning to secondary school

# Bullying, Exclusion & Misunderstanding



“Inclusion was not something that I or he understood or experienced ... At times he is separated from the other children ... he is excluded by the other children, and comes home on a daily basis saying that children have called him a “retard” or “spastic” because of his behaviour. He considers this to be normal, and a part of his day. As a result, I am excluded, and am known as ‘the mother with the weird kid’ .”

(Sean’s mother)

# Discourse around “Normal”



“I feel the normal students learn in a similar degree to each other and follow the curriculum and can learn how the teacher gives it out. [But] I don’t think I am normal. I feel like what school is all about is learning how to engage socially with people and I feel I have difficulty with both learning new things and engaging with people. I believe a normal person can learn brand new things but I cannot as easily ... I just think I learn differently and teachers don’t know how to teach me.” (Dave)

# Discourse around “Different”



“To me “normal” means to doing the same thing as everyone else, and thinking in the same way. I think that I am different to everyone else. There is no such thing as “normal” because everyone is different. People look different, act different, speak different ... I don’t like the word normal because nothing is “normal”. We are all different in our own unique way ... The word different means me. I am different because I have Asperger’s Syndrome. I find it difficult making friends, and I know that people don’t accept me because my behaviour and way of thinking is different. They just won’t accept me; they won’t let me in. I try to be myself, but I feel lonely because I am different. But we are all different. You are different, and I am different. Everyone is different.” (Sean).

# Making a Positive Difference: Recommendations from Students

- Give task choice.
- Allow alternative submission options.
- Acknowledge disability and the extra effort required.
- Use visual cues and planners rather than just verbal information. Explain things in a range of ways.
- Listen to students and families.
- “Break down” information into smaller parts.
- Provide tutoring/one-ton-one to help students “catch up”.
- Provide quiet or withdrawal spaces for work/assessment) and/or allow use of headphones to “zone out” noise.
- Acknowledge diversity of individual learning goals.



# Concluding Advice from Students

“I learn a different way to other kids. I shouldn’t be treated any more or any less than any other kids without a learning condition, but I should have the tools that I need to learn in an equal way to other kids without my condition, and at the moment I don’t feel I have that.” (Dave)



“I’d like to tell everyone that there is no such thing as normal and we need to accept each other for who we are. We should listen to each other more, and put ourselves in each other’s shoes before making judgments. We are all different and we should just be kind to one another. That would make our world a better place.” (Sean)

# Research Conclusion



- Negative discourse and notions of normativity (Forlin et al., 2013; Nirje, 1994; Purdue, 2006) through the use of such terms as “typical”, “normal”, and “different”
- Tension around inclusion: there was acknowledgement that there *should* be acceptance of diversity and differentiation of learning experience, but the reality was that being “different” meant being rejected.
- Policy and discourse are not enough to ensure inclusion. Two key elements need more work:
  - practical differentiation and support strategies
  - philosophical aspirations around inclusion for all, social justice and respect

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